

If It Were Not Exceptional, We Wouldn't Have Chosen It: Institutional Habitus of Two Nursery Schools

Lucie Jarkovská

Masaryk University, Faculty of Education

Abstract: Using the concept of institutional habitus, the article analyses the distinctive everyday practices in two nursery schools (privately-funded Forest nursery and publicly-funded Estate nursery). Based on data from interviews and from direct observations it explores how the habitus of both nurseries is constituted; focusing on social context of each nursery, its organizational structure, shared values and interpersonal and community relationships. Those aspects are discussed with theories of parental attitudes and styles and its consequences for social reproduction as addressed in the works of Bourdieu, Lareau, and Reay. The analysis shows that parents are hoping for similar outcomes (e.g. self-reliance) however they believe in different paths leading to those goals. Additionally, through looking at the habitually framed difference in the perceptions of discipline and social control exercised through institutional rules we illustrated how the exclusivity of private institution is constructed. We concluded, it is not just the required fee, but also the adequate level of cultural capital needed to understand the sophisticated code of rules that are framed by freedom and as voluntary. The analysis of such subtle processes is important for understanding educational inequalities and reinforcing social cohesion through education.

Keywords: institutional habitus, pre-school education, parental attitudes, social reproduction, the Czech Republic

Parental attitudes towards education and upbringing form an important part of social reproduction research (Kaščák & Betáková, 2014; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Reay, 2000). Parents attribute different values to education, and they disagree in the perception of their role in the educational process and in the amount of energy and finances invested in their children's education. However, what is the situation in Czechia, a country that has been unified in terms of class and ethnicity as least since the post war period? Twentieth century education in Czech society was largely unified; this has only recently begun to change. In this research project, we¹ aimed to investigate how parents perceive this diversification on the pre-school level and how it influences their nursery choices. In this paper, through the concept of institutional habitus we analyse two distinct nurseries: privately-funded Forest nursery and publicly-funded Estate nursery. These two nurseries were not chosen to represent private and public sector in general and they should not be perceived as constituting a dichotomy where other existing institutions may lean to either one or

¹ This research is a team work, the data were collected by all members of the team: Jana Dvořáčková, Petr Fučík, Lucie Jarkovská, Martina Kampichler, Lenka Slepíčková and Katřina Slezáková. However, this particular analysis was made by the author of this text.

34 the other case. They were chosen as two distinct institutions when the differences in everyday practices (for example changing clothes, space organization etc.) can bring the focus to more general questions in education and parental reflections of those issues and reveal the non-self-evidentness of things that may be taken for granted when looking just at one case. The data we analysed were interviews with parents and heads of nurseries and direct observation of everyday practices in each of the selected nurseries. The analysis explores the institutional habitus of two nurseries and answers the question of how institutional habitus is formed through various practices (organizational, pedagogical, discursive).

This text starts with the assumption that the parental choice of a school is influenced by family values, cultural orientation, and worldview (Kašparová & Klvaňová, 2016), which are connected to the family habitus. We used Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus and further developed it for research in the habitus of educational institutions. The concept of institutional habitus allows us to capture the fact that being educated in a specific institution results in a different quality of education and in the cultivation of different characteristics and skills, a different relation to society and to oneself, and identification with a concrete social or interest group. The perspective of institutional habitus was combined with the theory of parenting styles of Anette Lareau (2000, 2003).

Therefore, studying diversification in education means researching social reproduction and reflecting on the capacities of nursery schools (as institutions) to contribute to social cohesion or fuel social fracturing. Educational institutions are diversified not only through social status; an important role is played by worldview and values polarisation that are part of family habitus. Using the method of interviews and direct observations we investigate if those family values are in accordance with the institutional habitus of the researched institutions and if this is even seen as important.

1 Historical and sociological context

The change of political regime in 1989 opened the door for privately-funded subjects; however, their share remained low. Even today most education is still obtained in public institutions. If we look at the educational levels, only 6.5% of nursery schools are privately funded, compared to 3% of elementary schools, 16% of secondary schools, and 10% of all universities (Český statistický úřad, 2017). However the growing private sector in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is an undeniable trend. In 2016/17, there were five times more privately-funded nursery schools than ten years earlier (Půbalová, 2017). They started mostly as a response to the lack of capacities in public ECEC that were drastically lowered during the 1990s and could not accommodate the baby boom of the beginning of the 21st century. Nonetheless, in recent years the rise of education in the private sector also follows the parental demand for institutions reflecting their educational preferences. Moreover

the sphere of public ECEC facilities is also undergoing diversification. This has been made possible by the 2004 school reform, which gave ECEC relative autonomy in legal and conceptual matters. Each nursery school can design a specific educational programme, guided by the Framework Education Programme for Preschool Education. Some facilities have used this situation to create specific profiles, and parental demand indicates that certain nursery schools attract more parental attention than others. This change was the primary motivation for our research. Some institutions distinguished themselves from other nursery schools by offering new pedagogical approaches, distinctive curriculum, excellent facilities, low student-teacher ratios, and even a different philosophical framing.

For this reason, we focused our Czech ECEC diversification research on an analysis of institutional habitus, enabling us to study the differences among institutions that are not discernible in research using objectively set quality criteria. Our analysis targets two nursery schools, the (public) Estates and the (private) Forest, and their institutional habitus, which comprises social and cultural family backgrounds, the organisation and pedagogical approaches of the schools, and the broader societal context in which the schools work.

2 Institutional habitus as a tool in education research

Habitus is a set of embodied inclinations that structure the ways in which individuals understand and respond to the world. It is a product of early childhood, mainly of socialization within the family, which is constantly being transformed in relation to new experiences and interactions with the outside world. It is a methodological tool that makes it possible to simultaneously analyse the experience of social actors and the external structure that enables their experience (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 782). Types of capital derived from education are key to habitus formation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). It is therefore not surprising that the concept of habitus is widely used in education research.

