



Day-care nurses'¹ perceptions of their educational practice in France and in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The goal of our research project is to compare the perceptions of the educational practices of Czech and French day-care nurses. Our population consisted of 59 nurses in France and 50 in the Czech Republic. The children came from homes with both parents and their average age was 25 months in France and 24 months in the Czech Republic. The questionnaire was made up of 10 scales presenting the issue of day-care nurses' perceptions of their educational practices. In view of the results we obtained, we can put forward the hypothesis that professionalisation in the Czech Republic is based on a "*knowing how to do*" approach to the child, whereas in France it is based more on a "*knowing how to be*" approach.

Key words: educational practices, day care nursing

Introduction

Our research project aims to compare the perceptions of the educational practices of Czech and French day-care nurses. The theoretical models in developmental psychology do not provide any definite answers to the question of where the most adequate form of care is provided – in France or in the Czech Republic – for young children while their parents are at work.

The political and economic contexts of the two countries – parental child-rearing leave, unemployment rate, women's work rate, privileged day care nurseries or not, etc. – are obviously quite different. As suggested by Mozère (1992), the debate on day care for young children remains "opaque because of ideological stances, where some people are in favour of young children being educated by their mother and others are violently opposed to it. These options influence equally current policies as they do any attempts to reform" (p. 14).

In France, the history of day-care nurseries for early childhood comes within the framework of economic and cultural changes. Although children under three years of age are not as numerous now as in the post-war period, the needs in terms of day-care nurseries are increasing. The 1970s saw the development of collective day-care nurseries as a response to the growing number of women at work. During this period, at the core of the institutional practices in French day-care nurseries, the emphasis has shifted from the absolute necessity of reinforcing the mother-child bond, to a better understanding of the very young child's ability to build multiple attachments, without making the parents feel guilty or substituting the nurse for the

mother. Along the same lines, many studies (David et Appell, 1973; Loutre-Dupasquier, 1981; Aubry, 1983; Athanassiou, 1988) have largely contributed to a better understanding of the discontinuities the child has to cope with.

In the 1990s, with the evolution of socio-economic conditions (higher unemployment, part-time work mainly for women...), a search for more qualified and specific answers was illustrated by the appearance of innovative structures such as "part-time" nurseries, "kindergartens" "*maisons vertes*", "*multi-accueil*" "*halte-garderie*"⁵... In the same way, in the Czech Republic, some notable changes could be seen in the perceptions and practices of the professionals of early childhood:

- After World War II, under the influence of a culture advocating collective principles, the State was entrusted with the task of looking after children in collective day-care nurseries from the age of three months (at that time, 100% of them were placed in day nurseries).
- The family policy adopted in the country between 1968-70 as a reaction to the post war situation attempted to make it easier to put the child back into or keep it in the family, and offered mothers a two-year period of paid leave. Furthermore, Bowlby's (1958, 1969) and Spitz's (1965) works in particular encouraged researchers and practitioners of early childhood to analyse the influence of early separation from a family environment on the young child's development. As a result, it was preventively recommended that mothers should care for and educate their children at home. It should be noted that mothers got their job back at the end of this parental leave, and that the point of this measure was in no way to reduce high levels of women's unemployment (almost nonexistent at that time).
- Nowadays, mothers can prolong this parental leave until the child is four years old. Therefore, in the Czech Republic, there are not many children in day nurseries although 90% of women work (note that there are only collective day nurseries in that country). The reason for this is not financial, since nearly all of the nurseries are state-run; their cost is not a handicap for underprivileged families. On the other hand, the women who are now mothers, as well as those of the previous generation, grew up in collective nurseries during the first years of their lives. It seems that these women, particularly those from privileged backgrounds, do not want their own children to experience this kind of care, which most of them did not appreciate. They have listened to arguments stating it is better that mothers should care for her children during the first years of their life.

"Perceptions have to be put back in their social, political, economic and demographic contexts which, in the course of the history of each country studied, have shaped and are still shaping the outlines of childcare policy in today's discussion" (Jenson & Sineau, 1998, p.4). Our research fits into this framework.

Method

Sample

Our sample consisted of 59 nurses in France and 50 in the Czech Republic. In the framework of this study we contacted several collective day nurseries in France in several *départements* of the Midi-Pyrénées and Aquitaine regions, and in the Czech Republic collective day nurseries situated in Prague and its surrounding areas. In both countries, the children came from two-parent households. They had a mean age of 25 ± 1 months in France and 24 ± 2 months in the Czech Republic.

