HOW TO INTRODUCE ALTERNATIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SERVICES IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

A GOOD START

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Access to high quality care and education services provides young children, especially those from poor and excluded groups, with a good start in life that is positively associated with improved success in education and beyond. Children’s early experiences augment or inhibit cognitive development and the emergence of the varied skills that lay the foundations for lifelong development. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) calls for States Parties to “ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.” Globally, there is increasing recognition of the unique opportunities and vulnerabilities of the early childhood period as well as a commitment to intervene early.

As the countries of the Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) region cope with economic transition and sectoral reform, the rights and needs of young children have tended to be overlooked. Reduced/inadequate public investment in young children, combined with widening disparities, present long-term implications for child development, school completion, social inclusion, poverty reduction, social stability and security and, in the final analysis, national development.

In CEE/CIS, it is commonly understand that kindergartens are the most appropriate arrangement for early childhood education. This is a legacy from the pre-transition period when these publicly provided institutions doubled as day care centres for the children of working parents. Kindergartens then were relatively elaborate. With budgetary cuts, many kindergartens were closed down and the ones that have survived are concentrated in urban centres, serve only a fraction of the eligible 3-6 year old population, typically do not benefit the poorest and exclude the marginalized. Under-funding and low salaries have given rise to informal payments, making services even less accessible for poor groups. The legacy of the old system is biased towards restoration and limited budgets are mainly spent on unaffordable programmes, orthodox staffing patterns and the maintenance of aging infrastructures. The responsibility for providing early education has devolved to local governments – who, if they have the will, rarely have the capacity to do so.

Radical rethinking is required in order to transform the early education sector so that every child has the chance to participate in rich learning opportunities. This would not only enable the child to be ready for school but in the long run would improve efficiencies in schooling given the strong positive association between early childhood education and improved pupil performance at the primary level and beyond. In order to provide young children with the best start in life, social sector reforms must incorporate innovative, diverse and multifarious solutions that reach all young children with high quality early childhood care and education services that are designed and administered in line with modern standards of excellence; the effort should be to devise alternative arrangements which are informed by the science of child development and are equitable, inclusive, effective and efficient.

A GOOD START: How to introduce alternative early childhood education service in local communities was developed by the Comenius Foundation for Child Development, Poland with the support of Bernard Van Leer Foundation. This English version was prepared with assistance from the UNICEF Regional Office for CEE/CIS. Organized in two parts, this publication provides compelling arguments for investing in children, an impressive range of practical tips for how to set up alternative early education services as well as strategies to engage communities and local authorities in the process. The contents of this book are firmly grounded in professional expertise and
years of intense experience of working with a variety of stakeholders. The text is supported by excellent examples. Although written within and for Poland, this publication has many useful ideas and lessons for CEE/CIS countries. It is for this reason that this English version was prepared with the participation and permission of the Comenius Foundation for Child Development and with the support of UNICEF and. Our thanks and admiration to the Comenius Foundation, especially Teresa Ogrodzinska, for sharing this valuable document with us.

The five chapters in Part 1 are:

1.1 Why it is a good idea to invest in education of young children
This section discusses the importance of ensuring a good early start in life for all children, especially the most vulnerable in order to reach their full developmental potential. It stresses that local authorities must invest in early childhood as this is an important means of human capital formation.

1.2. Alternative forms of pre-school services
This section describes different ways of establishing alternative pre-school services. Often local authorities, particularly those in rural districts do not receive adequate State resource to support such services. This section illustrates how in Poland alternative services were established and sustained through cooperation between relevant partners (Ministry of Education, local authorities, NGOs, teachers and parents) and how cost sharing was achieved.

1.3 Step by Step: How to open alternative pre-school services in the local community
This chapter draws on the Comenius Foundation’s experience of initiating alternative early education services in the form of Pre-school Centres and provides detailed steps on how quality pre-school centers can be established.

1.4 Quality in alternative pre-school services
Research confirms that educational programmes are effective in supporting children’s development and school readiness – but only high quality programmes are known to be effective in giving a fair chance for a better future, especially to underprivileged children. This chapter details what “high quality” means for early childhood education.

1.5 Effects of alternative pre-school services
This chapter discusses the findings of a study conducted in Poland by Dr. Olaf Żylicz of the Warsaw School of Social Psychology. The positive effects of introducing alternative services in communities and the views of parents, teachers and local leaders are discussed.

Part 2: Alternative pre-school services: Organization and funding
Some children, especially those from rural areas have limited access to pre-school education. Many different types of day care provision should be created to ensure that these children have a good start at school. Alternative early education services be implemented under a variety of legal and formal arrangements. This section provides a detailed explanation and examples of how these pre-school services can function and how to estimate costs.
PART 1

1.1 WHY IT IS A GOOD IDEA TO INVEST IN THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN
BY ANNA BLUMSZTAJN

1.2 ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES
BY ANNA BLUMSZTAJN

1.3 STEP BY STEP: HOW TO OPEN ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY
BY MARTA BIAŁEK-GRACZYK

1.4 QUALITY IN ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES
BY MONIKA ROŚCISZEWSKA-WOŹNIAK

1.5 EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES
BY MARTA BIAŁEK-GRACZYK

PART 2

ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES: ORGANISATION AND FUNDING
BY ANNA BLUMSZTAJN
PART 1

1.1

WHY IT IS A GOOD IDEA TO INVEST IN THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN

BY ANNA BLUMSZTAJN

HUMAN CAPITAL: PEOPLE ARE THE BEST INVESTMENT

What is human capital? Broadly speaking, the idea of human capital takes note of the fact that knowledge and skills are just as important to the economy as infrastructure and new technologies. Human capital should be looked upon in terms of an investment. This means that any expenditure on the education of future adult citizens and workers is definitely money well spent.

The emergence of a knowledge-based economy has created a situation where the quality of human capital is crucial to economic growth. Policymakers and institutions specialising in economics have started to recognise that the quality of human capital plays a central role in providing a good social and economic environment – witness the title of the European Social Fund programme for 2007-13, called the Human Capital Operational Programme.

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE A GOOD INVESTMENT

The fact that a good education system and high quality human capital are closely linked is widely acknowledged in Poland, even if the words of politicians are not necessarily followed by actions. In most cases, however, policymakers fail to recognise that early childhood, including early childhood education, is a critical period in the development of skills and dispositions that will have a decisive effect on the quality of human capital in the future. What has early education got to do with human capital? Does it really matter for the country’s economy how we educate our children? The answer is – yes, it does. We wish to underscore that point: Economic growth does depend on the education and development opportunities provided for children in their early years.

Early childhood is a period when we develop most of our intellectual, emotional and social dispositions and skills. Creativity, persistence and literacy are the easiest to learn and foster at an early age, and they bring benefits to us for the rest of our lives. The provision of conducive environments for children at this important stage is advantageous not only to the young beneficiaries, but also to the whole of society.

HUMAN CAPITAL AND EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Early childhood education is the key factor in the quality of human capital for precisely the same reason why it is the most effective way to equalise
educational opportunities. In their early years, children are particularly susceptible to external influences. If they have no access to a variety of stimuli to help them acquire social, intellectual and emotional skills and dispositions, they will never acquire them. Many skills and dispositions are difficult to develop later in life. Early childhood is also the best time for remedying the learning and socialisation deficiencies. Pre-school education helps to offset adverse social influences. In a good early education setting, young children from disadvantaged or dysfunctional backgrounds can, at least to some extent, learn what they were unable to learn at home to start primary school together with their luckier peers. Primary school is too late to begin intervention. Good quality pre-school programmes bring the most spectacular benefits to children in most disadvantaged communities.

THE QUALITY OF HUMAN CAPITAL: A CHALLENGE FOR THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Every community’s survival and socioeconomic progress depend on the quality of its human capital. Those who are resourceful will leave for good if they find local day care and education provision inadequate and disappointing. They will also leave if they witness the growing ranks of the helpless who cannot be helped making the social divide wider.

The value of human capital is determined at the local level. Local authorities need to invest in the quality of human capital in their area. In the long run, this investment is just as important as and much more profitable than any investment in infrastructure projects. Investment in human capital rests on the investment in early education. This education should primarily be aimed at local disadvantaged children because they will define the shape of the community in the future. Only when every child has optimum conditions to develop can the quality of human capital be enhanced – in every district and across the country. Young children’s future is in the hands of local communities. We should ask ourselves: does our community regard human capital as an essential prerequisite for growth? Asking this question opens the door to a strategic approach to early childhood education.

A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Strategic planning is necessary to formulate a rational educational policy. Strategic planning should also allocate tasks to individuals and institutions that are responsible for the provision of physical resources and for the quality and effectiveness of teaching. The task of local authorities is to develop long-term educational policy that will define long-term objectives in internal and external contexts.

Educational policy is not just a vision of future educational services, including early childhood programmes. It is an investment plan per se. Educational policy helps to bring together many scattered efforts and resources to better implement priority goals benefiting various groups of citizens. It facilitates the allocation of (local) funding to education, and reduces the impact of politics (recurring local elections) on local educational priorities.
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: EUROPE AND THE WORLD

Other European countries, including Poland’s neighbours in Central and Eastern Europe, are perfectly aware of the significance of early childhood education. Early childhood development has become a high priority across Europe, with pre-school programmes becoming integrated into formal education systems. Improvement in the provision of early education and care is a major issue in the Lisbon Strategy, which defines the course of community-oriented actions within the European Union over the next decade. At present, almost every four-year-old has a place at pre-school in Spain, Belgium and Hungary.

PERCENTAGE OF FOUR-YEAR-OLDS IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES ACCORDING TO EUROSTAT 2004

It is widely recognised across Europe and the world that high quality early education simply pays off. Research in the early childhood field has repeatedly confirmed that finding.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

According to the Word Bank (2002), early education research projects show that young children who participate in well-designed educational programmes do better at school, develop better social and emotional dispositions, and have better verbal and intellectual skills than children who did not use high quality pre-primary programming. To create opportunities for children’s healthy development is to invest in the country’s workforce and its socioeconomic progress.

‘A British longitudinal study of a group of 8,400 children born in 1970 shows a clear correlation between the children’s pre-school education experiences and their educational achievement at the age of ten with regard to literacy skills, mathematical skills and pro-social behaviour. Much higher levels of these skills were reported in the group of children from underprivileged backgrounds who went to nursery school than in the group of children who did not use any kind of early education and day care service.’
According to Timothy J. Bartik, research aimed at estimating the economic effects of public investment in early education and care programmes shows clearly that 'preschool programs and economic development subsidies both have about the same cost-effectiveness in producing earnings benefits for state residents, yielding about $3 in present value of earnings benefits for every dollar invested in these programs ... Most of the earning benefits of preschool are due to effects of high-quality preschool in increasing the future educational attainment and employability of preschool participants.' (Timothy J. Bartik, Taking Preschool Education Seriously as an Economic Development Program: Effects on Jobs and Earnings of State Residents Compared to Traditional Economic Development Programs, 2006, www.ced.org/docs/report/Bartik_3-15-06report.pdf).

