

# CHARACTERISTICS, CHALLENGES, AND PROPOSALS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF SHORT PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMMES IN SLOVENIA : ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUPS

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Our research focuses on the implementation of short pre-school education programmes in Slovenia, intended for children who had not been enrolled in kindergarten in the year prior to entering primary school. The purpose of the study was to recognise the characteristics, challenges, and potential programme improvement proposals. Data obtained through focus groups consisting of professional staff having implemented the short programme in previous years were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using qualitative content analysis in the Atlas.ti software. The study reveals a systemic change need in the short programme. The participants highlighted challenges pertaining to access to data on children not enrolled in pre-school education, linguistic and cultural communication barriers and the programme organisation at the level of kindergarten and state level. Only coordinated approaches at all levels - from individual kindergartens to national guidelines - can ensure optimal development and further learning conditions of pre-school children.

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# ZNAČILNOSTI, IZZIVI IN PREDLOGI IZBOLJŠAV IZVAJANJA KRAJŠIH PROGRAMOV PREDŠOLSKE VZGOJE V SLOVENIJI: ANALIZA FOKUSNIH SKUPIN

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Raziskava se osredotoča na izvajanje krajših programov predšolske vzgoje v Sloveniji, ki so namenjeni otrokom, ki v letu pred vstopom v osnovno šolo še niso bili vključeni v vrtec. Namen raziskave je bil prepoznati značilnosti, izzive in morebitne predloge za izboljšanje programa. Podatke, pridobljene s fokusnimi skupinami, v katerih so sodelovali strokovni delavci, ki so v preteklih letih izvajali krajši program, smo zbirali s polstrukturiranim intervjujem in jih analizirali v skladu s kvalitativno vsebinsko analizo v programskem orodju Atlas.ti. Raziskava razkriva potrebo po sistemskih spremembah krajšega programa. Izpostavljeni so bili izzivi dostopnosti podatkov o otrocih, ki niso vključeni v predšolsko vzgojo, jezikovne in kulturne bariere v komunikaciji in organizacija na ravni vrtcev in ravni države. Le z usklajenimi pristopi na vseh ravneh – od posameznega vrtca do nacionalnih smernic – lahko zagotovimo optimalne pogoje za razvoj in nadaljnje učenje predšolskih otrok.



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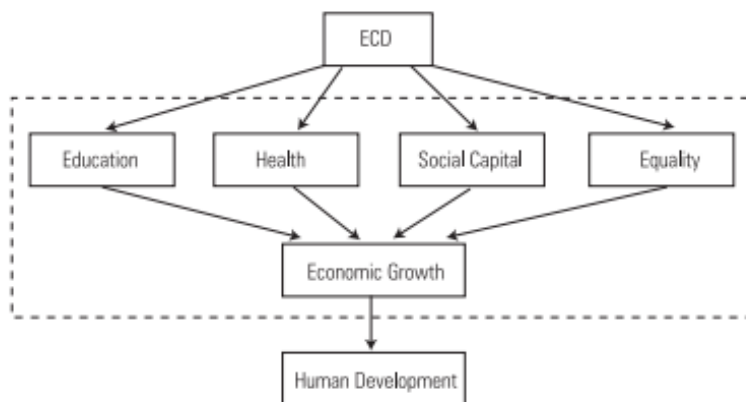
## **1 Introduction**

Participation of children in pre-school education programmes is a crucial step towards their optimal development. The positive effects thereof can be primarily observed as pertaining to the social and speech development, learning, and later academic success of children (Lynch, 2004; Marjanovič Umek, 2014; Morgan, 2019; Rutar, 2018; Vonta, 2009). These benefits are also highlighted in the fundamental principles of pre-school education in kindergartens emphasising the need for equal development opportunities for all children while considering differences arising from their social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Creating an inclusive educational environment that respects diversity and promotes the comprehensive development of each child is the foundation for building a more open and tolerant society (Curriculum for Kindergartens, 1999; Ginner Hau et al., 2022). In this context, understanding how quality pre-school education contributes to effective learning, social development, and the acquisition of fundamental skills that enable children to successfully and independently transition into the school environment is crucial. Therefore, it was decided to investigate the implementation characteristics of short pre-school education programmes in Slovenia. Subsequently, it was focused on the organisation of these short programmes from the perspective of regulations, statutes, and recommendations. This chapter is concluded with theoretical foundations and the definition of the purpose of our study.