Survey questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was mainly constructed on the basis of the study carried out by Bosse-Platière et al. (1995) in the framework of professional practices in day-care structures for early childhood, on Kellerhals and Montandon's research (1991a, 1991b) into the educational strategies of families, on Pourtois' (1979, 1989) and Durning's (1995) works on family education and on Lautrey's (1980) research into educational styles.

The questionnaire, as we shall see below, was made up of 10 scales⁶ (Zaouche-Gaudron et al., 2006⁷) presenting the question of day care nurses' perceptions of their educational practices.⁸ Firstly, on the basis of 82 questionnaires that were sent to French mothers and nurses (40% of whom answered), we calculated a Cronbach alpha ratio for each scale. The alpha was higher than .75 for each one, which allowed us to verify their internal validity.

The 10 scales were as follows (illustrated by some examples of items):

Scale A – Educational qualities: 6 items (for example: “understanding the child”, “having rules respected”, “stimulating the child”)

Scale B – Mother's educative function: 3 items (“the mother is the one who looks after the child”, “who watches over the child”, “who makes the child feel secure”)

Scale C – Educational values to be privileged in the child: 4 items (“autonomy”, “self-confidence”, “curiosity”, “obeying the rules”)

Scale D – Nurse's perception of her own behaviour towards the child: 10 items (for example: “affection”, “tolerance”, “confidence”, “availability”)

Scale E – Nurse's feelings for the child: 7 items (for example: “happiness”, “anxiety”, “guilt”)

Scale F – Child's personality trait: 12 items (for example: “aggressive”, “affectionate”, “autonomous”)

Scale G – Child's attitude towards objects/toys: 4 items (“curious”, “observing”, “lends easily”, “plays with the other children”)

Scale H – Child's attitude when at the day nursery: 7 items (for example: “the child shows interest in communicating with other adults”, “is dependent on the nurse”, “is happy when arriving at the day nursery”)

Scale I – Perception of the nurse's roles and functions: 17 items (for example “the nurse is someone who respects the mother”, “who replaces her”, “who judges her”, “who supports her”).

The scales are of the Likert type and comprise six reply options. The survey questionnaire on the representations of the educational practices of the day-care nurses thus consists of 77 items.

Results

We used Wilcoxon's test to process our data.⁹ Here we only present data that are relevant from a statistical viewpoint.

Among the suggested educational qualities (cf. Scale A), day-care nurses in France place the accent more on the “forbidding and having the rules respected” and “listening and paying attention to the child” items than day-care nurses in the Czech Republic do.

As far as educational functions are concerned (cf. Scale B), day-care nurses in the Czech Republic consider that the mother is the one who “watches over” and “educates” the child more than day-care nurses in France.

Table 1

Scale A: Educational qualities

	France		Czech Republic		Z		p
	m	σ	m	σ			
A4 Forbidding, having rules respected	5.29	0.85	3.71	1.57	0.54	-5.20	.000**
A6 Listening, paying attention to the child	5.71	0.65	5.22	1.18	0.26	-2.80	.005*

*: $p \leq .05$, **: $p \leq .001$ p: significance, m: average, σ : variance, Z: Wilcoxon**Table 2**

Scale B: Maternal educative function

	France		Czech Republic		Z		p
	m	σ	m	σ			
B8 The mother is the one who watches over the child	4.68	1.41	5.20	1.11	0.20	-2.00	.05*
B9 The mother is the one who makes the child feel secure	5.53	1.07	5.94	0.31	0.25	-3.11	.002*

Table 3

Scale C: Educational values to be privileged in the child

	France		Czech Republic		Z		p
	m	σ	m	σ			
C10 Autonomy	5.33	1.01	4.29	1.34	0.41	-4.34	.000**
C13 Respecting rules	5.27	0.88	4.71	1.12	0.27	-2.62	.009*

*: $p \leq .05$, **: $p \leq .001$ p: significance, m: average, σ : variance, Z: Wilcoxon

About educational values (cf. Scale C): French day-care nurses attach more importance to "autonomy" and "respecting the rules" than Czech day care nurses.