A similar Polish study conducted by Professor Barbara Murawska also showed a visible correlation between children’s attainments in the three Rs at the age of transition to primary school and the length of their pre-school experience.

All research findings seem to indicate that educational programmes should be high quality programmes because good pre-school experience produces two positive outcomes: a better education and a better job. Visible effects were reported only for programmes that used carefully developed work plans implemented by trained professionals. Those programmes were monitored for quality.

An investment yields higher returns if it benefits underprivileged children. (They benefit the most because early education services compensate for the inadequacies in their family environment.) These returns increase over time. A good pre-school education brings about many other positive effects such as a favourable impact on the labour market, better health, lower crime rates, a lower risk of impoverishment, etc.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN POLAND

Despite many years of transformation and attempts at educational reform, successive Polish governments have tended to ignore the needs of young children. Between 1990 and 2001 one in every three pre-schools was shut down. Where does that leave us? Poland has the lowest pre-school enrolment rate in the European Union – half the average rate reported for other EU countries. The educational gap that divides Poland from other EU members is just as huge as the gap that divides Poland’s privileged urban children from their underprivileged rural peers. The worst situation is in the rural areas, where a mere 17 per cent of children go to pre-school. In some provinces more than 50 per cent of rural pre-schools have been closed down.
Rural children need pre-school learning experiences much more than their urban peers. Many rural parents are poorly educated and have no idea about how to support their children’s developmental processes. Access to arts and culture (e.g.
books) is also limited, even though books are known to be especially conducive to children’s intellectual and emotional growth.

Unlike their urban peers, quite many rural children live in disadvantaged communities, below or on the poverty line. Some of them live in dysfunctional families. They cannot find many developmental stimuli in their home environment. As a result, primary school education is a real challenge for them. They need stimulating educational settings. In short, they need access to high quality early education programmes. Children who have no such opportunity stay at home with their parents, who mean well but are unable to provide the kind of experience their sons and daughters can enjoy at pre-school. And so, rural children end up ‘on the murky side of the playground wall.’

In his book *The Neglected Playground: Childhood Parenting Styles and Educational Inequalities*, Tomasz Szlendak wrote: ‘Educational inequity is a part of the divided playground... The dividing wall will never be torn down, and no one should believe that it could. But there should be a door in it and the children from the murky corners of the playground should be helped to pass through to the sunny side.’

How can we help them? We can start a child-serving project in our community.
WHO NEEDS PRESCHOOL?

HENRYK WUJEC
BORN IN THE COUNTRY, LIVED THERE UNTIL HE WENT TO COLLEGE

THE ANSWER SEEMS OBVIOUS. URBAN CHILDREN GO TO PRE-SCHOOL, EVEN THOUGH THEY GENERALLY HAVE BETTER ACCESS TO CHILDREN'S MAGAZINES, BOOKS, SMART GAMES AND PLAY OPPORTUNITIES, AND ALSO BETTER ACCESS TO THE INTERNET. IF SO, I CAN'T THINK OF A REASON WHY RURAL CHILDREN SHOULDN'T GO TO PRE-SCHOOL. WHEN THEY BEGIN THEIR EDUCATION AT PRIMARY SCHOOL, TOGETHER WITH URBAN CHILDREN, THEIR SITUATION CAN BE COMPARED TO A 100-METRE DASH IN WHICH THEIR STARTING BLOCKS ARE PLACED TEN METRES BEHIND THE OTHERS. THOSE WHO LIKE CHALLENGES WILL LOVE IT. THEY WILL DO THE BEST THEY CAN, ENJOYING THE COMPETITION. BUT THE MAJORITY WILL SPURN THIS KIND OF 'COMPETITION,' QUITE RIGHTLY, BECAUSE IT IS UNFAIR.

MOREOVER, EDUCATION AT A RURAL SCHOOL MAY WIDEN THE SOCIAL GAP INSTEAD OF CLOSING IT. I WAS A COUNTRY BOY AND, AS ONE MAY EXPECT, I DIDN'T GO TO PRE-SCHOOL. I STARTED MY EDUCATION AT A RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL. THE SCHOOL WAS POORLY EQUIPPED. AFTER THREE YEARS MY MOTHER, WHO HAD SEEN A LITTLE OF THE WORLD (SHE HAD WORKED IN FRANCE), CAME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT I WOULD NOT LEARN ANYTHING THERE AND SENT ME TO A PRIMARY SCHOOL IN THE SMALL TOWN OF BIŁGORAJ, WHERE I, A RURAL KID, FACED URBAN CHILDREN FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE. IN MANY WAYS THEY WERE MUCH BETTER THAN ME. THEY HAD MUCH BETTER SKILLS: THEY COULD WRITE WELL AND SPEAK WELL, WHILE I SPOKE WITH A COUNTRY ACCENT.

THE STRESS I WENT THROUGH GAVE ME A STRONG SPUR TO DO SOMETHING. I DECIDED TO SCALE THE WALL THAT KEPT ME APART FROM MY SCHOOLMATES, BUT SOME THINGS PROVED IMPOSSIBLE TO MASTER, FOR EXAMPLE, I NEVER LEARNED TO WRITE WELL. I THINK THAT YOUNG CHILDREN ARE FAST LEARNERS AND SHOULD BE HELPED TO LEARN A VARIETY OF SKILLS. PARENTS CANNOT DO MUCH WITHOUT QUALIFIED ASSISTANCE. THERE ARE ALL KINDS OF RURAL CHILDREN, BUT MOST RURAL FAMILIES ARE POOR. PARENTS MAKE SURE THAT THEIR CHILD IS NOT HUNGRY AND HAS PROPER CLOTHES TO WEAR, BUT THEY HAVE NO TIME, AND MANY OF THEM HAVE NO SKILLS, TO TAKE CARE OF THE CHILD'S INTELLECTUAL POTENTIAL, LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OR OTHER DISPOSITIONS. A RURAL PRE-SCHOOL AS A PROFESSIONAL AND FRIENDLY INSTITUTION MAY PROVE INDISPENSABLE TO HELP.
WHO NEEDS PRE-SCHOOL? PRE-SCHOOL IS A PLACE WHERE MANY THINGS HAPPEN FOR THE FIRST TIME. WE FALL IN LOVE FOR THE FIRST TIME. WE PICK OUR FIRST FIGHT. WE FEEL THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY WE HAVE NEVER FELT BEFORE. A THREE- OR FOUR-YEAR-OLD MAY FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE THAT SHE WILL SPEND MOST OF HER TIME AWAY FROM HER MUMMY, BUT SHE WILL GET USED TO IT AT PRE-SCHOOL.

HUMAN BEINGS ARE SOCIABLE CREATURES. WE ENJOY SPENDING TIME IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS. (EVEN THOUGH SOME OF US MAY TAKE A DIFFERENT VIEW ON THAT.) ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, BEING WITH OTHERS IS SOMETHING WE NEED TO LEARN, AND PRE-SCHOOL IS ESPECIALLY HELPFUL IN THIS RESPECT. CHILDREN LEARN TO SHARE, TO TAKE TURNS, TO CONTROL THE URGE TO GRAB THINGS WITHOUT WAITING.

PRE-SCHOOL MEANS PLENTY OF WONDERFUL PLAY OPPORTUNITIES. YOU CAN SPREAD YOUR WINGS AND LET YOUR IMAGINATION RUN FREE MUCH BETTER THAN AT HOME. YOU CAN BUILD A HUGE PALACE WITH BLANKETS AND MATS. YOU CAN FLY ON A BROOMSTICK. YOU CAN DANCE. YOU CAN RACE TO YOUR HEART’S CONTENT IN THE PRE-SCHOOL’S GARDEN OR, IF THE TEACHER ALLOWS, YOU CAN PLANT A SEEDLING AND WATCH IT GROW. PRE-SCHOOL IS A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN TEACH YOUR CLUMSY HANDS TO OBEY YOUR WILL. YOU CAN LEARN ABOUT PAINTS, MOULDING CLAY, SCISSORS AND GLUE. YOU CAN MAKE HUGE SCULPTURES OUT OF NEWSPAPER AND PASTE, SOMETHING YOUR MOTHER WOULD NEVER LET YOU DO AT HOME. YOU CAN LEARN, YOU CAN THINK, YOU CAN EXPLORE.

MODERN DEMOCRACIES OFTEN SPEAK OF THE NEED TO EQUALISE CHILDREN’S EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES. THIS IS WHY SCHOOL SYSTEMS HAVE BEEN CREATED – TO PROVIDE UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION FREE OF CHARGE. THIS, HOWEVER, IS NOT A SUFFICIENT CONDITION IN A WIDELY DIVERSIFIED SOCIETY. CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS, SO IMPORTANT AT AN EARLY AGE, DEPEND ON THEIR PARENTS’ INCOME, EDUCATION AND SYSTEM OF VALUES. THE ONLY WAY OUT FOR A STRONGLY DIVERSIFIED SOCIETY LIKE OURS IS TO PROVIDE EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILDREN. SOMETHING MUST BE DONE BEFORE A DISADVANTAGED CHILD GOES TO PRIMARY SCHOOL TO SPARE HIM THE ACUTE STRESS THAT MIGHT HAUNT HIM FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE. BESIDES, THE EARLY DETECTION OF THE CHILD’S DEFICIENCIES IMPROVES OUR CHANCES TO ADMINISTER A FAST, EFFECTIVE AND RELATIVELY INEXPENSIVE REMEDY FOR THE PROBLEM. THE SIMPLEST WAY IS TO PROVIDE A PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMME.

THE AMERICANS, WELL-KNOWN FOR THEIR PRAGMATIC ATTITUDE, HAVE DISCOVERED THAT ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS SPENT ON PROVIDING EARLY EDUCATION TO AN UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILD YIELDS A RETURN OF SEVEN THOUSAND DOLLARS FOR THE COMMUNITY. WHEN THESE CHILDREN ARE TAUGHT GOOD SKILLS, THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO FIND THEIR OWN PLACE IN SOCIETY AND LESS LIKELY TO DISPLAY CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR.
1.2

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES

BY ANNA BLUMSZTAJN

TRADITIONAL PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES

Since 1990 the task of providing early education and care has been in the hands of local authorities. Local authorities do not receive any State subsidies for pre-school services. They have to rely on their own resources. The provision of early childhood education has become another task that needs to be implemented with local funds, just as the task of building new roads and water supply systems. Needless to say, in money terms, these tasks are often mutually exclusive.

Rural districts or rural-cum-urban districts have been particularly affected by this arrangement. First, their income (from corporate income taxes and real estate taxes) is lower. Rural children live in scattered villages, making the provision of education more expensive and difficult, especially for the youngest, who need to be bussed to school. Research shows that primary school leavers have much poorer scores in their final tests in communities where many children have to use this kind of transport. If travelling long distances to school is difficult for a child of six, it is much more difficult for a child of five or younger.

A traditional pre-school institution offers classes to three-, four- and five-year-olds and stays open for eight hours a day. This is an expensive service, especially as it combines two functions: education and day care. Pre-schoolers need to be provided with meals and suitable facilities for relaxation.