The last 25 years have seen the emergence of the concept of institutional habitus, which further develops the collective aspect of habitus and confirms that habitus cannot be perceived only as an individual attribute. Institutional habitus enables us to study a school as an environment with its own habitus that coincides with the habitus of its pupils (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001).

The concept of institutional habitus in education research was theoretically elaborated by Diane Reay from the concept of organisation habitus first used by Patricia McDonough (1997). Institutional habitus represents the influence of a cultural group or social class as mediated by an organisation (McDonough, 1997). Using this concept, we can study how external structural conditions produce concrete schemes of perception, evaluation, and action (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) through the institution of school. Several studies analysed a secondary school environment and explained how institutional habitus contributes to forming the choice of university

36 (Meo, 2011; Reay, 1998; Reay, David, & Ball, 2001; Tarabini, Curran, & Fontdevila, 2017). School habitus includes an ethos (Jabal, 2013) that attracts a specific type of student while repulsing others. It also influences how different types of students feel at school and during their studies, the relation they build to school subjects and studies in general, the kind of relationships they form with their peers and teachers, how their teachers perceive them, and their aspirations for further education (Meo, 2011; Reay, 1998; Reay, David, & Ball 2001; Tarabini et al., 2017).

These studies showed how the family habitus intersects with the institutional one; regardless of personal abilities and performance, this intersection forms a student's university aspirations and self-conception. Other research studying the reproduction of elites at prestigious US colleges had a similar focus (Khan, 2011; Törnqvist, 2018). But the institutional habitus of a school is not a sum of social status of its students. Tarabini et al. (2017, p. 1179) describe that institutional habitus research involves inquiring into how schools collectively think, perceive and have an impact on their students. It implies asking about the shared beliefs of teachers from one institution as to the nature of students, education and the schools themselves. In sum, it means examining how schools are positioned in relation to their social context and how they respond to this background through a variety of organizational and pedagogical devices.

Based on their literature review, Tarabini et al. (2017) stress that the concept of institutional habitus is especially useful for studying school culture because it foregrounds the significance of social context while at the same time avoiding the limitations connected with the dominant perspective of school efficiency. Three main characteristics of the concept of institutional habitus emerged: (a) educational status (social composition of students, private/public status, perceived status of the school, ranking, etc.), (b) organizational practices (distribution of roles and power, coordination mechanisms, curricular and methodological organization, etc.) and (c) expressive order (school identity, shared goals and beliefs, conceptions of teachers' roles and functions, theoretical foundations and normative beliefs, etc.).

Although the concept of the educational habitus was used predominantly in the secondary and tertiary education above mentioned mechanisms can be found at all educational levels. Above mentioned characteristics of the concept formed the focus of our study and helped to operationalize the concept into the main research questions that navigated our observations and interviews.

- (a) *Nursery status*: How is the institution perceived by parents and teachers?
- (b) *Organisational structure and pedagogical approach*: On what principles and how is the everyday life of the institution organised?
- (c) *Expressive order*: Is there a notion of identity and shared values in the institution? How is it manifested?

The conceptual frame of institutional habitus was combined with Lareau's theory of parenting styles (2000; 2003). She identified two parenting styles in her research and she saw those styles connected to the social stratification. According to Lareau, working-class parents employ Accomplishment of Natural Growth, in which they give

preference to orders over negotiation, raising their children to respect and follow authority, leaving them a great deal of autonomy in play and other leisure time activities. On the other hand, middle-class parents prefer a parenting style she calls Concerted Cultivation, in which parents favour discussion and negotiations instead of mere acceptance of authority. They also organise their children's extracurricular programme very meticulously through courses and family activities to foster their child's talents. Lareau (2003) also considers the parenting style of middle-class parents with high cultural capital as more egalitarian to children. The parenting style has an impact on the educational choices and we examined how it interferes with the institutional habitus of selected institutions.

3 Method

Our research was conducted in 2016-2018. First, we conducted a survey of all ECEC² in the area (big city), mapping the number of applications per available

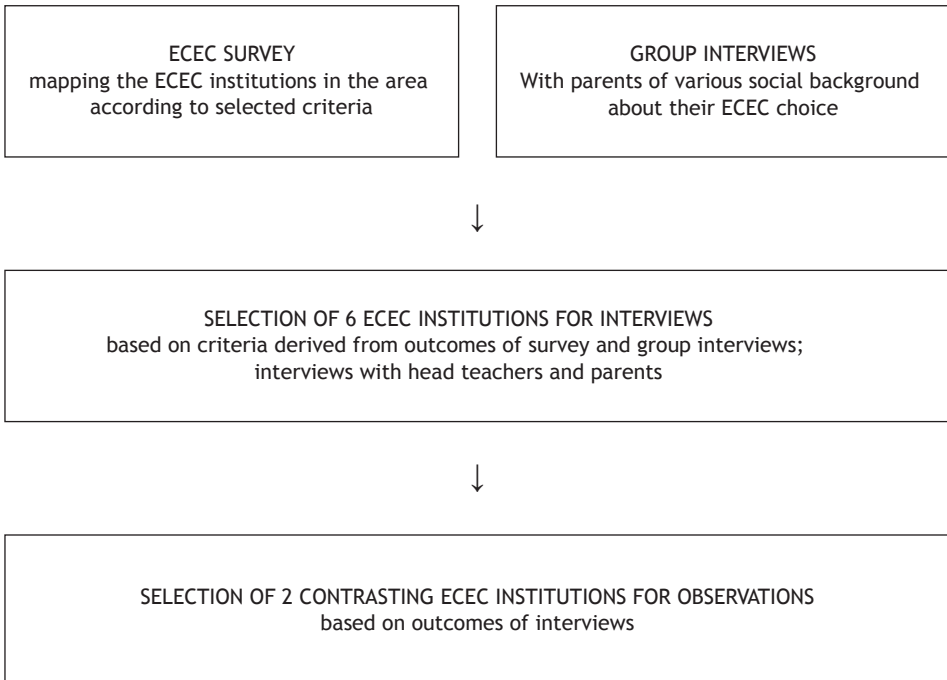


Figure 1. Pathway to nursery selection

² All facilities providing daycare for children from 3 to 6 years old were included regardless of the registration within the national register of educational institutions.