### **1.1 Short pre-school education programmes in Slovenia**

In Slovenia, preschool education in public kindergartens, established by municipalities, is conducted by 108 independent public kindergartens and 209 primary schools with kindergarten units. The professional basis for their operation is the national document 'Curriculum for Kindergartens' (1999, p. 7), which, considering its peculiarities, also forms the professional foundation for the implementation thereof. The short programme is intended for pre-school children who had not been enrolled in kindergarten in the year before entering primary school. Departments conducting short programmes in independent public kindergartens or kindergartens at primary schools are funded entirely by the state budget for up to 240 hours and are free of charge for parents. These short programmes in Slovenia (Cotič Pajntar & Zore, 2018, p. 3) serve to ensure a higher degree of inclusion of children of the second age group in the institutional system

of education and training, significantly shaping and conditioning the quality of a child's life. Moreover, studies (Ansari, 2018; Blau, 2021; Mlekuž, 2022; Vonta, 2009) confirm that the positive effects of pre-school education are long-lasting and establish foundations for lifelong learning. Jacques Van der Gaag (2002) states that quality pre-school programmes (ECD – early child development) are an investment in the future, as the long-term effects of quality pre-school education are linked to the development of humanity.



**Figure 1: From Child Development to Human Development: A Comprehensive Framework.**

Source: Van der Gaag, 2002, p. 76.

When planning, implementing, and monitoring educational work in the short programme, it is essential to ensure a balance of activities aimed at gradually acclimating children to institutional education and facilitating a smoother transition into school (Cotič Pajntar & Zore, 2018). The organisation of the short programme is defined by the Regulation on the Organization, Operation, and Funding of Kindergarten Departments Implementing Short Programs and Funded from the State Budget (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 42/2018). It is important that short programme groups of children operate independently and, in accordance with the conditions of the public tender, provide a space – a playroom that meets the prescribed requirements for a department of the second age group and a professional worker who meets the pre-school educator requirements. Kindergartens meeting the public tender conditions can apply for the implementation of the short programme by the end of April in the current school

year. Its implementation must not exceed four hours per day and sixteen hours per week and must include an optional meal (Hlastan-Ribič et al., 2008), contributing to the formation of dietary habits and a positive attitude towards a healthy diet. The regulation (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 42/2018) stipulates that a short programme groups can include from eight to twelve children. If the program is, however, implemented in a demographically endangered area and/or includes children of immigrants or parents with international protection, the minimum short programme implementation standard is five children allowing special attention to be paid to linguistically disadvantaged children (Bednjički Rošer, 2021), as the gradual acquisition of Slovenian and cooperation with parents (Ansari et al. 2018; Licardo & Oliveira Leite, 2021, 2022) are fundamental for facilitating and accelerating their integration. A special feature is also the implementation of the short programme in areas inhabited by members of the Hungarian national community, as educational work is conducted bilingually and the programme is implemented by two educators.

## **1.2 Research problem**

The purpose of our study is to gain insight into the implementation characteristics of the implementation of short pre-school education programmes, identify challenges, and familiarise ourselves with improvement proposals for these programmes based on focus groups consisting of professional kindergarten staff who implemented short programs in the 2018/2019, 2019/2020, and/or 2020/2021 school years. In group discussions or focused conversations, we were interested in the views, opinions, perspectives, and arguments of practitioners. The following research questions were posed:

- what are the implementation characteristics of short pre-school education programmes in Slovenia;
- what experience have practitioners in short programmes had in relation to specific aspects of reducing social, economic, and cultural inequalities;
- the views of kindergarten practitioners regarding the added value of mandatory ECEC;
- what new programme design proposals will the practitioners make; and

- what further education and training needs have been identified by kindergarten practitioners, including in the context of making improvement proposals for existing programmes.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants

Our study used a purposive non-random sample consisting of professional workers working in ten kindergartens who implemented the short pre-school education programme in the 2018/2019, 2019/2020, and/or 2020/2021 school years. All of them responded to our invitation. Educators working in short programmes, full-day programme educators, and kindergarten counselling staff were invited to join the focus groups. Management also decided to accept our invitation. Three focus groups were formed to improve the implementation of the study.