A traditional pre-school institution has to employ support staff, and contract the services of a caterer – an independent organisation that meets rigorous health and safety standards. For a long time early childhood education institutions have been regarded primarily as ‘waiting rooms’ where parents who worked full-time left their children for the day. It should be noted here that day care is not necessarily what young children in Poland need. In rural areas, day care is often provided by grandparents or parents who work only part-time (this is a common situation in rural communities). Alternative pre-school services focus on learning experiences and foster the development of children’s basic skills.

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES IN POLAND AND EUROPE

Prior to June 2007, pre-school was the only type of early education service identified in the Polish Education System Act. Pre-schools must comply with strictly defined standards. As has already been said, pre-schools have to offer education combined with various types of day care, an arrangement which makes the whole service very expensive. The arrangement is inflexible. It cannot be tailored to local needs, so it is too awkward and costly to be used by rural communities, where the children live in scattered houses and the function of day care is often redundant.
Other European countries have adopted a different approach. Most of them allow many different institutions to provide a variety of early education services, as shown below for the UK, Portugal and France.

**VARIOUS FORMS OF EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES**

**THE UNITED KINGDOM**

For children aged 0-5 years

- playgroups
- day nurseries
- children’s centres
- family centres
- nursery schools and classes
- primary school reception classes (from the age of 3)
- crèches
- family drop-in centres
- childminders
- playbuses
- toy libraries
- and many others

(Source: The Children Act)

**PORTUGAL**

For children aged 3-5 years

- standard pre-schools
- itinerant teachers
- crèches

(Source: The Framework Act for the Education System)

**FRANCE**

For children aged 0-5 years

- childminders working in their own homes
- resident nannies
- public crèches
- family crèches
- children’s centres
- universal education for ages 3-5 (99% children)
- école maternelle

(Source: The Framework Law on Education of 1886)

**ITINERANT TEACHERS**

The programme, created by the Portuguese central government in conjunction with the regional and local authorities in the Algarve, addresses the needs of one of the sparsely populated regions in Portugal. Its aim is to provide high quality pre-school education for Algarve children.
who live in small towns far from one another or in mountainous areas where farmhouses are widely scattered and neighbours rarely come to visit. The region’s underdeveloped public transport system makes it difficult for the children and their parents to travel to coastal pre-schools. The provision of standard pre-school services is not cost-effective because there are not very many children in the Algarve, and local birth rates are declining.

This is why the regional authorities have created an alternative programme in conjunction with the Ministry of Education to provide access to pre-school education for local children, and to ensure active involvement of parents and local communities. The Ministry pays the teachers’ salaries, while the local authorities cover their travelling expenses and the cost of the teaching aids. Most of the teachers use their own cars as means of transport. They meet three or four children, usually at one of the children’s family homes, twice a week for three or four hours a day. Sometimes a teacher comes to visit just one child. Classes are open to all members of the local community, not only to parents. Teachers bring all the requisite resources with themselves. The local education authority in the Algarve coordinates the teachers’ efforts, relocating them to another district if necessary. All the programme teachers know and help each other. Teachers who work in one district meet once a month and all teachers in the region meet twice a year to exchange information, to plan their work, and to write scripts for playroom activities. The important thing is that standard and itinerant pre-schools work hand in hand.

(T. Ogrodzińska (ed.), Nigdy nie jest za wcześnie [It’s Never Too Early], Warszawa 2003.)

‘WHERE THERE ARE NO PRESCHOOLS’: THE COMENIUS FOUNDATION’S BRAINCHILD PROGRAMME

Alarmed by the desperate state of early childhood education provision in rural areas, and inspired by the Portuguese project, the Comenius Foundation has started a programme called ‘Where There Are No Preschools’ (WTANP) – the first alternative early education service in Poland.

Initially eight communities decided to take part in the programme’s pilot project by opening 14 Pre-school Centres. Today, these communities manage a total of 42 Centres, and as many as 26 communities provide funding for their Pre-school Centres and run them together with the Comenius Foundation.

WTANP was developed in response to the growing inequities in the provision of early childhood education in Poland. Its long-term goal is to equalise educational opportunities for children ages 3-5, especially in rural areas with high unemployment rates.

WTANP helps communities to create new forms of early education services for children ages 3-5 in rural areas where no such services are provided. Currently the programme is being implemented in 28 rural districts, where 75 Pre-school Centres have been opened in libraries, arts centres or school buildings, depending on the availability of space. More than 800 children are now benefiting from classes which are offered for several hours a day, three or four days a week.
(a total of 9-12 hours weekly). The classes are taught by teachers who have been trained by the Comenius Foundation.

Local authorities buy equipment and resources for the Centres and pay the teachers’ salaries. The Foundation trains the teachers, monitors their playroom activities, and prepares educational materials (also available to parents). Local authorities join the programme voluntarily, often at the request of local community members and parents. Funding for the Centres comes from local arts, prevention or welfare budgets.

The Centres focus on learning experiences. Teachers work with small groups of 10-15 children ages 3-5, so they are able to reach every child in the group individually. Work at the Centres is based on teacher-developed plans that reflect all the goals of the pre-school education curriculum. These plans have been approved by Dr Małgorzata Karwowska-Struczyk, an official consultant to the Ministry of National Education.

WTANP teachers attend a 140-hour training course to learn to implement the programme and address local community needs. Workshops include topics such as multi-age grouping, the involvement of parents and local communities, working with problem children, and the use of the project approach. Supervisors monitor the teachers’ work regularly by visiting their classrooms once a month and by organising monthly meetings for all WTANP teachers in the area to help them plan and document their activities. Supervisors, who work as a team, are specially trained by early education experts. Parental presence in the classroom is another distinctive feature of WTANP. Parents are encouraged to take part in children’s group activities and to engage in educational games at home.

The clear need to provide a different type of pre-school service and the positive lessons learned from the implementation of the Comenius Foundation’s WTANP pilot phase have inspired the Ministry of National Education to incorporate alternative forms of early education provision – as the Ministry’s pilot scheme – into efforts supported by the European Social Fund (ESF), which is the main source of EU funding for community-oriented project.

The ESF funds, managed by the Ministry of National Education, are earmarked for the provision of better access to early education services, so they can be used only by rural communities where there are no regular pre-schools. Some of the ‘pioneer’ communities who implemented WTANP have used this opportunity to enhance the Centres’ outreach in their areas. Other communities followed suit, including those who have initiated the provision of alternative pre-school services under the ‘Pre-school Centres: A Chance for a Good Start’ project operated by the Comenius Foundation. (The project, which receives EU funding, is an offshoot of the WTANP programme.) Today there are Centres supported with local funding and Centres supported with EFS funding. The Comenius Foundation runs, independently or in partnership, a total of 300 Pre-school Centres in 90 districts throughout Poland.
The idea of alternative rural education services has inspired other non-governmental organisations. As many as 18 NGOs now operate 900 preschool services under a variety of names across Poland.
NUMBER OF CENTRES IN DISTRICTS

PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES OFFERED BY NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS
SOURCE: DATA PROVIDED TO THE COMENIUS FOUNDATION (2007)
1.3

STEP BY STEP: HOW TO OPEN ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

BY MARTA BIAŁEK-GRACZYK

The idea of opening a Pre-school Centre may occur to a local official or to a parent who visits the District Office, but whoever it is, you will need to take STEPS to translate the idea into action.

This chapter draws on the Comenius Foundation’s experience of initiating alternative early education services in the form of Pre-school Centres. We will tell you – STEP BY STEP – what to do to open similar Centres in your local community.

- Demographic data analysis
- Sources of funding
- Programme promotion
- Appointment of a local leader
- Admission of children
- Teacher training
- Preparing pre-school centre facilities
- Contacting the foundation

1. WHY DO YOU NEED A DEMOGRAPHIC DATA ANALYSIS?

Does our community really need a Pre-school Centre? This is the first question you should ask before starting to introduce alternative forms of early education services in your area. Before you decide to open a Centre, make sure that there are enough young children in the neighbourhood. For this purpose, you will need hard data.

WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION SHOULD BE GATHERED FOR A DEMOGRAPHIC DATA ANALYSIS?

- how many children aged 3-5 live locally
- how many children of pre-school age actually go to pre-school
- how many children aged 3-5 will live locally in three years’ time
• what is the distribution of children who might benefit from a Pre-school Centre; are there villages with a sufficient population of children (10-15) to open a Centre.

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHIC DATA ANALYSIS CARRIED OUT IN THE LUBAWA DISTRICT IN 2005

1. HOW MANY CHILDREN AGED 3-5 LIVE LOCALLY:

**DESCRIPTION YEAR FIGURE**

- total number of local children aged 3-5 in 2005: 496
- total number of local children aged 3-5 attending pre-school in 2005: 0
- total number of local children aged 3 in 2005: 164
- total number of local children aged 3 attending pre-school in 2005: 0
- total number of local children aged 4 in 2005: 160
- total number of local children aged 4 attending pre-school in 2005: 0
- total number of local children aged 5 in 2005: 172
- total number of local children aged 5 attending pre-school in 2005: 0

2. PROJECTED POPULATION OF CHILDREN AGED 3-5 IN 2006-09

**DESCRIPTION YEAR FIGURE**

- total number of local children aged 3-5 in 2006: 461
- total number of local children aged 3-5 in 2007: 439
- total number of local children aged 3-5 in 2008: 410
- total number of local children aged 3-5 in 2009: 405

2. SOURCE OF FUNDING

In general, there are three ways of funding and running a Pre-school Centre.

I.
Outside the school system – as a local arts project or a local social prevention/intervention project. In this case, Centres are funded by local authorities with their own money allocated for local arts, welfare or alcohol abuse prevention initiatives.

II.
As a project funded by the European Social Fund. Local authorities or a local NGO need to apply for funding in a competition. If their application is accepted, they may either receive the money or be made part of a wider project implemented by an umbrella organisation.

III.
Since 1 January 2008, a Pre-school Centre may operate as ‘another form of pre-school provision,’ under the Education System Act (as amended on 7 September 2007). In this case a Pre-school Centre is within the network of local education services.

Depending on the local needs, situation and availability of funds from other sources, local authorities have to decide which course of action is the best for them. The funding and organisational issues are described in greater detail in part two of this manual (see p. 65).
3. HOW TO PROMOTE THE IDEA OF PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

If you want to generate universal interest and support from the local community, you should promote the programme among community members and local councillors.

Local councillors decide how much money can be spent on pre-school education. Before they approve your programme, they need to adopt a resolution, so they need to know precisely why the community wants to implement this particular child-serving effort, what benefits they may expect from this kind of day care service, and how other communities are implementing it. Most importantly, you should convince members of the local education committee and the budget committee that your idea is good.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PERSUADE LOCAL COUNCILLORS?