38 place, price, type of pedagogy, number of children per teacher and education of pedagogical staff. Parallel to this survey we conducted group interviews with parents of various socioeconomic status who had chosen different types of nursery schools. We asked parents about their approaches to choosing an ECEC facility and the strategies they applied to get a place in the desired one (Kampichler, Dvořáčková, & Jarkovská, 2018). Based on this mapping (survey and group interviews) we selected three public facilities, with high, medium and low parental demand and three private facilities offering their services at a high, medium and low price (in the context of city of our research), see Table 1. The selection process is described in Figure 1. This selection is not proportionate, the private ECEC sector has been growing over the last years, but still, the large majority of care is provided in public facilities (Table 1).

Table 1

Three selected facilities per public and private sector representing various pedagogies and locations

Public facilities	
Central	located in downtown, high parental demand, known among parents for its specific curricula and pedagogical approach
Estate	located close to estate high rise houses at the outskirts of the city, average parental demand, focus on physical exercise
Ghetto	close to socially deprived urban area with low parental demand, no specific pedagogies
Private facilities	
Academic	high tuition, emphasis on cultivation of children's skills and knowledge
Forest	average tuition, emphasis on nature, outside physical activities and freedom
Transfer	low tuition, high fluctuation of children, usually used by parents as a solution between the end of parental leave and acceptance to public facility

In each school we first conducted an interview with the headteacher and then (in cooperation with the facility's headteacher) started contacting parents for interviews. We distributed leaflets with an offer to participate in the research and we also contacted parents directly while they were picking up their children. While in most of the cases, the headteachers were open to the research and the interview, the reactions of parents varied substantially, based on the type of ECEC facility. Due to this fact, our interview data has a certain self-selection bias. The results of group interviews have drawn our interest to different lifestyles, various parental notions about education and upbringing, and general social beliefs that navigate parental choices. In short, parental narratives mirrored the family habitus. This inspired our interest in the habitus of nursery schools. After the group interviews, we selected six different types of nursery schools and conducted individual interviews with the managers and parents.

After we conducted the interviews with parents in six selected schools, we decided for deeper focus on two nursery schools where we conducted participant observation. These were the Estates and the Forest nursery schools, which represented two distinct types, according to our interview findings. In the Estates school, we interviewed three parents and the headteacher; during our observations, we met with class teachers Dáša and Zina and a class of 27 children, of whom 20 were present. In the Forest nursery school, we interviewed four parents and the headteacher; during our observation, we met again with the headteacher Tereza, guides Pavel and Pavlína, several parents, and 16 children (see also Table 2).

Table 2
Parents from Estates and Forest schools taking part in our study

Code	Education	Household income
Estates school		
Mother 27	university (Master's)	medium
Father 28	secondary school	low
Mother 32	university (Bachelor's),	high
Forest school		
Mother 01	university (Master's)	high
Mother 03	university (Master's)	medium
Mother 04	university (doctoral)	medium
Mother 05	university (Master's)	high

The transcripts of interviews and field notes from the observation were analysed through atlas.ti in an effort to answer the above research questions. The codes for coding were partly derived from our research questions (how do teachers/parents characterize their school, what are the daily routines of the school), partly from the topics that opened up within the interviews most frequently (e.g. freedom, fitting into the system), partly from our theoretical framework (institutional habitus).

4 Analysis

4.1 Status: Ordinary and exceptional schools

Question: Do you see your nursery school as exceptional?

Mother 27, Estates school: No, I would not call it that.

Mother 03, Forest school: Well, if I did not see it as exceptional, we wouldn't have chosen it.

Interviewed parents from both nursery schools were satisfied with their chosen facility and praised it. However, they differed in whether they regarded their nursery school as exceptional in any aspect. The parents from the Estates school did not see any unique qualities; parents from the Forest school felt their facility was exceptional. For both groups, this evaluation was, in fact, one reason they had chosen it. The parents from the Estates school unanimously claimed that they had chosen it because of its convenient location. Their expectations were not unusually high, and they assumed that all nursery schools offer more or less the same quality. They visited the facility before applying, and they liked its nice environment: a newly repaired and vividly painted building with a big garden. They considered this a good standard and did not see why they should look for a nursery school other than the one to which they administratively belonged. Interestingly, the headteacher's answer to our question (*What does the nursery school offer to the children that are attending it?*) was: 'I hope the nice environment, friendly teachers, physical activity, play, the same as everywhere I guess.'

These answers indicate an understanding that pre-school education is not very diversified, and that all nursery schools offer basically the same things, differing only in the size of their gardens and the personalities and ages of their teachers. It also shows the trust in the system - the state guarantees all nursery school children an education in facilities of a certain quality, and there is no need to choose carefully.

On the other hand, parents from the Forest school chose this nursery school because it is different and exceptional, corresponding to the difference and exceptionality they attribute to their families. This school is not a registered nursery school; it works like a club, with fees that are 10 or even 20 times higher than in government-funded nursery schools and that are not tax deductible. The nursery school stands out from the system in many regards, including by not adhering to all prescribed regulations, such as the education level of its pedagogical staff, hygienic norms, and compulsory vaccinations.

In all five interviews in the Forest school (headteacher + four mothers), we touched on topics of freedom and liberty,³ which appeared eleven times; the subject did not surface at all in the Estates interviews. Besides the freedom to decide about vaccination, the mothers and the headteacher mentioned freedom and liberty in terms of the pedagogical approach, which gives children a great deal of freedom and applies non-disciplining methods instead of punishments. Children also have freedom of movement, and they can decide what they would like to do.