Czech day-care nurses think that they are not only more "affectionate", more "tolerant", more "available", "closer", more "satisfied with their role" but also more "anxious" than day-care nurses in France. Their French colleagues are more "impatient" and do not consider their "work difficult", unlike Czech nurses (cf. Scale D).

Day-care nurses in the Czech Republic feel less "pride" and more "joy" with the children than French nurses do.

In the Czech Republic, more than in France, day-care nurses consider that children are not very "aggressive" or "difficult", and "closer" to them, but also less "autonomous" and "know less what they want" (cf. Scale F).

Table 4
Scale D

	France		Czech Republic		Z		p
	M	σ	m	σ			
D14 I am affectionate	4.78	1.10	5.34	0.80	0.28	-2.69	.007*
D15 I am tolerant	4.40	1.02	4.90	0.99	0.24	-2.57	.01*
D17 I am available	4.86	0.91	5.52	0.81	0.36	-4.05	.000**
D18 I am close to the children	4.44	1.00	5.23	0.88	0.39	-4.06	.000**
D19 I am impatient	2.60	1.49	1.98	1.09	0.23	-1.95	.05*
D21 I am anxious	1.79	1.25	3.06	1.55	0.42	-4.57	.000**
D22 I am satisfied with my role	4.78	0.98	5.43	0.68	0.36	-3.6	.000**
D23 My role as day-care nurse is difficult	2.77	1.72	5.58	0.84	0.72	-7.71	.000**

*: $p \leq .05$, **: $p \leq .001$

p: significance, m: average, σ : variance, Z: Wilcoxon

Table 5
Scale E: Day-care nurses feelings towards the child

	France		Czech Republic		Z		p
	m	σ	m	σ			
E24 Joy	4.71	1.01	5.43	0.82	0.36	-3.86	.000**
E30 Pride	2.92	1.57	2.02	1.39	0.29	-2.84	.004*

*: $p \leq .05$, **: $p \leq .001$

p: significance, m: average, σ : variance, Z: Wilcoxon

No item appeared to be significant from a statistical viewpoint concerning the scale relative to the question on children in relation to objects (cf. Scale G).

Czech nurses consider that children are “happy to arrive at the nursery” and tend to perceive them as “depending on them” more than they do on French nurses. (Cf. Scale H).

As far as their roles and functions are concerned (cf. Scale I), day-care nurses in the Czech Republic more often see themselves as someone who “educates”, “looks after”, “watches over” the child and “makes him/her feel secure”, and they agree on the idea that nurses “take better care” of the child than its mother. In addition, they consider that the nurse is someone who “completes” the mother, “knows more” and “supports her”. They see day-care nurses as playing the role of “second mother” much more than French nurses do.

Day-care nurses in France consider that they “respect” the mother, “help her to part” from her child but they do not think that they either “replace” or “judge” her, unlike nurses in the Czech Republic.

Table 6
Scale F: Child's personality traits

	France		Czech Republic		Z		p
	m	σ	m	σ			
F33 Aggressive	2.63	1.47	1.67	1.05	0.35	-3.59	.000**
F36 Difficult	2.61	1.65	1.94	1.45	0.21	-2.45	.01*
F38 Close to me	3.86	1.10	4.81	1.23	0.38	-4.35	.000**
F39 Autonomous	4.40	1.22	3.72	1.46	0.25	-2.40	.02*
F43 Knows what he/she wants	5.03	1.28	4.42	1.46	0.22	-2.39	.02*

*: $p \leq .05$, **: $p \leq .001$

p: significance, m: average, σ : variance, Z: Wilcoxon

Table 7
Scale H: Child's characteristics at the nursery

	France		Czech Republic		Z		p
	m	σ	m	σ			
H52 Is dependent on nurse	3.16	1.42	3.67	1.39	0.18	-1.72	.08 □
H53 Is happy when arriving at nursery	4.59	1.40	5.16	1.15	0.22	-2.43	.01*

*: $p \leq .05$, **: $p \leq .001$

p: significance, m: average, σ : variance, Z: Wilcoxon

Finally, as far as relationships with the mother are concerned (cf. Scale J), we only noted one significance: that day-care nurses in the Czech Republic think they have good relationships with her, more significantly so than in France.