- tell them why this investment in early childhood education is necessary, and give them a picture of early childhood services in their area (you can make use of resources and statistics available on the Comenius Foundation website)
- talk about other similar programmes offered elsewhere
- point out the benefits of the programme (see table below)
- show them a video on similar programmes (a video on the implementation of ‘Where There Are No Preschools’ and a video on the benefits of early childhood education entitled ‘The Pineapple Won’t Sleep’ are available on the Comenius Foundation website)
- arrange a visit to a community where a similar programme is being implemented or organise a meeting with a leader of that community.

BENEFITS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

POLITICAL:

Parents whose children attend a Pre-school Centre change their attitude to local officials, especially in underprivileged communities where many people do not know how to voice their needs so they shun all kinds of involvement in community affairs and have a negative picture of local authorities. Opening a Centre may resolve some of their problems and inspire a change of heart. Parents from the Pre-school Centre in the small town of Międzybrodzie Bialskie have found information about a source of funding that may help to keep the Centre open.

Opening a Centre may help to defuse local tensions among villagers in areas where a pre-school or primary school education service has been discontinued, and among local teachers, who may want to consider employment at the Centre. At one point, Międzybrodzie Bialskie was threatened with a prospect of closing down the local primary school. Parents very much wanted to keep the classes for the youngest children operational. The opening of a Pre-school Centre put them at ease. Now the WTANP Centre has been converted into a Pre-school Class for five-year-olds, and the school has not been closed.
Implementing the programme brings prestige and good reputation to authorities that care about early childhood education. This kind of reputation and experience may prove extremely useful when applying for EU or Polish grants to carry out other community-oriented projects.

On 22 June 2007 the jury of the fourth ‘Godni Naśladowania’ [Follow Their Lead] competition organised by the NGO Council of the Warminsko-Mazurskie Province awarded a prize to the Lubawa District. In the same year, Lubawa won another award for its alternative pre-school services, this time for best local initiative implemented in conjunction with the voluntary sector.

SOCIAL:

Local education standards are markedly improved, which is precisely what the programme seeks to achieve. Don’t lose sight of this when thinking about expenses! As a result, children are better prepared for transition to primary school reception classes and to primary school, making the job of school management much easier (and sometimes also much cheaper). Providing fair educational opportunities means investing in children, especially those from dysfunctional families.

Natalka is four. Both her parents have a drink problem. On her first visit to the local Pre-school Centre at Bełżyce, the girl grabbed a pencil to take a good look at it, and asked ‘What’s that?’ Hard to believe, but true. What would her position be in a primary school reception class if she had not been to pre-school?

Increased parental involvement.
Parents in Karolin, Garbów District, have fought hard to make the authorities change their minds and open a Pre-school Centre in their community instead of somewhere else. There are very many young children in Karolin. Parental involvement and population statistics have done the trick.

Increased educational awareness of parents.
A mother in Czyżów, Stopnica District, was actively helping the teacher at the local Centre to conduct playroom activities. A representative of the Comenius Foundation took note of that and of her good interpersonal relations with children, and encouraged her to improve her skills. Now she is studying hard to earn her A level certificate. She has plans to go to college and work with children with special needs. She says that the programme gave a chance for a good start not only to her child but also to her.

Increased community involvement.
A Pre-school Centre may take the place of a discontinued service as an important cultural institution in the community. The CORONA Association was originally established to run Pre-school Centres in the Koronowo District under the ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ programme. Now the Association is involved in a variety of educational projects, working hand in hand with scout organisations,
business people, schools and the Centre for Citizenship Education, implementing the POST project on local educational policy.

Bringing together various educational, care-providing and cultural efforts to address the needs of young children.

On 20 May 2006 children from three Pre-school Centres in Kazanice, Grabów-Waldyki and Prątnica went for a picnic to the Hubertowka Hostel. The children’s parents and some local officials also went with them. The event involved games, a tour of the area, a visit to the animal park and a light snack by the fire. The picnic was like a family outing and has now become a regular event for the young beneficiaries of the Pre-school Centres in the Lubawa District. The event was organised by the Lubawa District Social Welfare Centre, aided by Pre-school Centre teachers, parents, scouts, volunteers and local sponsors.

ECONOMIC:

A positive impact on the labour market. Working for an alternative pre-school service may be a good option for those who have lost their jobs because the population of children of pre-school and school age has been declining, and because many pre-schools and primary schools have been closed down. A Pre-school Centre is a good place to start one’s professional career in the field of early childcare. Moreover, a teacher working at a Pre-school Centre can quite easily combine employment with domestic responsibilities.

A teacher at a Centre in the Czarna District, Podkarpackie Province, comes from another part of Poland, where she was an early childhood worker. For many years she could not find a job in Czarna – there were more qualified teachers locally than the teaching posts offered. She decided to try and open one Pre-school Centre; now she runs two, and is an active member of the local community.

A good way to promote the programme in local communities is to arrange meetings with parents to discuss the idea behind the programme, the significance of early education and the possibility of opening a Centre for their children. It is also a good idea to invite other local leaders concerned with the provision of early education.

WHO SHOULD BE INVITED TO A PROGRAMME PROMOTION MEETING:

- parents and grandparents of young children,
- teachers,
- principals of educational institutions,
- NGO leaders,
- leaders of other key local institutions (social welfare centres, community centres, etc.)
- respected local citizens,
- anybody else concerned with child care.
- Provide detailed and clear information about the meeting and its purpose to draw a large local audience.
SIX WAYS TO DRAW AN AUDIENCE:

1. Provide written information addressing your audience direct. Posters are good for this purpose, especially if you put them up on the local notice boards, in the shop windows or at the bus stop.
2. Use personalised letters to invite parents. You may also ask an enthusiastic parent to visit potential beneficiaries in their homes.
3. Visit everybody who may be your ally: NGO workers, teachers, priests, etc.
4. Use local media organisations – they are a wonderful source of information about local affairs.
5. Ask the local priest to announce the meeting from the pulpit.
6. Remember: there is nothing better than the grapevine to spread the news!

We are parents from the village of Złota. Some time ago we found out that the authorities had opened Pre-school Centres in other villages. There had used to be a centre like that in our parish of Wysokiennice, and the children were happy to go there. We talked to the head teacher of the primary school in Złota, and she said she could provide for this purpose a vacant flat in the school’s tied house. So we went to see our local councillor and the district administrator, with a petition. The village mayor also came out in support. A few mothers and I went to a session of the District Council, and we won. My only regret is that my older children had no opportunity to go to a similar Centre.

(Małgorzata Kowalczyk from the village of Złota)

4. APPOINTING LOCAL LEADERS

It is absolutely essential to appoint a local leader to organise and monitor your Pre-school Centre efficiently and effectively. You can appoint someone from the District Office or from another local-government institution, or someone from an non-governmental organisation that works closely with the District Council.

THE LOCAL LEADER’S RESPONSIBILITIES:

- to promote the Centre in the local community
- to arrange children’s admission to the Centre
- to organise meetings for parents before the Centre is opened for the first time and before every school year begins to provide information about the Centre’s educational aims, teaching methods and admission procedures
- to ensure that the process of setting up and running the Centre meets the pre-defined criteria
- to provide support for teachers, children and parents
- to ensure regular contact with the district administrator/mayor
- to write annual programmatic and financial reports of the Centre’s performance and to file the reports with the local authorities
- to draw up annual operating expenditure plans for the Centre and file them with the local authorities as scheduled, i.e. before the local budget is planned
- to help various local child-serving institution to co-ordinate their efforts
- to work closely with the Comenius Foundation or another independent organisation to provide programmatic support for the Centre
to create a conducive climate locally to convince everybody that the provision of early childhood education is central to every child’s school success and later life achievement. Most importantly, those with educational responsibilities should be encouraged to create alternative pre-school services in areas without pre-schools.

WHO WILL MAKE A GOOD LOCAL LEADER:

A good local leader should:
- be aware of the significance of early learning experiences
- be aware of the needs of young children
- support and understand various types of alternative pre-school services
- be a good organiser and mediator
- be eager to take on new challenges!

Paweł Matraszek was an IT expert working in Garbów, but first and foremost he was a father. He read about Pre-school Centres in the paper, and decided to persuade the mayor to open a similar centre in their local community. The mayor said yes, and Paweł Matraszek, the Centre’s initiator, was appointed a local leader.

5. ORGANISING CHILDREN’S ADMISSION

A demographic data analysis and some vital statistics will help you to determine the number of potential child beneficiaries. Invite each family with one or more young children of suitable age to attend a preparatory meeting in every town and village where a Pre-school Centre is supposed to be opened. If you expect high enrolment in your pre-school programme, you must lay down clear admission criteria. If there are 30 or more children, you may consider setting up two groups for them (if each group meets for 12 hours a week, one teacher employed full time can work with both of them). It seems appropriate to give priority to children of five, siblings, and children with special developmental needs. You should also look out for children from disadvantaged or dysfunctional backgrounds. Ask the local Social Welfare Centre to help you find them.

Under WTANP, not more than 15 children can be admitted to a group. The names of those for whom there are no places should be put on the waiting list.

The Comenius Foundation has made templates for children’s admission records. These templates have already been used for the Centre’s enrolment purposes in the new school year. Priority was given to rural children in communities where Preschoolers’ Clubs had been opened. A large number of parents turned up. Some of them wanted to put on the waiting lists children who were only 12 months old to ensure a place for them at the Centre in two years’ time, when the children turn three. As a result, steps have now been taken to open another group in the village of Krężnica Jara. It seems that the district of Niedrzwica Duża will have another Preschoolers’ Club soon.

extract from a monthly report written by a teacher from Niedrzwica Duża
6. HOW TO RECRUIT AND TRAIN TEACHERS TO WORK AT PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES

Teachers are a key resource. Good teacher recruitment translates into high quality learning experiences, active parental participation and close community involvement. Teachers should be aware of children’s developmental needs. Ideally, they should be qualified educators with some additional skills and dispositions. They should be unconventional, self-reliant and well-motivated organisers willing to take on new challenges and eager to work closely with local community members.

Pre-school Centres are very different from traditional pre-schools. There are no principals, teachers’ committees, or other staff who might provide advise and support. Often there are no assistants to teachers and no cooks to provide meals. Teachers have much more contact with children’s parents or other carers who come to help in the playroom. It is important to make the teachers aware, from the very beginning, of what alternative services can and cannot offer, why they are important, and what is the role of the Comenius Foundation and its partners. Understanding all this will help the teacher to work well with the local leader and the Foundation representatives, to take part in the group creation process, to get involved in facility arrangement and to build good interpersonal relations with the children’s parents.

Teachers must be able to work in partnership with the children’s parents, otherwise the Centre will not be effective in providing high quality learning experiences for the young participants.

Realising that the role of a Pre-school Centre teacher is in many ways special, the Comenius Foundation has drawn up a number of unique training courses for its early childhood workers to help them work with mixed-age groupings, develop their own curricula, use the project approach, and ensure parental involvement in the broad meaning of the term. Teacher training and teacher support are two very important components in the provision of high quality early education and care. More details can be found later in this book. (See the chapter 1.4 on QUALITY IN ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES.)