**Table 1: Number (f) and structural percentages (f %) distribution of kindergarten professional staff based on their post**

Kindergarten	Professional Workers	f	f %
Goriška region, Southeast Slovenia, Podravska region, Central Slovenia region	Educator in a full-day programme	9	27.3
	Educator in a short programme	15	45.5
	Counselling staff	5	15.2
	Management	4	12.0
Total		33	100.0

The three focus groups consisted of a total of 33 members of professional staff from 10 kindergartens, distributed by regions. Half of the participants were educators with experience in the short programme, followed by educators from full-day programmes without any experience in short programmes, counselling staff, and management. The groups were predominantly composed of women, with the exception of one man included as an educator in the short programme.

## **2.2 Instrument**

The measurement instrument used in our study was a semi-structured interview. Based on the research objectives, a protocol for professional kindergarten professional was drawn up, containing thematic sections with basic questions and discussion points. The content sections were as follows:

- Implementation characteristics of short programmes;
- Experience in reducing social, cultural, and economic inequalities;
- The added value of the mandatory form of the pre-school education program;
- Proposals for designing a new pre-school education program or improving existing ones;
- The need for further training of professional staff in the context of the short programme.

As facilitators of the focus groups, the protocol was used to guide discussions and assist in maintaining the structure of the conversation. Based on the protocol, a form enabling the taking of minutes for each focus group was also created.

## **2.3 Data collection**

Data were collected as part of a national evaluation study titled "Analysis of Needs, Conditions, and Possibilities for Mandatory Inclusion of Children in One of the Pre-school Education Programmes from the Perspective of Reducing Social, Economic, and Cultural Inequalities" (Licardo et al., 2023). These data constitute only a part of the extensive study, focusing solely on the data obtained from professional kindergarten staff focus groups. Data collection was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles.

The focus groups were led by two researchers, one of them being in charge of conducting the meetings and the other in taking the minutes. The facilitators of the focus groups contacted the selected kindergartens and invited them to participate in the study. The focus groups were organised remotely via the MS Teams application at various times in May and June 2022, with the timings coordinated with the

research participants. One week before the focus group sessions, all participants received a link to the meeting by e-mail, and a reminder two days before the meeting.

At the beginning, the focus group facilitator introduced the purpose of the study to the participants, ensured the anonymity of their responses, and obtained verbal meeting recording consent (to be used for verification of the accuracy of the data recorded in the notes). This was followed by a discussion of individual questions or discussion points outlined in the focus group protocols. Based on the participants' responses, a record of each focus group's proceedings was drawn up. The discussions in the focus groups lasted about 60 minutes.

## **2.4 Data analysis**

The analysis of data from the focus groups was conducted in accordance with qualitative content analysis. The analysis was performed using the Atlas.ti software (version 22).

The analysis procedure consisted of the following sequential steps:

- Reviewing and organising the minutes;
- The coding process, or text analysis, aimed at identifying meaningful parts of the text relevant to the research objectives (open coding);
- The categorisation process, or grouping codes into categories;
- Combining categories into thematic sections relevant to the research objectives.

## **3 Results**

Hereinafter, the results of the focus groups according to the individual content sections outlined in Chapter 2.2 are presented.



## Results of the kindergarten focus groups regarding the fundamental short programme implementation characteristics

**Table 2: Analysis of focus group representatives from kindergartens regarding the short programme implementation characteristics**

Topic	Category	Code
Short programme implementation characteristics (17)	Good practices (3)	Cooperation between the municipality and kindergarten is key (1)
		Group-work method (4)
		Adequate logistics increase children's participation levels in SP (1)
	Challenges (10)	240 hours is not enough (2)
		Additional burden on staff (4)
		Children SP participation level challenge (3)
		Enrolment challenges (1)
		Financial challenges (1)
		Challenges for parents with children in SP (1)
		Location challenges (6)
		Staffing challenges (4)
		Need for additional competencies for educators in SP (1)
		Educators do not want to work in SP (1)
	Organisation (4)	Implementation in the afternoon (1)
		Group-work method (4)
		Organisation of hours (8)
		Rotation of educators (1)

The most frequently highlighted short programme challenges by the focus group participations were those pertaining to their implementation, followed by the characteristics related to organisation and some good practices. The most common challenges include location problems, especially spatial limitations in kindergartens implementing short programmes; lack of space, implementation in special departments, and accommodation centres. Staffing challenges also represent a significant factor, as there is a shortage of staff, consequently burdening educators who already have to perform their duties in the full-day programme. In one kindergarten, several educators rotate in the implementation of the short programme, coordinating among themselves. Participants specifically pointed out the lack of Roma assistants and additional, dedicated staff for short programmes. Therefore, the workload is shared among themselves. Kindergartens also face difficulties in obtaining data on children who had not been previously enrolled in kindergarten, for whom the short programme is in fact intended.