The headteacher of the Forest school: We try to [...] not be very strict, we want to let children do things by themselves to a certain extent because freedom is important, and I don't think it is good to force children to become obedient soldiers. Of course, there are some limits; we have borders that should not be crossed.

³ The attitudes of parent that refuse the compulsory kindergarten attendance were studied by Picková (2017). Parenting style and the mistrust that the kindergarten curricula and everyday practice will ensure the child's comprehensive development were among the main reasons why parents refused to send their children regularly to the kindergarten.

The importance of freedom and liberty in the pedagogical approach was based on the idea that children are seen as inherently strong and creative beings. Education should unveil their uniqueness and support them in finding their own way.

Conversely, the parents from the Estates school considered it important that education cultivate the ability to adapt, to coexist with others in the collective and in the system - which can function well only when individuals understand the behaviour of others and the operational rules of institutions.

Mother 32, Estates school: The state nursery school simply is a kind of line you need to follow, and no one in there is taking any extra steps to get closer to you. You have to fit in, and if you like it, I think that the children are better off in the end, if they learn that it is not about any special care, and he learns to rely on himself.

In contrast, the parents from the Forest school opposed the mechanism of 'adaptation' and stressed equality between adults and children, which was expressed in the observed interactions.

Ida climbed on the very top of a climbing frame above the sand at the playground. Pavlína got nervous about it. She told her: 'Ida, get down. Do not climb that high.'

Ida: But why?

Pavlína: You could fall, it is quite high, and you could hurt yourself. We have a celebration this evening, let's not ruin it with an injury.

Ida: But it is nothing for me. It is easy to climb up.

Pavlína: I do not feel good watching it. I know that you are skilful and it is easy for you.

Ida: And so what if you don't feel good? (A longer exchange followed. I think Ida has the upper hand in the conversation defending her right to climb, Pavlína lacks further arguments.)

Four-year-old Tony got Pavlína's attention by asking: What did Ida do wrong?

Pavlína: She did not do anything wrong, I just don't feel good watching you climb that high.

Observation field notes, Forest school, 8 July 2018

Ida considered it natural that she would defend herself against her teacher's instructions not to climb somewhere, because the Forest school does not have any rule forbidding students to climb trees. Similarly, Tony, who is one of the younger children, wanted to understand the situation, and he found it natural to ask the teacher to explain, even though he was not involved. The teacher Pavlína was self-reflective and admitted that Ida's behaviour was not bad and that the problem was that she herself was anxious. This situation reveals how the Forest school cultivates the legitimacy of feelings of entitlement and relationships with authorities.

Törnqvist (2018) describes interactions at the Global College, where hierarchies between teachers and students were removed, stating that questioning automatic hierarchy and authority fosters feelings of equality and helps students to build their own independence and self-confidence. Törnqvist (2018, p. 13) further comments on the leftist vegan students dressed in secondhand clothes: 'Although their leisure activities and style of debating differ from that of economic elites, the ethos

42 fosters them towards somewhat similar personhood characterized by entitlement, sociability and drive.’

Children from the Forest school showed great self-confidence, and they often contrasted their own preferences to the preferences of adults; younger children were not afraid to enter interactions and conflicts between older children and remind them of the rules. This specific approach toward children motivated parents to choose this nursery school. Lareau (2003) considers an egalitarian approach to children to be characteristic of the parenting style of middle-class parents with high cultural capital. Even if for most of them the choice was not primarily an escape from social problems, this habitual attraction and the wish to stand out, not to be ‘average’, distinguished this nursery school from others. Questioning the adult/child hierarchy was part of establishing the feeling of social superiority, acquiring an identity that is not automatically submissive.

In the Forest school, parents are middle-class with high cultural capital, with a non-authoritative approach and an effort to negotiate, corresponding to Lareau’s findings, but the programme organisation differs significantly (more on this in Kampichler, Dvořáčková, & Jarkovská, 2018). The parents from the Forest school emphasise freedom for children. It is why they chose this particular facility, where the approach and organisation give children liberty. Children can play without direct supervision, and the nursery school’s space and rules support spontaneous activities and involve children and parents. The parental strategy of Forest parents seems not to fit into Lareau’s theory. Those parents are middle class with high cultural capital and do emphasise processes of negotiations with children over authorities, they also accent the autonomy of the child and criticize the idea of an overlaid child who is expected to play piano, learn languages, do sports and visit galleries. What is described as concerted cultivation seems distant to them. However the way they imagine “the natural growth” of their children is different from what Lareau describes for working class parents. The autonomy of their children takes place in what we would call concerted environment - those children are free in a safe space of forest nursery surrounded by like-minded people - known as their guides. Parents believe that those guides can be interesting role models for their children to be inspired by, as opposed to subjected.

Children in the Estates school received quality care and education from experienced pedagogues. Their parents considered it essential that they learn to function well within the system. The fulfilment of normative criteria was also crucial for the Estates teachers, who focused their expertise on how well the children met certain standards.

In the Estates school, we encountered a discrepancy between the status ascribed to the facility by the parents and by the teachers. While the Estates parents viewed the nursery school as easy and standard and did not think it stood out as problematic in terms of the social compositions of families that send their children there,⁴ the

⁴ The parents did not consider the social composition of the nursery school problematic; they neither saw nor discussed social diversity.

teachers did not share this perspective. During our interviews, the topic of social problems surfaced repeatedly, and the teachers often complained about the family backgrounds of some children, stressing the need to address the deficits with which these children enter nursery school.