Because work at a Pre-school Centre is so different, the teacher should be provided with a professional support system in the form of regular meetings with a methodology consultant (psychologist, speech therapist or education and care expert) who has been trained to provide this kind of support. It is also important to arrange regular meetings for all the teachers in the area to let them share information and provide self-help.

I was really afraid of that training course and of being away from my family, but now I know I made the right decision. I learnt a lot. I saw my children in a different light. I have realised that their involvement in every activity must be voluntary, that there is nothing wrong with them running off to play somewhere else. I’ve been a practising teacher for 14 years, I’ve always worked with groups of 25 children. I didn’t like it when my children started to move about the room whenever they felt inclined. I couldn’t come to terms with the fact that they wouldn’t sit next to me on the floor at learning time. I found it very annoying ... When I came back...
from the training course, I decided to let the children move about freely. And guess what – they have started to come over and everybody is interested in my suggestions. It just feels great.

- comments by a teacher who took part in a training course for Pre-school Centre teachers.

7. WHERE TO LOCATE A PRE-SCHOOL CENTRE AND HOW TO ARRANGE IT:

WHERE TO LOCATE A PRE-SCHOOL CENTRE
- in an existing school building
- in an old schoolhouse
- in a Teachers’ Boarding House
- in a community centre
- in an arts centre
- in a parish building
- in a social welfare centre
- in a fire station
- in a rented facility.

A FEW TIPS TO REMEMBER WHILE SELECTING AND ARRANGING FACILITIES FOR PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES:

- the building must have electricity and running water
- there must be an easily accessible toilet not far from the playroom
- it is a good idea to have a changing room next to the playroom
- the playroom should be big enough for children to engage in physical games
- the playroom should be big enough to arrange a play area and a quiet relaxation area
- ideally the playroom should be easily divisible into a ‘dry’ area with a carpet, and a ‘wet’ area to experiment with paint, water, etc.
- the space outside the building should be safe, preferably with a playground.

Try to involve parents in all preparation work to make them feel like co-initiators. At this stage the teacher should encourage parental participation and should get involved in arranging the premises to meet the requirements of early day care.

The physical environment should address the developmental needs of young children by inspiring exploration, free choice and experimenting in well-defined areas of interest (learning centres, children’s own collections, etc.). Equipment and resources (books, toys, coloured pencils) should be easily accessible to children. Children and teachers should be able to re-organise the playroom by moving furniture to create learning centres.

More information about the Centres’ organisation standards can be found in the chapter on QUALITY IN ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES (see 1.4).

The Grudusk Pre-school Centre is in a ground-floor flat in the Teachers’ Boarding House, not far from the primary school. There are two playrooms, a changing room and toilets. Parents have bought some
curtains and a cork board, and the primary school principal has found the tables and shelves. The local authorities have provided the funding for the carpets and curtain rods. These concerted efforts have made it possible to open the Pre-school Centre in Grudusk.

8. CONTACTING THE COMENIUS FOUNDATION

Communities that want to ensure better access to early childhood education and care in line with the philosophy and principles of the ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ programme can rely on the Comenius Foundation for assistance, including:

- co-ordination of the curriculum-related aspects of the programme, especially by monitoring the quality of teaching at Pre-school Centres
- assistance in selecting and training the teaching staff by providing guidelines, educational resources, induction training and in-service training
- provision of resources with information about the curriculum and organisational standards at the Centres
- assistance in creating a self-help system for the Centres’ childcare workers
- assistance in incorporating the programme into the local system of early childhood education and care
- organisation of conferences and seminars on early education and fundraising for local officials from participating communities.
1.4

QUALITY IN ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES

BY MONIKA ROŚCISZEWSKA-WOŹNIAK

If we want to create the best possible environments for young children, we should remember one thing: we must provide a top quality service. Research confirms that educational programmes are effective in supporting children’s development and school readiness – but only high quality programmes are known to be effective in giving a fair chance for a better future, especially to underprivileged children. If we are not providing high quality education, we are wasting time and money.

For many years, quantity used to be the political issue – what mattered was the growing pre-school enrolment rate. Now quality is the main challenge. No one really asks anymore whether early education is necessary or not. Researchers, professionals, even politicians now ask what kind of early education is a top quality education.

WHAT DOES ‘HIGH QUALITY’ MEAN FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

The quality of education depends mainly on:

- well-developed educational guidelines and curricula
- well-trained, qualified and motivated teachers
- teacher-child interactions
- teacher-parent relationships
- the physical environment
- good settling-in/transition programmes at the pre-school and primary school levels to ensure a relatively smooth transition from one educational environment to another.

TAKING CARE OF QUALITY IN ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES

Quality should be a matter of on-going concern. It should be cherished and monitored regularly to ensure that it stays high. The right tools to help maintain quality are quality standards, or a set of philosophical, educational, qualifying and organisational principles and criteria that allow teachers, local authorities, parents and education supervisors to monitor the quality of children’s learning experiences.

Below we present key issue areas and principles to ensure high quality education at the Pre-school Centres run by the Comenius Foundation.
AREA I.
EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

1. THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION AND CARE:
Every child is a unique person.
Every child should be looked after by a caring and supporting adult.
Every child is a full-right citizen. Any effort benefiting children should observe the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
Any effort benefiting children should be appropriate to their developmental stage, and should offer opportunities to enhance natural curiosity, self-esteem, social skills, and other dispositions.

2. PLAYROOM WORK PLAN:
Teachers implement ‘The Comenius Foundation’s Work Plan for Pre-school Centres,’ which says that playroom activity planning must take into consideration the children’s educational needs and the environment in which they live.
The daily schedule should involve well-balanced activities and various areas of learning.
Children should be able to use varied and developmentally appropriate resources that inspire engaged learning.

3. OPTIMUM OPENING HOURS:
Where a Pre-school Centre is within the education system, the Centre must be open for at least 12 hours a week, with a single session lasting for at least three hours.
Where a Pre-school Centre is outside the education system, the Centre must be open for at least 9 hours a week, preferably split into three sessions, each lasting for three hours.

4. DOCUMENTING CHILDREN’S ACTIVITIES:
Teachers document children’s playroom activities by recording monthly attendance, weekly teaching plans and their implementation, and children’s development progress (using developmental checklists and individual portfolios).

AREA II.
INITIAL AND IN-SERVICE STAFF TRAINING

1. TEACHERS / CHILDCARE WORKERS MUST HAVE PROPER QUALIFICATIONS TO WORK WITH YOUNG CHILDREN:
Where a Pre-school Centre is within the education system, the Centre’s staff must be qualified as prescribed by the Education Act.
Where a Pre-school Centre is outside the education system, the Centre’s staff should preferably have had initial teacher education.

2. STAFF INDUCTION TRAINING.
Induction training takes at least 70 hours.
Training includes the following topics and skills:
- working with multi-age groups
- observing children
• planning and documenting playroom work to address children’s individual learning needs and capabilities, and
• an introduction to the project approach.

3. PROFESSIONAL SKILL ENHANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES.
Once a year teachers attend supervised in-service training sessions. Teachers are assisted by a methodology consultant (psychologist, speech therapist or education and care expert). Teachers have access to the Comenius Foundation’s publications and programme guidelines. Teachers working at the Centres stay in touch to share professional expertise.

AREA III.
TEACHER AND CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

1. A TEACHER MAY NOT WORK WITH A GROUP OF MORE THAN 15 CHILDREN.

2. TWO ADULTS (ONE TEACHER AND ONE PARENT OR ANOTHER VOLUNTEER) LOOK AFTER CHILDREN TO FACILITATE INDIVIDUAL CONTACT WITH EVERY CHILD.

3. THE TEACHER HAS CLOSE PERSONAL INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN, PROVIDING THEM WITH A SENSE OF SECURITY AND SUPPORT IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION.

The teacher knows how to reach every child individually during playroom activities. Playroom work organisation leaves sufficient time for resolving problems and celebrating children’s discoveries and achievements.

AREA IV.
TEACHER AND PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

1. THE TEACHER AND PARENTS CONCLUDE A PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT DEFINING THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES, TASKS, RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS.

2. THE TEACHER SUPPORTS FAMILIES DURING THE CHILDREN’S SETTLING-IN PERIOD AT THE CENTRE.

Family members are encouraged to be present in the playroom during the child’s settling-in period. Parents are encouraged to visit the Centre whenever they feel inclined.

3. THE TEACHER INVOLVES PARENTS, WHO DO VOLUNTARY CHILDCARE DUTY AS PLAYROOM ASSISTANTS.

The partnership agreement contains provisions concerning parental childcare duty shifts: every family must provide voluntary care for three hours at a stretch at least once a month. The teacher may draw on the parents’ skills and expertise during their shifts.
Parents have the right to be consulted or to take part in decision-making in matters affecting the Centre as per the partnership agreement.

4. THERE ARE EFFECTIVE WAYS TO ENSURE MUTUAL FEEDBACK ON THE CHILD’S DEVELOPMENT
The teacher regards the child’s parents as the key source of information about the child.
A system is in place to inform parents orally or in writing about any daily incidents involving their children.
The teacher knows how to talk to parents and bring up sensitive issues.
All parents are informed about playroom rules, work plans and other issues concerning the Centre.
Parents inform the teacher without delay about any major events in the life of their child.

AREA V.
WORKING CLOSELY WITH PRIMARY SCHOOL SETTINGS

1. THE CENTRE’S PROGRAMME ALLOWS A SMOOTH TRANSITION TO PRIMARY SCHOOL.
The Centre’s programme is developed by the Centre’s teachers in association with primary school teachers, parents and children.

2. THE PRIMARY SCHOOL WORKS WITH THE PRE-SCHOOL CENTRE.
The primary school provides its schoolchildren with opportunities to engage in activities benefiting children at the Pre-school Centre.
The primary school works with the Centre’s staff, providing support in teaching and organisational issues.

AREA VI.
SPECIFICATIONS FOR PRE-SCHOOL CENTRE SETTINGS

1. ROOM ORGANISATION:
Provide at least 25 square metres of play space for a group of up to 10 children. If the group is larger, the minimum density should be 2.5 square metres per child.
Children should have easy access at all times to a separate toilet facility for children (with a low-sitting toilet or a regular toilet with a seat adjuster and a raised platform, and a low washbasin placed at child level).
Ensure that the playroom can be divided into different play areas (including a paint area with washable carpeting) and a quiet area for relaxation. Children and their teacher should be able to re-arrange the space by moving furniture and creating learning centres.
Preferably there should be a washbasin or a sink in the playroom (at child level).
Provide natural light (a Centre must not be located in a basement).
Ensure that there are low windows protected against being opened by children but easy to open in emergency.
Provide heating with an active thermal control system to ensure suitable ambient temperature at all times. Remember that heat emitting surfaces may not be hotter than 50°C, or they must be protected. Radiators must not present a health hazard (use panel radiators or radiators protected with wooden guards).
The electricity system (power points) should be at levels inaccessible to children or should be protected with dummy electric plugs. Room arrangement should be appropriate to children’s developmental needs. The learning space should inspire exploration, free choice and experimenting in well-defined areas of interest (learning centres, children’s own collections, etc.). Equipment and resources (books, toys, coloured pencils, etc.) should be easily accessible to children.