Regarding the organisation of short programs, participants highlighted the specificities of schedules and work methods. Most kindergartens conduct short programmes in the afternoon, 2 to 4 times a week per 4 hours. These programmes are primarily attended by immigrant children, Roma, refugees, while educators strive to implement content according to the *Curriculum for Kindergartens* (1999). Group work involves the use of translators, dictionaries, and the preparation of language materials, as children often do not know the language and have difficulties with graphomotor skills. A good practice includes the use of various aids, online resources, and libraries. Participants also cited the implementation of short programmes at school as a good practice example, allowing children to familiarise themselves with the school environment before enrolling in primary school. Proper collaboration between the relevant kindergarten and school is also important in terms of gathering data about children eligible for the short programme.

Educators and other members of professional staff believe that 240 hours of the short programme is insufficient for children to acquire and develop language competencies and achieve developmental goals in the early period of their lives. Irregular attendance of children in the short programme (30–40%) also poses a significant challenge to educators. To ensure attendance, one kindergarten that implemented the short program arranged organised transportation, achieving 90% attendance.

### **Results of kindergarten focus groups regarding reducing social, cultural, and economic inequalities**

Both good practices and challenges were identified in the focus groups consisting of professional kindergarten staff when discussing the reduction of economic, cultural, and social inequalities. Good practices include a variety of activities, such as visits to external institutions (puppet theatre, art gallery, sports clubs, nearby primary schools, etc.), cooperation with Social Work Centres and health centres, dance lessons, nature walks, visits to the city library, accustoming children to daily routines, developing graphomotor skills, joint meetings with parents and children, children's performances, and the use of multilingual picture books. Working with children also involves involving immigrant parents in various activities.

**Table 3: Analysis of focus group representatives from kindergartens regarding reducing inequalities in short programs**

Theme	Category	Code
Reducing inequalities (8)	Good practices (3)	Implementation of various activities to reduce inequalities in SP (6)
		Cooperation with other institutions (1)
		In SP with children from Ukraine, one parent is always present (1)
	Challenges (5)	SP does not fully allow for reducing social, cultural and economic differences (1)
		Insufficient hours to reduce inequalities (5)
		Parents are not invited to SP activities (1)
		Strengthening contact with parents mainly in regular programmes (1)
		SP does not conduct meetings with parents (3)

Participants reported that, when working with Russian-speaking children, they use texts in the Russian language. To overcome language barriers, educators are occasionally assisted by siblings of the children who are already enrolled in primary school.

Despite the efforts of professional workers, the main challenge remains the lack of time, as 240 hours is insufficient to effectively address the problem of inequality. Professional workers highlight that there are inequalities in children's language development, socialisation, and other areas of development.

Additionally, professional staff pointed out that short programmes often do not include the conduct of additional activities with parents as the lack of time for anything else only allows for primarily focusing on working with children. Professional staff believes that the short programme only partially enables the reduction of inequalities.

**Results of kindergarten focus groups with kindergartens regarding the added value of mandatory inclusion of children in pre-school education programmes**

Responses in two categories – challenges and proposals – were found when analysing the added value of the potential introduction of a mandatory pre-school education programme. Kindergarten professionals face problems as a result of the

current short programme not being mandatory, leading to irregular attendance of children and lack of parental responsibility. Organising short programs at the system level presents an additional challenge, as kindergartens experience spatial and staffing constraints and lack adequate support from kindergarten founders (municipalities). An additional challenge specific to certain areas in Slovenia is that only Roma children are directed by kindergartens to short programmes, constituting a form of segregation. This finding is certainly concerning from both a professional and legal standpoint. Kindergarten professionals provided several design proposals for a potential new programme or improvement proposals for existing programmes. All agree that the duration of the short programmes currently co-financed by the Ministry of Education is too short, as continuity in the pre-school period is essential. They also suggested that the short programme should be mandatory for all children who had not participated in regular kindergarten programmes before starting school. They believe the programme should last throughout the school year in a condensed form in the morning. They highlighted the positive effects of a mandatory and longer short programme, mainly reflected in children's progress in individual developmental areas and knowledge. All participants acknowledge that systemic changes and organisation are necessary.