Teacher Dáša: This is by far the worst class we ever had. We have four Gypsies here, two Ukrainians. Half of the parents are divorced; many kids are in shared custody. Parents do not talk to each other, not to mention the child. Pepa, he's from a carnival family, he lives with his grandma, doesn't even have a mother. The grandma's only worry is that he looks good, but he knows nothing. Does not recognise colours, cannot recite a poem. They forgot him in nursery school until he was four and did not notice he needs to be among older children. We've been fiddling about with him since September. Sofinka, she has terrible parents, the father shouts in the cloakroom at her mother *you cow, you junkie*. And the kid sees all of this.

Teachers Dáša and Zina: This is the worst class, they are wild, and it takes ages before you can teach them anything. We have been singing this song for a week, a simple one, and they can't do it.

Observation field notes, Estates school, 31 May 2018

Similar perspective of nursery headteachers are documented by Simonová, Potužníková and Straková (2017) who mapped headteachers' attitudes and opinions. The headteachers pointed out the significant changes in children's readiness for nursery, a lack of social skills, and the prevalence of diagnosed disorders and saw them as consequences of problems in families and insufficient parenting.

The observation in the Estates school took place before the observation in the Forest school. We wanted to find if and how the Forest headteacher notes the topic of social differences and whether she thinks that the fact that there are children from families with substantial cultural and economic capital helps her facility to work better.

I am asking Tereza whether she thinks that the same concept of nursery school management would work somewhere in a regular government-funded school, with children from families that are much less involved in the way the school is run. She says: *I don't know. [...] I tell her that the teachers from the Estates school complained about difficulty cooperating with children, because of noncooperative parents. They also mentioned that the children did not know how to play anymore, because the toys they have are exhibits rather than toys. No building kits. And that children cannot remember any songs or poems; they are not able to learn them. Tereza bursts out: Why they should drill through something with them? It doesn't matter whether they learn a song or not. My son has not been able to learn a poem about waking up an elf in three years. We've been reciting it every day for three years, and nothing. He won't learn it, and so what! I try to correct my previous words: Not that they have been drilling them, but that they have been singing something simple for a week, and the children do not remember it. Maybe some children are more difficult to work with than others, they need more pedagogical attention?*

Tereza shakes her head in contempt and turns to Pavlína (a teacher): *Well, they need to drill it for the performance so that they can show off to parents. We don't do this at all here, rehearse something and then stage a show.*

Observation field notes, The Forest, 8 June 2018

The Forest school staff repeatedly raised the issue of defining themselves in opposition to the government-funded education sector. The headteacher Tereza's motivation had not been to establish a nursery school for the elite; she was driven by her pedagogical beliefs and by an effort to do things differently and in a better way. However, the repeated definition in opposition to 'regular government-funded nurseries' worked as a mechanism solidifying exclusive status of the Forest school. We also opened the topic of the different status of government-funded and privately-funded nursery schools during our observations in the Estates school. The teacher Zina saw the status of privately-funded nursery schools as one of prestige, for more affluent families. With the Estate teacher Dáša, we spoke about the privilege of some facilities to choose children and families that are closer to their philosophy and are more active. She considered it legitimate and she stated that she thinks that if the teachers want to achieve something with children, it is acceptable for them to reject students who do not match their philosophy.

The status of the Forest school has been constructed by parents as exclusive. For the headteacher, this exclusivity represented a contrast to the generally shared notion of government-funded pre-school education. The parents did not oppose the public sector that strongly. When asked why they had not opted for a public sector facility, they replied that no government-funded nursery school 'appealed' to them, even if they admitted that they never scrutinised the qualities of government-funded nursery schools. Their motivation to choose a privately-funded facility stemmed from feelings of sociocultural closeness, also expressed in the pedagogical approach. The habitus of the Forest school was compatible with the habitus of their families.

The status of the Estates school was perceived differently by parents and teachers. The parents saw the facility as a standard one, neither privileged or underprivileged. Two of the families we interviewed had some experience with a privately-funded facility before they found a place for their children in a government-funded one. They admitted that privately-funded nursery schools offer more amenities (email communication, smaller groups of children), but they did not consider these differences to be decisive; they also wanted their children to experience a mainstream approach. Estates teachers perceived their nursery school as an intersection of many social problems that resulted in increased pedagogical concerns. In their view, privately-funded nursery schools had a higher status and they saw this situation as legitimate.

4.2 Organisational structure: large and small collectives

The organisational structure of the school constitutes the framework for the everyday practices. While the organizational structure of Estate nursery is formed by the official standards and orders, Forest nursery reflects very much the ideals of its funder and headteacher. The Forest school's capacity is 18 children. It is open from 8:00 to 16:30. Throughout the day (except the first and last 30 minutes), there are two teachers present. These are often assisted by international volunteers (in

2017/18, there were two volunteers via European Volunteering Service) and by parents, who spend some time with the children at the beginning or the end of the day. Therefore, there are 9 or fewer children per one adult.

The Estates school has three classes, with 27 children per class. The standard capacity is 24 children per class, but the headteacher applied for an exception with her municipality, so that she could offer full-time jobs to her employees. The working time is 6:30 to 16:30. However, two teachers are present only from 10 until 12:30. For the remaining time, each class is supervised by only one teacher. Even if it is rare for all children to attend at once, as many are frequently absent or leave after lunch, the average number of children per one adult is twice that of the Forest school.

The difference between the Estates and the Forest schools also lies in the position of the pedagogical staff. The Forest staff label themselves as 'guides', who accompany children in their own life discoveries. The Estates teachers want to teach something to the children, to prepare them for elementary school and further life. The Estates school has two full-time teachers who have worked in the facility for over 30 years; the Forest school employs several pedagogues working part-time. Some of them have other jobs and some of them want to work part-time because they study or devote time to their families. Their pedagogical engagement in the Forest school is part of a distinct lifestyle. Some of them opted for guiding/teaching after experiencing tiredness or burnout in their previous job. Their education often does not correspond to the state requirements, and they work as pedagogues because they wanted a change in life: to do something that seemed meaningful and fulfilling. They consider this work to be part of their own self-development.