2. SAFETY:
The Centre meets the health and safety standards laid down by the relevant regulations (legislation). All the equipment, installations and systems meet the safety standards and are regularly inspected for safety. The premises and furniture are clean and secure. Fire safety is ensured. The premises should be equipped with a fire extinguisher. Teachers should receive training in health and safety at work and in fire safety. Insuring the children at play: It is up to the parents to decide whether their child should be insured. They should be informed about the consequences of not insuring the child.

3. FURNITURE AND EQUIPMENT:
Furniture: Use good quality furniture that will last for at least two years. Choose soft colours of natural wood. PVC edges may be in contrasting colours. Avoid furniture and equipment with hard edges. Carpeting: Choose soft colours. The carpet should cover one third to one half of the floor area. Use washable carpeting or floor panelling. Remember: the floor must be non-slippery! Provide educational resources to teach a variety of curriculum issues at various stages of children’s development. Toys, books, board games, CDs, art materials, role-playing sets and sports gear should be top quality and heavy-duty items made of natural materials (e.g. wood) in soft colours. They should have safety certification.

4. OTHER ORGANISATIONAL SPECIFICATIONS:
The teacher should have access to a telephone at all times when at the Centre. The teacher should have access to the Internet (in the building where the Centre is located or in another place locally). Preferably there should be an enclosed playground not far from the Centre.

THE PRE-SCHOOL CENTRE ACCREDITATION SYSTEM

Communities and organisations that run Pre-school Centres in line with the philosophy and principles of the Comenius Foundation may apply for quality certification issued by the Foundation.

The Comenius Foundation offers help to maintain the quality of its certified Centres:

Teachers working at Comenius-certified Centres have preferential access to the Foundation’s in-service training and educational materials.
The Comenius Foundation provides training to methodology consultants (psychologists, speech therapist and education and care expert) who monitor the quality of the teachers’ work. Communities running Comenius-certified Centres have preferential access to the Foundation’s educational programmes and seminars. Where possible, the Foundation provides books and educational toys to its Centres.
1.5

EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES

BY MARTA BIAŁEK-GRACZYK

1. INCREASED AVAILABILITY OF PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION
Communities that implement ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ have reported an average increase of 15 per cent in their pre-school enrolment figures. In many communities, Pre-school Centres have helped to provide early education to as many as 50 per cent of local children. In some communities all the children aged 3-5 years go to pre-school.

PRE-SCHOOL ENROLMENT RATES IN SELECTED DISTRICTS IMPLEMENTING ‘WHERE THERE ARE NO PRE-SCHOOLS’

2. PARENTS ARE SATISFIED AND COMMITTED.
Parents assist the teacher during playroom activities and provide other kinds of support. Questionnaires used for the evaluation of the ‘Pre-school Centres: A Chance for a Good Start’ programme show that 99 per cent of parents are satisfied that they may send their child to a Pre-school Centre.

A total of 500 parents completed a questionnaire about the Pre-school Centres attended by their children:
DOES YOUR CHILD GO TO THE CENTRE WILLINGLY?

- 74% Very Willingly
- 24% Quite Willingly
- 1% Rather Unwillingly
- 0.2% Very Unwillingly

HOW MUCH SAY DO PARENTS HAVE AT THE CENTRE?

- 47% Substantial Say
- 48% Some Say
- 3% Little Say
- 1% No Say
WHEN A CHILD HAS A PROBLEM, HE/SHE CAN FIND HELP AT THE CENTRE

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THE MAIN ADVANTAGES OF PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES ACCORDING TO PARENTS:

Parents can be present in the playroom.
Children are free to take part in learning activities. They participate if they want to; if they don’t, they can go and play with a mother on voluntary childcare duty. A nice atmosphere and good interactions with children. Activities are varied and outings are truly educational experiences.
Children get hot meals.
Children are prepared for transition to primary school. They can meet other children. The atmosphere is nice, the teacher is caring, and the activities are well designed.
Groups are small. Psychologists and speech therapists provide help. Activities are provided free of charge.
Children make sure that they behave well and keep clean. Physical activities build up their fitness. Children learn to paint and dance.
Staff and their attitude to children.
The best thing about the Centres is that they exist because they give parents and children the time to get ready for transition to primary school, and they teach children self-reliance and good citizenship.

3. CHILDREN ARE BETTER PREPARED TO RESPOND TO LIFE CHALLENGES AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

To collect information about the effects of alternative forms of pre-school provision on the development of children and local communities, the Comenius Foundation has carried out a special evaluation study of Pre-school Centres
among Pre-school Centre teachers, reception class teachers, parents and local leaders. Below are the key findings.

THE STUDY

The study was conducted by a team of researchers headed by Dr Olaf Żylicz of the Warsaw School of Social Psychology. The aim was to evaluate the effects of ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ (WTANP) on the emotional and social development of preschool- and early primary-school age children. This evaluation focused on four basic developmental categories that were central to the Foundation’s educational efforts, namely persistence in task completion, social skills (including the ability to engage in co-operative play, to adjust to others and to provide assistance), self-confidence and interest.

Apart from one complementary test, we had no data provided directly by children. All data came from teachers and parents. In order to measure persistence, interest, social skills and self-confidence, children’s behaviour questionnaires were drawn up for parents and for teachers. The project involved comparing a representative sample of WTANP graduates in primary school reception classes with their peers who had not used a regular preschool education service. To confirm the data collected from the teachers, we closely examined the descriptions provided by the children’s parents. The questionnaire surveys were complemented by focus group interviews with reception class teachers, Pre-school Centre teachers and parents of WTANP children. These qualitative data allowed us to develop a better understanding of the correlations revealed in the questionnaire surveys.

KEY FINDINGS

According to parents, children who had gone to Pre-school Centres had higher ratings on all the four developmental categories than reception class children without preschool education.

According to reception class teachers, the most visible differences were in the level of self-esteem and to some extent, in the level of interest.

Children who had attended Pre-school Centres had significantly higher ratings in each developmental area surveyed than their reception class peers without preschool education.

In focus group interviews, parents and teachers emphasised differences in the levels of self-esteem, social skills and persistence (in favour of the children who had attended Pre-school Centres).

The longer a child’s enrolment period in the programme was, the more interest and persistence the child showed according to the child’s parents, and the more interest, social skills and self-confidence the child showed according to the child’s teachers.
WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT CHANGES IN THEIR CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOUR:

These comments come from questionnaires completed by parents of children who were attending Pre-school Centres:

- Ania is learning letters. She can count very well. She is a good listener, and she likes telling stories.
- Kacper is less shy, and more likely to listen when we talk to him about reading and writing.
- Gosia can dance and paint very well. She’s developing fast in her group.
- Julka is more self-reliant. She has her own play ideas, and she puts aside her things after play. She can get along very well with others in her group, she shares her toys.
- Krzyś is calmer now. He has learnt to work with others. He is more independent now he’s learnt to ‘do without his mummy.’
- Kuba has learnt to use school equipment. He likes to draw with coloured pencils.
- Zuzia is open-hearted, resourceful, confident, more self-reliant.
- Wiola is always smiling, she often sings songs she has learnt at the Centre.
- Magda can settle to one activity for longer. She is more self-reliant, she has learnt some positive behaviour. She has also learnt a lot of different skills.
- Zosia is less withdrawn and more intellectually mature. She comes up with various play ideas at home and she has developed a taste for drawing. She washes her hands more often, she doesn’t have to be reminded to wash her hands before meals.
- Damian is good at helping other children.
- Rafał is more interested in artistic expression (painting, clay modelling, etc.); he’s stopped flitting about.
- Asia is very busy painting and drawing all the time.
- Maja is more self-reliant at play.
- Antek can dress himself. He has learnt some poems by heart.
- Bartek is less reticent.
- My son Adam loves learning. He is very good with words.
- Grześ is more approachable and less withdrawn.
- Ala has learnt to share her toys. She’s better organised.
- Natałka is more talkative and more imaginative.

WHAT TEACHERS SAY ABOUT CHANGES IN CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOUR:

Children from the Pre-school Centre are more active in the classroom, more eager to contribute. Sometimes they put up their hands to offer answers even if the question hasn’t been asked yet. There is a girl who didn’t go to pre-school. When it comes to saying something, I have to ask her, please say a word. I have to get words out of her mouth.

- Alina, a reception class teacher from Michowice.
It used to be difficult for me to work with Mateusz [a boy without pre-school education]. He would always sit on the sidelines, he wouldn’t play with other children, but there were always a few children who had attended the Pre-school Centre, and they said, ‘Come play with us.’ The proportion of children in my class is fifty-fifty. Those who attended the Centre are trying to encourage others to play. I wouldn’t call them domineering. I’d call them co-operative.

- Jolanta, a teacher from Korycin

Sylwia is three and a half years old. When she joined us, she was very shy, she wouldn’t talk to anybody, wouldn’t play with other children. She just looked through books away from others. She always had a book in her hand. She was very quiet. When I said something to her, she would just nod and say ‘yes’. She was such a cute darling. She did not want to stay in the play group, she became tearful, but now she lets her mother go home. She’s undergone a complete transformation. She can raise her voice and shout at other children. ‘You hit Klaudia. You mustn’t jump in here.’ Or ‘I’m not a little baby, I’m Sylwia.’ She plays with a toy gun with the boys, and with a toy handsaw. She’s started to sing songs instead of just moving her lips. When we put on our ‘pre-school singers’ show, she goes on stage, says her name and starts to sing.

- Iwona, a teacher from Wasilków

Kacper, aged 5, enjoyed coming to the Centre. Initially I thought he was four years old, because he was overshadowed by a stronger, bulkier boy, who was actually a year younger than him. Kacper was too shy to speak at circle time. He would hang his head low, and hunched his shoulders when it was his turn to say something. Most often he wouldn’t even open his mouth. Then he repeated what others had said. He wasn’t fond of drawing or painting, or he got it done in a slapdash way, hurriedly, carelessly, without really paying attention. He watched what other children were doing. He wanted to be the first to finish. He often said that he didn’t know how to do things. At play, Kacper liked to imitate child leaders. He was clearly looking for a mentor, even among younger children. He would often play with the girls. He was only interested in building blocks, cars, and a farm tool kit. Now he spends more time on art activities, trying to get things done. He’s the last to complete a painting. He has learnt to draw people and three-dimensional objects – earlier on he couldn’t capture geometric shapes. He is also active at circle time, singing, dancing and talking, even if he needs some time to think about what he’s going to say. He is a leader at play, not just an imitator. He is an initiator. He has always enjoyed being part of a group, but he’s more confident now. He likes artistic expression, role-playing, and storytelling where children must come up with suggestions on how to end the story. He loves stories, being read to, he’s an avid listener.

- Monika, a teacher from Lubawa

4. CREATING NEW JOBS.

The programme has helped to create new jobs for unemployed women: about 30 per cent of teachers now working at the Centres used to be unemployed.
5. GROWING READERSHIP FIGURES.