Discussion

When examining the educational qualities, functions and values expressed by French day-care nurses as opposed to those expressed by their Czech counterparts, two main themes stand out from the analysis and concern, on the one hand, the issue of law and rules and, on the other hand, that of the attention and autonomy given to the child. This result can be explained by the fact that in the Czech Republic, contrary to France, a two-year-old child is not subject to the application and respect of rules, and that Czech educational partners generally encourage autonomy less than their French colleagues do. French day-care nurses' concern for authority must certainly be highlighted and taken into account. We may also wonder if those two terms have the same definition in the two countries. The notions of authority and autonomy may actually evoke different levels of reality for nurses. It goes without saying that in this kind of comparative study, we should not only consider, on a general level, the country's socio-political realities, but also be careful, in a more focussed way, to analyse the collective nursery

Table 8

Scale I: Perception of the nurse's roles and functions

	France		Czech Republic		Z		p
	m	σ	m	σ			
I55 The nurse is the one who educates	3.66	1.53	5.16	0.96	0.50	-5.26	.000**
I56 The nurse is the one who takes care	3.63	1.33	5.76	0.43	0.73	-8.11	.000**
I57 Watches over the child	5.05	1.25	5.58	0.84	0.24	-2.72	.007*
I58 Makes the child feel secure	5.41	1.06	5.80	0.57	0.22	-2.47	.01*
I59 The nurse cares better for the child than the mother	1.36	1.01	2.91	1.44	0.53	-5.97	.000**
I60 Respects the mother	5.54	1.01	5.22	0.91	0.16	-2.54	.01*
I61 Replaces the mother	1.48	1.25	3.17	1.97	0.46	-5.28	.000**
I62 Completes the mother	4.21	1.67	5.04	1.27	0.27	-2.88	.004*
I63 Judges the mother	1.49	0.98	2.47	1.47	0.37	-4.20	.000**
I64 Helps the mother to part from her child	4.96	1.38	4.00	1.66	0.31	-3.22	.001**
I65 Knows more than the mother	1.52	1.21	3.23	1.48	0.54	-6.18	.000**
I67 Supports the mother	4.44	1.36	5.08	1.23	0.24	-2.83	.005*
I68 Drives the mother away from the child	1.23	0.89	1.00	0.00	0.17	-2.11	.03*
I70 Plays the role of a second mother	1.80	1.49	3.33	1.77	0.43	-4.63	.000**

*: $p \leq .05$, **: $p \leq .001$ p: significance, m: average, σ : variance, Z: Wilcoxon**Table 9**

Scale J: Mother-nurse communication relationship

	France		Czech Republic		Z		p
	m	σ	m	σ			
J77 Good relationships with the mother	5.34	0.73	5.68	0.59	0.25	-2.66	.008*

*: $p \leq .05$, **: $p \leq .001$ p: significance, m: average, σ : variance, Z: Wilcoxon

better in its entirety – structure, nature, functioning, ideological or even political basis – as well as take care to use terms that convey the same meaning.

In their relationship with children, Czech day-care nurses appear to be particularly devoted as far as affection, tolerance, availability and closeness are concerned. This result is also in agreement with the way they consider children: they feel happy with them, perceive them as being not very aggressive or difficult, and are close to them, even if they find that they are less autonomous and know less than what they want them to. They note, however, that their role is difficult (which is perfectly understandable given that there are only two nurses to care alternately for 20 children each in the nursery). We therefore wonder if there is not a tendency by Czech day-care nurses to increase their affective tonality with children. Comparatively,

French nurses express more impatience with the children even if they appear to be prouder of them than their Czech counterparts are.

Another outstanding feature concerns the range of the roles and functions which are fulfilled differently by nurses in the two countries.

It appears that in the Czech Republic day-care nurses consider themselves as “second mothers”, or even as being more competent than the mothers, while having good relationships with them. This result is particularly interesting insofar as the family policy in the Czech Republic promotes maintaining the child with the mother during the first years of its life.¹⁰ Objectively, day-care nurses in the Czech Republic have good professional qualifications (4 years in a specialised medical school, including subjects such as educational theory and psychology in the first years), which can account for the high level of competence they believe they have. A second reason can be evoked as an explanation for this result. A widely-held opinion – which they also share up to a certain point – is that mothers who put their children in day-care nurseries are not “good mothers”, and that their children suffer from this because they have to leave the family circle prematurely. This is why they consider themselves as “second mothers” or even as “spare mothers”. But, and this is our third hypothesis, are they not also trying to suggest that they can do as well as the mothers, if not better than them? And, consequently, are they not saying that day-care nurseries, as much as the family circle, have a specific role to play for young children? What’s more, Czech nurses underline – more than their French colleagues do – that they consider that the child is happy at the nursery and “depends on them”. And yet, we know that in the Czech Republic the mother, the essential partner in the child’s life, is considered as the “expert” in the field of education during the pre-school period, and is even seen as being “irreplaceable”, relying on maternal feeling, intuition, etc., which seems to be stronger than education. Perhaps the child-care workers are highlighting these points because they fear that many institutions might close due to a lack of children in these structures.