The parents appreciated this self-development of the Forest teachers and thought that they had charm and charisma. Their approach means they represent a natural authority for the children, one that does not stem from a hierarchical position, but from the ability to engage. Such authority is legitimate and corresponds to the notion of freedom and equality the parents want in their parenting and the education of their children.

The Estates school teachers adopted the roles of professionals who know the curriculum prescribed by the framework educational programmes; they consider the programme adequate and important and adapt it for their pedagogical work. They have their lessons planned for the whole year, but they look into their previous notes rarely, because they remember everything by heart after years of practice. They view children through a diagnostic eye, evaluating their psychomotor and cognitive development. They notice deviations from the norm and think about how to deal with insufficient language, physical and academic skills, body imperfections (overweight/underweight) and many other problems that they discover. The reluctance to subject their own children to such diagnoses might be a factor contributing to the Forest parents' dislike of government-funded schooling. On the other hand, the attitude of the Estates teachers meets the expectations of the Estates parents.

We found a big difference in the physical space of both nursery schools and opportunities offered by the space. The Forest school is in a fenced area near a forest, and it has a tent, an open shelter, a dry toilet, and a brick building for a kitchen. The large garden is flush with many trees and bushes, wooden climbing frames, a sandbox, and a meeting place with benches in a circle. When there is no shared programme for all the children, they can run around freely, and they organise their own time individually or in groups. No one deems it strange that not all the children are supervised by adults. There is no 'entry point' where parents would come to deliver and pick up their children. When they come, they find their child in the garden, or they may join some activities or just chat with someone until the child sees them eventually.

There is no water or electricity on the premises. Parents must transport water in every day. When it rains, the nursery school area is not that comfortable and the garden is muddy; in winter, children must share a smaller space, spending more time in the tent.

The Estates school is located in a cube-shaped two-floor building from the 1970s and has three classrooms. Each classroom has its own cloakroom and is divided into thematic play corners - one with tables for drawing and similar tasks, and one with a carpet for playing on the floor or exercising. After lunch, cots for sleeping are unfolded here. Behind the building, there is a newly reconstructed garden with climbing structures, a playground, a sandbox, and paths for riding scooters or tricycles. Although the classrooms and the garden are quite spacious, the concentration of children is much denser than in the Forest school. Children are under constant supervision; there are no secluded spots where the children could play without the adults seeing them. This arrangement reflects two conceptions of childhood. In the Forest school, children enjoy considerable autonomy and they can perform activities considered to be risky, such as climbing high trees; in the Estates school, they can play alone but never without adult supervision.

Each nursery school has strikingly different hygiene practices. The Estates children change their play clothes and shoes when they arrive at the nursery school. Then they change into gym clothes, if they have sports; afterwards, they change back into their play clothes. When they go to the garden or for a walk, they change into outdoor clothing and shoes, and when they return, they change into play clothes again. They also change for sleeping after lunch, for playing in the afternoon, and then once more into street clothes when they go home. They may change as many as six times on a regular day, and eight times on sports club days. Children also need to wash their hands before eating. In the Forest school, children do not change their clothes or shoes⁵; they only regulate their layers of clothing according to the temperature, which is mostly left up to them. Handwashing is mentioned, but it is not done collectively or checked.

⁵ In winter, they remove their shoes before entering the tent.

These practices are a physical manifestation of the general sets of values in both nursery schools. In the Estates school, order plays a significant role, and both teachers and parents assert that children should learn it; the Forest school prioritises freedom and liberty. Their values are not seen as possible alternatives; they are related to social hierarchy. Dirtiness and cleanliness have always been part of social practices and evaluations, in which dirty meant low and undesirable and clean meant high and desirable (Campkin & Cox, 2007). The meaning of dirtiness and cleanliness is thus both physical and symbolic. Labelling someone as dirty can be part of a social practice placing them in a socially subordinate position.

On the other hand, there are groups with social positions so secure that not even physical dirt and nonstandard hygienic conditions (dry toilet) might cause them to be considered low or backward. In this case, giving up certain comforts is part of their institutional habitus. The children in the Estates school have to be careful not to get dirty and not to ruin their clothes. If they are dirty and ragged, someone might think they were neglected. But in the Forest school, dirtiness equals freedom. Both the facility and the parents thereby show that clothing is not important. The soiled clothes of the Forest children are perceived similarly to the second-hand clothes of Global College student researched by Törnqvist (2018); they signify shared values.

The Estates teachers complained that some parents only wanted their children to be clean and well dressed. Nevertheless, by insisting on the rituals of changing clothes, the Estates school helped to solidify this expectation.

From the organisational-structural point of view, both nursery schools struggle with tight budgets, but the Forest school fees filter out low-income groups. However, a higher income does not automatically mean that families choose privately-funded education. In the Estates school, we found families from all income categories; children from social housing as well as a nearby wealthy neighbourhood. The Forest parents shared material well-being and a specific cultural and social capital. None of the institutions had a big budget, but the Forest school ensured a smaller collective and fewer children per pedagogical staff member.

The habitus of each school attracts different types of staff. In the Estates school, teachers are long-term professionals; in the Forest school, none of the staff had the corresponding education required for nursery school teachers by law. They called themselves 'guides' and their work reflected a clear life stance, which gave them charm and natural authority in the eyes of parents. The arrangements of physical space reflected the different pedagogical approaches, stimulating and discouraging certain types of activities.

4.3 Expressive order: Identity and values

The Estates school did not show any unifying identity or affiliation; the Forest school gave a strong feeling of its character. It was built on its uniqueness and the conviction that it represented an alternative to the mainstream and defied the regulatory influence of the system. The opposition to the mainstream and the agreement on

48 basic rules unified teachers and parents and created a feeling of affiliation and belonging. The Estates school demonstrated no collective identity. It lacked a unifying tie for parents and teachers.