In rural communities with Pre-school Centres some parents have started to use local libraries or book collections available at the Centres.

6. PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION.

The Centres offer activities also to children with special needs (some of them are older than five, but it is difficult to provide individual care for them). Able-bodied and disabled children play together in an atmosphere of openness and acceptance.

For two years I taught a disabled boy who came to my group twice a week with his father. Other children were really caring, they helped the boy because he couldn’t move well. They brought him newspapers. They would take a newspaper and scrunch it into a ball – he had trouble moving his fingers because he suffered from cerebral palsy and was unable to scrunch paper – and they would thrust it into his hand. They would make those paper balls themselves. It was so interesting to watch how eager they were to help a child with special needs.

- Alice, a primary school teacher teaching forms 1-3

7. INCREASED COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN ADDRESSING YOUNG CHILDREN’S NEEDS.

Pre-school Centres are places of encounter, where parents, teachers and young people can meet. Some communities have established associations to support early childhood education. Research conducted by Education Department students at the University of Łódź show that local rural communities see Pre-school Centres as places where children can improve their educational chances. Local leaders and officials in 19 districts have developed long-term education policies for the early years, with the provision of quality education being regarded as paramount.

WHAT LOCAL LEADERS SAY ABOUT THE IMPACT OF PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES *:

Parents are actively involved. They help arrange the playroom for the school year and take part in playroom activities while doing voluntary childcare duty. They buy educational resources, soap and cleansers. They bring things to use in the playroom and in the learning centres. They are eager to help the teachers. Children from Pre-school Centres attend primary school events and community events together with children in forms 1-3 because these teachers work hand in hand.

- a local leader from the Sosnowica District

Earlier on parents just enrolled their children in primary school reception classes and paid the fees. And that was all they did. Pre-school Centres are more demanding because they require parental involvement. It did cause some concern at first – parents were not very eager to participate in their children’s
learning experiences, but everything has turned out well. Parents and local people enjoyed being involved in Pre-school Centres’ activities. Interestingly, some parents have continued their involvement beyond the pre-school level, in primary-school environments.

- a local leader from the Myszyniec District

Parents are partners in the programme. They are actively involved in learning experiences, provide a lot of help in creating (arranging facilities) and running Pre-school Centres. They see the need to open more Centres, and they are determined to open them.

- a local leader from the Milejów District

Parents are more interested in their children’s intellectual development. Their voluntary childcare duty shifts at the Centre have inspired them to spend more time doing voluntary work for the community. They help the teachers – there are no barriers to parent-teacher communication.

a local leader from the Barciany District

* All quotations come from a questionnaire on the Diffusion of Innovation. The questionnaire was part of a study to evaluate the ‘Pre-school Centres: A Chance for a Good Start’ project. The questionnaire was completed by local leaders in project-implementing communities.

8. INTRODUCING CHANGES TO THE SYSTEM. THE LEGISLATION ON ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION.

Thanks to the constant efforts of the Comenius Foundation and other NGOs, the Education Act was amended in September 2007 by incorporating ‘alternative forms of pre-school provision.’ Pre-school is no longer the only type of early childcare service offered in Poland.

9. IMPROVING TEACHERS’ QUALIFICATIONS

Teachers working at Pre-school Centres receive induction training. They learn to work with children and local communities. They observe children’s individual development, and plan individualised educational efforts. They are actively involved in the creation of local partnerships for the youngest citizens, and encourage the children’s parents to join in.

WHAT TEACHERS SAY ABOUT WORK AT PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES:

It was my first job teaching young children, and I wasn’t sure if I was the right person for the job, but I think it’s all right now. I met a lot of new people. I’m glad that my first job was at a pre-school centre like that. I wrote my master’s thesis about the Pre-school Centres, and at my finals everybody listened with an open mouth. They didn’t ask any questions, they just wanted to hear about the Centres. My training experience proved invaluable.

I’ve found some very close friends. I took that job straight from college. The beginnings were tough. I was left to my own devices. There was no principal or supervisor. The project approach helped me a lot. Things are changing in Zabrodzie, and more and more children are being enrolled.
Looking back, I can say that my self-esteem has improved. I never thought I’d be able to combine teaching at a pre-school with teaching at a primary school and with two post-degree courses… I managed to do all that without a break. I had my ups and downs, but I did it. Now I can’t imagine myself not working at this pre-school.

I’m more confident now. I really needed more self-confidence. I’m glad that we were able to persuade the local community to open the Centres, and that we made people realise that these Centres were useful. After a few years as a school teacher, you usually get into a rut, but the Pre-school Centre has taught me that it isn’t necessarily the case.

My colleagues have begun to appreciate innovative teaching approaches. I’m not alone anymore. The best thing about the training courses is the kind of work they offer, the hands-on workshops. We feel like partners.

Three important things: One – I’m back in business. Two – I’ve got a job. When I was a child, I very much wanted to go to pre-school, and I envied my cousins who did. Now I’ve got children of my own, and they go to pre-school. I’m proud of the Pre-school Centre in our community. And three – I feel like a lady of the world because I’ve been to Warsaw twice for my training course. I hadn’t been to Warsaw earlier.
PART 2

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES: ORGANISATION AND FUNDING

BY ANNA BLUMSZTAJN

Rural children have limited access to pre-school education. Many different types of day care provision should be created to ensure that these children have a good start at school. Alternative early education services can improve the situation. They can be implemented under a variety of legal and formal arrangements. Below we present some types of arrangements that are probably the most useful for this purpose.

I. ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES PROVIDED OUTSIDE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The early childhood education and care services that we call ‘Pre-school Centres’ can be provided in a variety of forms under the following legislation:

- the Social Welfare Act
- the Arts and Culture Programmes Act
- Business Law
- the Local Government Act

The legislation refers to the general functions of local authorities, and specifies who may run Pre-school Centres and how these Centres may be run. Depending on the arrangement chosen, a Pre-school Centre may be run as part of a local education, care or arts programme by a local institution or by a separate body (for example, by an association). The arrangement adopted will determine the way of funding the Centre – with local budget funds or with other sources of funding (including grant aid). All the cases presented below use local budget funds as their main source of money, but other sources can also be used.

Summaries of various arrangements adopted by communities that implement ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ can be found later in this book.

PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES RUN BY LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES RUN BY LOCAL LIBRARIES OR ARTS CENTRES

To open a Centre under these provisions, relevant amendments must be incorporated into the statutes of the library or arts centre. The District Council must adopt a resolution to approve the amendments. The Centre is funded with money earmarked for local arts programmes. The money is paid into the bank account of the library or the arts centre. The teaching staff may be employed by these institutions. The cost of running the Centre must be shown in the institution’s financial plans.
PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES RUN BY LOCAL INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR SOCIAL PREVENTION PROGRAMMES

A Pre-school Centre may operate as part of a local Alcohol Abuse Prevention and Treatment Programme, which may use funding provided by the Alcohol Abuse Prevention Committee. This financial aid can be granted to many different institutions that are also responsible for prevention programmes, for example schools, libraries, rural community centres, fire brigades, rural women’s clubs, etc. Service providers may operate under a temporary service contract. Most importantly, the social prevention programme must contain a provision to make possible the implementation of an early prevention programme for young children. Under a programme like that, drop-in centres can be created with wide-ranging activities for various age groups.

PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES RUN BY LOCAL SOCIAL WELFARE CENTRES

Pre-school Centres may operate as one of the programmes implemented by Social Welfare Centres (SWCs). The Social Welfare Centre’s long-term policy must contain provisions to make possible the implementation of a programme for young children as one of the functions related to family support. The only catch is that the task of a SWC is to provide support to families within specific income brackets. The way out is to define the Pre-school Centre as an additional form of support offered by the SWC. Naturally, funding for the implementation of the programme must be allocated in the SWC’s budget.

THE HISTORY OF THE PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES IN BEŁŻYCE

I’ve been managing a day care centre for children for several years. When the Social Welfare Centre in Bełżyce contacted me with a suggestion to run a group of pre-schoolers, I was very pleased. I knew I’d be looking after some younger sisters and brothers of children who used my day care service. These children came from families who lived on welfare benefits. They had no opportunity to go to pre-school.

Creating a group of pre-schoolers was a fabulous task that turned out to be a revelation. Mothers who brought their children to the group were motivated to look neat and tidy. They had the opportunity to talk to education experts and specialists. When I watched the children at play, I also watched their mothers – they were very interested in art activities and educational games.

Over a period of about a year, the behaviour of children and their mothers has changed dramatically. Positive standards of behaviour and play combined with learning, have captured their imagination and encouraged them to take part in playroom activities.

A ten-month-old girl named Julka is a case in point. She watched her big sisters and other children from her mother’s lap. When she had learnt to walk, she was happy to play together with others. She learnt to make gestures with her hands, and learnt to speak. She knows playroom rules. She knows how to use paint and scissors. She is very fast at stringing beads and very good at doing jigsaws. She can sing a lot of songs, and her drawings of people are full of detail. Hers is just one of many stories that prove the need for early childhood education.

- Irena Kamińska, a teacher at the SWC Pre-school Centre in Bełżyce.
A Pre-school Centre may be run by a local education administration unit, whose task is to administer local educational institutions. As the law stands, education administration units may provide out-of-school education and care. If this arrangement is adopted, it is a good idea to incorporate responsibility for pre-school education in the local education policy document and appoint the education administration unit to carry out the task. The unit should employ the teaching staff, whose salaries will be paid from the local education budget.

In none of the above arrangements is the Pre-school Centre a separate legal entity. If run under these provisions, a Pre-school Centre is not very different from other activities offered by arts programmes or social prevention programmes. The Centre is, in fact, the person who is employed to run it. Moreover, the funding for the Centre (operating expenses, art materials, etc.) are part of the funds provided for the arts centre or the social welfare centre. A Pre-school Centre may be run by a local institution, but it does not mean that it has to be physically located in the institution’s building. Most of the Pre-school Centres run under ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ are located in unused primary school classrooms. Some of them are also located in a rented facility, in a fire station or in the District Council building.

The law makes it possible to provide education as a kind of business operation. Running a Pre-school Centre may be regarded as a business service. In this case, local authorities should make education for young children a separate programme and should arrange a competitive bidding procedure to find the education provider. The responsibility for this task must be allocated to a local business, for example a private pre-school or a retired or unemployed teacher who will register their education and care services in the business registry. If local authorities decide that they need education and care services within their area, they may allocate the task to businesses under public procurement procedures. Education and care services may be funded by local authorities because they are responsible for the provision of education in the community. Alternatively, local authorities may sign a contract with a self-employed teacher to provide education services. The teacher may, in turn, engage other teachers by signing employment contracts or temporary service contracts with them.

NGOs can provide educational services for children (foundations and associations are bodies corporate) if their statutes contain provisions that allow them to offer this kind of service. Local authorities must define the tasks and funding in its NGO partnership programme, publish an announcement to invite applications, and select the organisation that will carry out the task.
TEACHER EMPLOYMENT PROVISIONS

If run under these provisions, Pre-school Centres are not regarded as statutory education institutions, and the teaching staff are not regarded as teachers within the meaning of the Education System Act. This means that the Teachers’ Charter does not apply to their employment situation.