**Table 4: Analysis of kindergarten focus group representatives regarding the added value of the mandatory pre-school education programme**

Theme	Category	Code
Added value of the mandatory programme (11)	Challenges (4)	Challenge that SP is not mandatory (3)
		Challenge of staff overload (2)
		Need for system-level organisation (3)
		The current SP focuses only on Roma (1)
	Proposals (7)	SP as a mandatory form should last the entire year (5)
		Mandatory SP should not be in the afternoon (1)
		Noticeable progress in children in SP (1)
		Need for system-level organisation (3)
		The programme should be longer than 240 hours (3)
		A condensed form of SP is sensible (6)
		More time is needed for added value in various areas (4)

## Results of kindergarten focus groups regarding new programme design proposals

**Table 5: Analysis of kindergarten focus group representatives regarding new programme design proposals**

Theme	Category	Code
New programme design proposals (14)	Needs (5)	Need for Roma translators and other staff (1)
		Need for Roma educators (1)
		Need for various SPs (4)
		Planning transitions from SP into regular programmes (3)
		Need for multilingual materials for SP (1)
	Proposals (9)	SP should last the whole year before school (4 hours) (1)
		SP should be mandatory (4)
		SP should be for children aged 3-6 (2)
		Departments should be homogeneous (2)
		Inclusion of younger siblings in SP is important (1)
		Need for various SPs (4)
		The programme should be free-of-charge (2)
		The programme should last more than 240 hours (1)
		Challenges with including younger siblings (2)

The analysed responses of kindergarten focus group participants regarding new programme design proposals were classified into two key categories: needs and proposals. The responses highlight the need for various short programmes, with some professionals proposing separation of programmes based on the origin of children (Ukraine, Roma, refugees) and Slovenian children. They propose specialised short programs for specific groups, including special staff such as Roma assistants, translators, and interpreters. They also emphasized the need for planning transitions from short into regular programmes, focusing on integrating children into regular programmes after completing the short one. Educators expressed a desire for multilingual brochures explaining the pre-school education system to parents. Regarding proposals for a new programme, the idea that a new programme or some form of a short programme should be mandatory for all children stands out. Again, the desire for offering different types of short programmes tailored to specific child populations is highlighted. Proposals also include demands for homogeneous departments, programmes for children in the second age group, duration of more than 240 hours, and a year-long programme before entering school. However, opinions are divided on the inclusion of younger children (siblings). Some see this

as increasing parental trust, while others believe it complicates work and that younger children cannot keep up with the activities.

### Results of kindergarten focus groups with kindergartens regarding the needs for further education and training

**Table 6: Analysis of kindergarten focus groups regarding further education and training**

Theme	Category	Code
Further Education and Training (8)	Needs (5)	Networking need of SP implementers (1)
		Competence development proposal for staff involved in SP (1)
		Need for exchange of good practices in SP (1)
		Lack of training providers (1)
		Kindergarten organises its own training (1)
	Proposals (3)	Need for more information about SP (1)
		Proposed content for additional training (6)
		Examples of good didactic materials for learning Slovenian (1)

Kindergarten professionals highlighted various needs for further education and training. Among the most common proposals are the needs for additional education in "Slovenian as a second or foreign language" and training for planning and implementing language activities in short programme groups attended by children with different mother tongues. Professionals emphasize the need for language training for working with immigrant children. In addition, they express a need for developing competencies in "approaches to teaching immigrants, Roma" and "cooperation with parents" due to the diversity of family values and cultures. They also mention the need for networking among short programme implementers in Slovenia and the exchange of good practices, which would help overcome professional challenges. Implementers of short programmes also express a need for multilingual didactic materials for pre-school children, which are rarely available in our area. They particularly emphasised the importance of multilingual picture books as an excellent resource for literacy development and language learning in linguistically disadvantaged circumstances. Picture books were also used to encourage communication between children and their parents in the mother and/or foreign language.

## 4 Discussion

The research based on focus groups of professional kindergarten staff revealed numerous challenges in and characteristics of implementing short pre-school education programmes. The most common challenges highlighted by kindergarten professionals were issues related to space or spatial limitations. Suitable material work conditions, especially regarding space, equipment, materials, tools, etc., are essential for the implementation of a quality educational process, as they affect the educational process and consequently the child's development and achievements (Batistič Zorec, 2011). Numerous authors also emphasize the importance of appropriate space and equipment in the earliest periods (Baran et al., 2007; Leinonen and Venninen, 2012), as a quality learning environment supports children's activities and promotes quality learning (Mohidin et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2018).