Consequently, the relations inside the nursery schools and their contact with parents differed substantively. The Forest school closely collaborates with the parents, who must intensively participate in its operations. Parents deliver drinking water (60 litres a day), take shifts serving lunch and washing dishes, and participate in weekend gardening once a month. The parents also participate in the school's festivities and rituals. During our observations, we observed a ceremony for the children who would start elementary school after the summer holidays. Several mothers participated in preparing the whole celebration and elaborate decorations for several days, making garlands and creating supersize portraits of all the schoolchildren-to-be. In the morning, many parents who brought their children to the school did not hurry back to work – they stayed and took part in the activities. They only left around 10 a.m. when children gathered for the morning welcome and chat. The same situation repeated in the afternoon. Older and younger siblings who used to go to the nursery school or who were about to begin also came. Most parents were quite familiar with the school staff and volunteers. The parents also knew the other parents; they networked and spent time together outside of the institution. The families felt they belonged there, even if some of the mothers were aware that not everybody can easily afford the school and that a few parents can only enrol their children part-time for that reason. However, as far as their opinion and worldview was concerned, all the parents and the staff felt close to each other.

In contrast, some of the parents in the Estates school were not even sure about the names of the teachers. They did not know other parents and they might not even greet each other in the street. The contact at drop off and pick up was hurried. There was a transfer zone in the cloakroom, where children took off their shoes and changed their clothes. Then they went through a short narrow corridor to the classroom. The teachers were not able to spend much time with the parents in the cloakroom because they could not see the children in the classroom from there. The mothers and father whom we interviewed admitted that they would welcome more information about their children, but they did not wish for closer contact with the facility. One mother whose children previously attended a privately-funded nursery school said:

Mother 27, Estates school: Well, yes, when we come, there is a difference. Here, in the state nursery school, the teacher has twenty other children to take care of, so it is just: hurry, hurry, and there is no time... but in a privately-funded one, she has only four kids, and so we can talk, but what should I ask every day, what is there to talk about?

Later in the interview, she summarised her feelings with the familiar saying: *No news is good news*. For such parents, the Estates school represents an autonomous institution that will provide care, education, and overall development to their children. The parents expressed trust toward their school, and they did not want more

information about children, teachers, or activities. They had neither the desire nor the capacity to participate.

Most probably, the Forest school would not accept a family that would not participate intensively in its community life and that could not invest both time and cultural capital in various events and rituals. The Forest school thus represents an institution requiring a certain level of material, social, and cultural capital, the value of which was further increased through intensive community life. In other words, the Forest demanded a whole lifestyle compatible with engagement. On the other hand, the Estates school maintained parental autonomy and did not interfere in family life.

Interestingly, the parents from the Forest school, who disliked all state regulations, considered the ways the Forest school interfered in their lives not only acceptable but even desirable. We observed an exchange between the headteacher and a mother who was organising a group trip with other parents that coincided with a sleepover event at the school. The headteacher pressured the mother to change her plans and leave for the trip on Saturday morning because the school event should be prioritised. Despite these high demands on their work and time, the parents saw community life in the Forest school as one of the most significant benefits. Ball (2003b) claims that social capital alleviates the anxiety and insecurity connected with the educational paths of children because it offers emotional support. We think that reliance on the community is a crucial feature in the Forest school because it enables the families to function outside the mainstream. At the same time, it can co-produce insecurity by presenting the government-funded education sector as unfit or even dangerous for children's education.

Mother 04, Forest: There is simply no way to get closer to the other parents or children or friends. It's a shame that everyone is in a big hurry in the morning, just dropping off the kid, and in the afternoon, they again rush in from work, and there is no time to talk to anyone.

The teachers from the Estates school expressed a certain disillusionment with the lack of engagement of parents in the school life; their expressions also signalled their moral evaluation of the level of activity.

I ask what activities they organise in their nursery school.

Teacher: The ceremonies for future school pupils and nursery school graduation, Halloween, and Christmas. Parents can come to all of these events. Well, they come, but they do not do anything. They might bring some sweets, but that is the maximum. They don't even talk to each other, just stand in a corner and stare or play with their phones. Observation field notes, Estates school, 5 June 2018

The growing demand on parental engagement and the public discourse that constitutes this engagement as a norm deactivate the modernist notion of education as a mobility tool enabling an individual to obtain an education based not on their background. Parental engagement as a factor of social reproduction is the subject

50 of a range of analyses (Lareau, 2000, 2003; Reay, 1996, 2000; West et al., 1998) examining the connection between class and parenting style. Parenting styles of the upper classes reproduce their socially advantaged position and they are also considered to be a morally superior and more conscious style.

5 Discussion

We analysed the institutional habitus of two nursery schools in the diversifying field of pre-school education in the Czech Republic.

The Estates and the Forest schools were chosen from the six institution that were part of the broader research project because they differed in values and pedagogical approaches. Also in the interviews with parents that preceded observations the Forest parents defined their nursery choice and the character of chosen institution in opposition to the general idea of public nursery. The observations then focused on distinctions in ethos and school culture, as well as in teacher-child and institution-parent relations and the levels of everyday life. All these differences indicate variations in ECEC institutions and are part of broader processes of social and cultural reproduction in which specific institutions attract certain kinds of parents and in turn try to cultivate different values in children.