In France, day-care nurses seem to distinguish more between the roles and functions which are specific to the mother, and also express a certain distance relative to their place beside the child and beside the mother, while respecting her. Since the studies initiated by David and Appell (1973), Athanassiou (1988) etc., educational projects have insisted on the fact that children must be able to put down other roots which are necessary for a harmonious socio-personal development outside their family. For many years we have also known that the nurse’s function must be stable enough for a lasting bond to develop safely, knowing that the time spent with the child is necessarily going to be short (three years at the very most). This function requires that the nurse should accept being merely an accompanying person – and not a person who takes the mother’s place – while being a structuring presence for its development. “If you resolutely put yourself on the side of the child, the function of the day-care nurse proves to be paradoxical in the way that it consists of ensuring the continuity necessary for the child (between people, places and moments) in conditions of discontinuity (time and availability of the caring nurse), of separation (children-parents) and of difference (educational conceptions of each other, child who is not your own)” (Bosse-Platière & al., 1995, 11). These elements, which have been studied for a long time in France, seem to be better integrated in the educational projects, professional training and, possibly, in the French day-care nurse’s conceptions and practices.

Several *distantiated* relational aspects make up one of the privileged themes French nurses like to highlight, while relationships based on more *professionalised* elements seem to be a constituting focus of day-care nurses’ perceptions in the Czech Republic. In France, the “difference and complementarities” of both of the child’s educational partners – mother and nurse – appear to be the mainspring of their perception; on the other hand, in the Czech republic, the “substitution” of the mother by the nurse is more easily made. Could this be due to a lack of distance between the mother and the nurse, or perhaps to too large a distance? A distance that needs to be better resolved by the partners involved. It is nevertheless necessary to add that day-care nurses in the Czech Republic have objectively less time to establish and maintain an individual contact with the mothers: they have to care for several children and are often on

their own in the nursery at the time the children leave. They are therefore not able to make contact with the mothers and, at the same time, stop caring for the other children.

Conclusion

In view of the results we obtained, professionalisation in the Czech republic is set on a *savoir-faire* (knowing how to do) approach to children – which does not necessarily rule out the relational aspect – and that professionalisation in France is set more on a *savoir-être* (knowing how to be) approach.

These particular features are certainly the result of a different logic and history in the implementation of day-care nurseries, and of educational projects, which have left their own mark in both countries. Not only do the nurses in each country have their own perceptions, but also each country carries a culture that makes it different from the other in the educational perceptions of day-care nurses.

Notes

1. The authors use the French term "*accueillante*"- meaning "accommodating, welcoming person" for the personnel who regularly care for children in day nurseries, to highlight the change from the older term "guarding" to "accommodating".
2. Professor of the Psychology of Development, Head of the Psychology of the Young Child team, Personalization and Social Changes Laboratory.
3. PhD., CsC., Head of the Psychology of Development and Social Psychology at the Faculty of Psychology, Charles University, Prague.
4. Temporary Education and Research Attaché, member of the Psychology of the Young Child team, Personalization and Social Changes Laboratory.
5. Names of different French nursery or playgroup structures (translator's note).
6. An additional line of investigation was offered to mothers to measure their implication towards their children in order to avoid bias caused by mother-child relational problems.
7. Research financed by the French national family allowance fund (*Caisse Nationale d'Allocations Familiales*), agreement 97/477. As part of this study, we also examined the question of perceptions of the mother's educational practices.
8. Here we will only present the perception of the educational practices of nurses.
9. We would like to thank Mr. Pietr for having carried out the statistical processing.
10. On the one hand as a reaction to the collective nurseries women knew under the communist regime, and on the other hand because this policy relies on theories underlining the importance of the mother-child bond.

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