Staffing challenges also constitute a significant factor affecting the quality of the implementation of short programmes. Kindergarten professionals pointed out a shortage of staff, leading to additional burdens on staff conducting the short programme after their regular schedule in the full-day programme. Therefore, most kindergartens conduct short programmes in the afternoon, 2 to 4 times a week for four hours. The short programme groups mainly include immigrant children, Roma, refugees, and a few Slovenian children. Participants in the focus groups highlighted a lack of specialised staff. Despite recommendations (Cotič Pajntar and Zore, 2018; Mlekuž, 2022; Vonta, 2013), research in our country shows that educators working with vulnerable groups still need more professional support from the educational environment, more knowledge of methods adapted for children from vulnerable groups, and more cooperation with the parents of these children (Licardo, 2020).

Language barriers also present a significant challenge for educators in short programmes. To stimulate children's vocabulary, educators often use online translators, picture dictionaries and other multilingual materials. Nevertheless, educators strive to implement all areas according to the Curriculum for Kindergartens (1999). Good practices include using various aids, online resources, libraries, and exchanging experience among educators. In addition, kindergarten professionals strive to reduce economic, cultural, and social inequalities, but 240 hours, the current duration of the short programme, is not enough to address this issue. Participants highlight inequalities in children's language development,

socialisation, and other development areas, indicating the limitations of short programmes in reducing inequalities.

The analysis of proposed changes in pre-school education programs reveals the need for more mandatory short programmes, tailored to specific groups of children. Research from abroad shows that, for children from less stimulating family environments, it is important to be included in high-quality kindergarten at a younger age, which can act as a protective factor, e.g., in speech development, school readiness, and later academic success (Burchinal et al., 2000; Gormley et al. 2005; Loeb et al., 2004; Magnuson et al., 2006).

Kindergarten professionals have suggested the need for a wider range of shorter programmes, including specialised shorter programmes for specific groups of foreign-speaking children. This finding is concerning, as it implies that some professionals advocate for segregating children into short programme groups based on ethnic, national, and/or linguistic affiliation. This is professionally unacceptable and also encroaches on the legal aspect of children's rights.

Participants in the focus groups proposed that departments should be homogeneous, the programme should be for children in the second age group, last more than 240 hours, and be year-long before school entry.

Participants expressed a need for further education, especially regarding Slovene as a second or foreign language and planning and implementing language activities in short programme units with children of different languages. They also highlighted the need to develop competencies for teaching immigrants, Roma, and cooperation with parents to better understand the family values and cultures of children in short programmes, including intercultural education and the principle of multiculturalism.

## **5 Conclusion**

Quality pre-school education contributes to effective learning, social development, and the acquisition of fundamental skills that enable children to successfully and independently enter the school environment. Kindergartens in Slovenia offer various preschool education programmes that differ in duration and organisation; full-day, half-day, and short programmes.



Our study provides valuable insights into the characteristics of short programs' implementation from the perspectives of experience, challenges, proposals, and needs highlighted by kindergarten professionals who implemented short programs in the previous school years. Spatial limitations, staff shortages, and language barriers are key challenges found as faced by kindergarten professionals who highlighted the need for additional training in language activities, intercultural education, and parent cooperation, as these programmes primarily include children from vulnerable groups. Improvement proposals include a greater diversity of programs, homogeneous units, and extending the duration of programmes.

Our findings constitute an important basis for designing improvements at the implementation and systemic levels. The push to make a shorter programme compulsory for all children who are not enrolled in other forms of pre-primary education in the year before they start school reflects the need for systemic change. The programme should provide systemic support for families, including linguistic support (such as learning Slovene as a second language), and be significantly more than 240 hours. Systemic change could form the foundation leading to the quality implementation of short programmes. Consideration should also be given to planning transitions from short programs into regular programmes, with an emphasis on integrating children into regular programmes after completing the short one. Future research could focus to the research of development of additional strategies to address the identified challenges.

It is crucial to understand that including children in high quality pre-school education programmes is a fundamental step towards ensuring equal opportunities for all children and reduction social, economic, and cultural inequalities. Therefore, efforts should be made in the Republic of Slovenia to increase the participation levels of children in pre-school education programmes, with special attention being paid to including children from vulnerable groups therein.

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