In the sphere of education, we witness increasing diversification with more privately-funded institutions and also the diversification within the public sphere. At the same time, the emphasis on engaged parenting and the active role of parents in the school life grows. Ball (2003a) states that encouraging parents to participate in school life erodes the border between the private sphere of home and the public sphere of education. This was what we saw in the Forest nursery where parents were alarmed by the idea that the state would dictate their children's education and discipline the kids as well as the parents to behave/dress/eat in a certain (state curricula approved) way. Those rules seemed to Forest parents as too oppressive, however it did not mean that the rules would be absent from Forest nursery. Forest rules and expectations were much more subtle and coded in a way that only parents with certain cultural capital can understand. Instead of open disciplining practices that they were afraid of in publicly run facilities the Forest parents and teachers performed the subtle interplay of freedom and constraints, where social interactions seemed to be based on free choice than discipline. However the cultivated dispositions of Forest families enabled them to understand the correct behaviour. The social control that was perceived as obnoxious in publicly run facilities is here played out in more sophisticated ways, is framed by freedom, and is seen as voluntary (to choose the right behaviour). Also, as they were involved in the nursery life they had control over the everyday life and practices of the institution. The line between family and nursery life was much more blurred than in Estate nursery. In the end, Forest parents willingly let the nursery structure their family life quite extensively, however it was perceived as pleasurable and in accordance with their family values.

This distinction in social control and coding of the rules is an important aspect of how habitus operates to fuel the social reproduction of the “exclusive group”, keeping it accessible only to parents with an adequate level of cultural capital.

According to Bourdieu (1986), investing time in education is a crucial aspect of social reproduction, and it is closely connected with parental participation in school education.

As a result of diversification of education, there is a varied offer of educational institutions, giving parents a wider choice. However, the choice is becoming a necessity and a kind of moral obligation - a good parent is supposed to choose the right school. The educational outcomes are individualized, they are not seen as a responsibility of public institutions but as a consequence of parental choice. Stephen Ball (2003a) noted educational policies change and increasingly emphasise the parental role. Making a decision requires proper orientation in all the options. The parents from the Estates school trusted the state to offer education as a public service, available for all. The parents from the Forest school made their decision within a neoliberal regime -it is necessary to make the right choice and cultivate our investments. Ball (2003b) mentions the role of distrust in the diversified educational field, which works more like a market than a public service. Parents find it difficult to obtain reliable information and make sure their choice is the right one, which increases feelings of anxiety and insecurity. The statements of parents from the two nursery schools differed in the level of (dis)trust. While the Estates parents trusted the state to offer a good service and trusted the nursery school to make this service available without any intensive intervention on their part, the Forest parents expressed distrust in the state. They trusted the Forest school because it was in explicit opposition to the mainstream, and as they took a big part in the daily life of Forest nursery school, they exercised a direct control over how their child is treated and educated.

Our analysis scrutinized the institutional habitus and parenting values and practices in a publicly-run Estate nursery and a privately-funded Forest nursery. The validity of Lareau's theory was confirmed for the central European context by Kaščák and Betáková (2014) who concluded that despite distinctive parenting styles an extensive systemic social segregation in preschool education provision does not yet exist. However, they argue for focused pre-school educational interventions for children from families with low cultural capital to enable their social mobility. We suggest there should be cultivation of specific skills by parents of various cultural capital. At first glance, the Forest families appeared not to fit into Lareau's parenting styles categories of “natural growth” and “concerted cultivation”. Forest parents stressed the autonomy of their children and the idea that their time should not be too structured. It should rather be devoted to free play than to organized activities. However we see an enormous difference between what Lareau described as a “natural growth” parenting style of blue collar parents and Forest parents. Although the time of Forest children was not organized through clubs, sports trainings and music lessons the children were carefully supervised. As Lareau states (2003), with

52 concerted cultivation, the practices often infiltrate into the family life; Forest parents were not tortuously creating sophisticated stimulating afterschool programs for their kids, but the family participated enormously in the life of nursery and by doing so created what we call a concerted environment that was supervised by parents and eliminated undesired influences on the child and family. The autonomy of the child could take place only in the protected space. What we see as very important was the sense of entitlement that was formed in Forest children through the way they were brought up. It was casual for them to question adults, and see themselves as equals, which is what Lareau sees as the important outcome of concerted cultivation parenting style.

6 Conclusion

While the Estates school draws children from a great diversity of social backgrounds, the Forest school appeals to a narrow segment of parents. It is open only to those who have sufficient financial, cultural, and social capital. The parents also share a particular worldview and way of parenting and educating children. Parents from Estate nursery are characterised by their trust in the system. Although they have not really chosen their school, they accepted the institution that is formally ascribed to their district. They do not have a detailed idea about the school day, and are not sure about the teachers' names. Therefore, there is a clear cut between the school and family life.

Parents from the Forest nursery are characterised by distrust to the system, they have chosen their school because they assumed the publicly-run facility would discipline their children and the whole family. An important value for them is freedom. They have detailed insight into everyday life of the school, they know the teachers well and the teachers know the families. Parents spend a lot of time volunteering for the school, and their family life is quite extensively influenced by the school demands.

The habitus of Forest school is constructed as exclusive and fosters the notion of exclusiveness by fostering the feeling of entitlement. Exclusiveness of the institution is not only a matter of the fee that some families may not be able to pay, but also a matter of a system of subtly coded unformal rules that require adequate level of cultural capital in parents.

The private sector is only a small share in Czech nursery and primary education; however, it has been growing recently in relation to the increased interest in educational alternatives expressed by middle-class parents with high cultural capital. The public sector responds to this demand only very slowly. Some privately-funded institutions have thus arisen as an antipode to the public ones. Middle-class parents with higher cultural capital tend to live with growing anxiety concerning the educational paths of their offspring. This drives them towards the private sector, which is seen as more innovative and sensitive to children's needs. Forests parents

represent only a specific group of opinionated parents with quite unique educational views, but they do not represent the private sector as such. However, we see them as a symptom of a trend when various social groups would accommodate their needs in various schools without the necessity to be confronted with other segments of society (not only in the sense of social stratification). We believe this trend may be potentially dangerous as the anxiety of middle-class parents may accentuate not only social but also cultural segregation and further deepen the fractures in social cohesion.

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Lucie Jarkovská, Ph.D.

Institute for Research in Inclusive Education
Faculty of Education, Masaryk University
Poříčí 31a,
603 00 Brno,
jarkovsk@mail.muni.cz