Nevertheless, because their work is in no way different from the work done by teachers in statutory educational institutions, their working hours should include not only the contact hours but also the time spent preparing for playroom activities. In addition, Pre-school Centre teachers are also expected to attend meetings with parents and methodology consultants, and the time spent at such meetings should also count as their working hours. Vacation time should also be considered.

A local institution funded by local authorities and responsible for running a Pre-school Centre may sign an employment contract with a teacher, full-time or part-time, for a fixed term or for an indefinite term. Another option is to sign a temporary service contract, especially if working at the Centre is an extra job for the teacher. In this case, the teacher is paid for the length of time spent at the Centre. Temporary service contracts are disregarded when seniority (the length of continuous service) is calculated.

Local authorities may also sign a contract with a self-employed teacher to provide education services for young children. In this case, they pay a privately owned business for the provision of education, and they bear no other costs related to employee insurance.

All these types of organisation may be used within one community. Definitely, the best arrangement for teachers is to sign an employment contract, especially if they have no one else to pay their social security. It is a good idea to consider arrangements that will be attractive enough for the staff to make them stay longer. If a Centre has a stable workforce, the quality of the programme is easier to maintain. Teachers need time to learn the rules and standards developed for the Centres; their work improves every year, they learn to communicate better with the children’s parents – and good teacher-parent communication is key to the programme’s success.

Volunteers can also be engaged. Any adult person without a criminal record can by law be a volunteer. A volunteer should be aware of the special character of early education and care services, and of the need to maintain strict confidentiality in matters involving children and their parents. Volunteers must be covered by civil liability insurance against damage and injury caused at the workplace. A volunteer should sign an agreement with the institution that runs the Centre.

THIS AGREEMENT SHOULD DEFINE:
• the tasks to be carried out by the volunteer and the length of voluntary service
• the volunteer's promise to act in consultation with the person in charge of the Centre and with the playroom teacher
• the volunteer's promise to maintain strict confidentiality in matters involving children and their parents.
**FUNDING**

**COSTS OF RUNNING PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES**

The costs of running pre-school centres involve the following:

- the upkeep of the facility/room where the Centre is located (heating, electricity, water, maintenance and repair costs)
- staff salary (the teacher’s salary)
- the methodology consultant’s salary
- furniture and equipment (furniture, carpeting, cleaning agents, etc.)
- resources: toys, books, art materials
- children’s insurance
- other costs (e.g. the cost of hiring a bus for an outing).

Where pre-school centres are funded by local authorities, their cost will depend on factors that can – to some extent – be controlled by these authorities, depending on the needs, funds in hand, teachers’ and parent’ preferences, etc.

The key factors are:

1. **THE NUMBER OF PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES AND ENROLMENT FIGURES**

The more children, the more teachers. The more teachers, the more funding is needed to pay their salaries. Under ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools,’ a playgroup should consist of 7-15 children. Working with a group this size, the teacher can provide high quality learning experiences to magnify the children’s educational chances and help them get ready for primary school.

Most communities implementing ‘Where There Are No Preschools’ began by opening one or two Centres, and then gradually increased their number. Parents were often the initiators. In some districts, Centres have been opened in every community where suitable premises were available.

2. **PRE-SCHOOL OPENING HOURS**

The opening hours depend on the needs of parents and on the availability of local funding. Under ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools,’ a Centre should provide activities for at least nine hours a week for a full group of children (up to 15 children). Many communities choose the none-hour time-frame because they can set up more groups. Evaluation carried out in 2006 in many communities implementing ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ shows that children who attend the Centres for nine hours a week develop just as fast as those who attend the Centres for longer periods. (In some communities Centres are open for 25 hours a week at parents’ request.) Apparently, the length of time spent on activities does not matter so much as the teacher’s good qualifications, her good interactions with children, and high quality learning experiences that engage young beneficiaries.
Local authorities decide whether their Centres will provide year-round care or are closed for the summer. Their decision will depend mainly on the needs of parents and on local contexts. Is the facility where the Centre is located open in the summer? Do most children stay at home or go away for their summer holiday?

3. PRE-SCHOOL CENTRE FACILITIES

A community that wants to offer an alternative pre-school service must find suitable premises – a room or a building. Make sure that the premises are appropriate. (See the chapter 1.4 on ‘Quality in Alternative Pre-school Services’.) If the facility is in poor repair, the cost of the Centre will go up. Apart from repairs, another major item in every Centre’s budget – before the Centre is opened – is the cost of facility upkeep, including heating, electricity, cleaning and snow removal. If no funding is provided for this purpose, the Centre’s budget plan should at least contain items such as expenditure on cleaning agents and on other consumables (e.g. art materials). You may also ask parents to help you with the upkeep (by turns).

If a Centre is located in a building where other institutions have their offices, its cost can be kept down to a minimum. If a Centre is located in a building where there are no other institutions, its cost will be high, mainly because of the cost of heating.

ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY OF ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES

The average cost of a rural pre-school service (or, to be more precise, the money saved if a pre-school service is discontinued) is 55,000 zlotys a year. The average cost per child in a regular pre-school is about 4,500 zlotys a year. The maximum cost per child in a Pre-school Centre is 1,200 zlotys a year, not including the cost of teacher training, initial resources and repairs.

Please note that the best efficiency indicator is the cost per child, but local authorities may prefer to think in terms of overall costs before they decide if the project is feasible.

Compared to a classic pre-school, a Pre-school Centre is more cost-effective because it is more flexible. Below is a list of factors that contribute to economic efficiency. Remember: some factors reduce the cost of the service (e.g. the cost of a pre-school hour per child), while other factors reduce the level of total overall spending, and they may prove more important to local authorities.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY BY REDUCING THE COST OF THE SERVICE:

- no support personnel are needed
- it is not necessary to provide meals
- flexible employment schemes do not generate fixed costs
- parents provide help (in-kind help, assistance in running Centres)
- facilities can be shared under a shared rental arrangement
- the Comenius Foundation provides specialist, in-kind and financial assistance.
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY BY REDUCING THE LEVEL OF TOTAL OVERALL SPENDING:

- shorter opening hours.

**SUMMARY TABLE**

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<tr>
<th>Type of Arrangement</th>
<th>Effect on Local Budget/Programme Cost</th>
<th>Other Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centre run by a business</td>
<td>(+) more effective management</td>
<td>(+) more commitment and motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(+) local authorities are not responsible for management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre run by an NGO</td>
<td>(+) it is possible to raise funds from outside sources</td>
<td>(+) increased community involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(+) NGO can be engaged in many projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre run by local authorities</td>
<td>(-) local authorities pay most expenses</td>
<td>(+) various local programmes can be integrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(+) expenses may be shared with other programmes</td>
<td>(+) local authorities are more committed to the programme (increased programme stability)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building used by a local institution</td>
<td>(+) lower cost of facility upkeep (included in other operating costs)</td>
<td>(-) shared use of premises may be inconvenient (potential conflict)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(+) no rental costs</td>
<td>(+) various local programmes can be integrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-) potentially higher cost of facility arrangement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village building used by local authorities</td>
<td>(-) high cost of facility upkeep</td>
<td>(+) community revival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent facility</td>
<td>(-) rental costs</td>
<td>(+) local market revival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Employment Provisions</td>
<td>(+) no cost of facility upkeep/repair</td>
<td>(rental money goes to local authorities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary service contract</td>
<td>(+) lower cost of labour</td>
<td>(-) less stable workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment contract</td>
<td>(-) higher cost of labour (fixed costs, social security contributions, taxes)</td>
<td>(+) better motivation to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(+) stable workforce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXAMPLES:

1. BARCIANY DISTRICT, WARMIŃSKO-MAZURSKIE PROVINCE

- year of opening the first Centre under ‘Where There Are No Preschools’: 2001
- number of Centres funded by local authorities: 3 (44 children)
- annual cost of Centres paid by local authorities: about 47,000 zlotys
- annual cost per child: 1,070 zlotys
- opening hours per week: 12
- availability (months per year): 12 months
- type of arrangement: Centres are run by self-employed teachers
- self-employed teachers sign a fixed-term contract with local authorities
- number of Centres funded by the European Social Fund: 2 (30 children)
- other pre-school services available to local children ages 3-5: a private pre-school (22 children)
- local pre-school enrolment rate for children ages 3-5 (all services): 42%

Barciany was one of the first Polish communities to offer alternative pre-school education services. In 2001 two Pre-school Centres were opened under ‘Where There Are No Preschools,’ initially run in conjunction with the Polish Children and Youth Foundation, and since 2003 – in conjunction with the Comenius Foundation. In 2005 the community received financial aid from the Comenius Foundation under ‘Pre-school Centres: A Chance for a Good Start’ to open another two Pre-school Centres. In 2006 a new Pre-school Centre was opened, funded entirely by the local authorities.

The staff at the Centres are self-employed teachers who made successful bids to run the services. The local authorities pay a pre-defined amount every month (about 1,400 zlotys) to cover the full cost of running the Centres, including the teachers’ salaries.

A TEACHER’S TYPICAL MONTHLY STATEMENT OF ACCOUNT:

- charge for the use of premises, electricity and heating: 243.61 zlotys
- social security contributions: 251.97 zlotys
- stationery, cleaning agents, sweet treats to distribute at events, and other: 168.33 zlotys
- outings: about 81.67 zlotys
- teacher’s salary: 654.42 zlotys

The Centres in Barciany and Mołtajny are located in a facility rented from the community services and housing administration unit, and in a building rented from Mołtajny housing co-operative. The teachers pay a charge for the use of the premises. Most recently a Centre has been opened in Skandawa in a public library run by the local community arts centre.

2. JEDNOROŻEC DISTRICT, MAZOWIECKIE PROVINCE
• year of opening the first Centre under ‘Where There Are No Preschools’: 2005
• number of Centres funded by local authorities: 9 (100 children)
• annual cost of Centres paid by local authorities: about 40,000 zlotys (teachers’ salaries). (Total cost including capital investment: about 120,000 zlotys)
• annual cost per child: about 600 zlotys (not including the purchase of furniture as a fixed asset)
• type of arrangement: programme operated by the local education, arts and sports unit
• opening hours per week: 30
• availability (months per year): open in school terms
• teachers employed full-time on fixed-term employment contracts (for the school year), holidays as defined by education authorities
• since 2007 all the Centres funded by the European Social Fund
• other pre-school services available to local children ages 3-5: a local authority pre-school (110 children)
• local pre-school enrolment rate for children ages 3-5 (all services): 65%

Jednorożec contacted the Comenius Foundation in 2005. Five Pre-school Centres were opened in the first year, and another four in the next year. The community has always been looking for outside sources of funding. In 2006 Jednorożec, acting in partnership with the ‘Kurpsie Razem’ Association Alliance (the project leader) and the Comenius Foundation, won a grant for its alternative pre-school services from the European Social Fund.

The Centres are located in primary school buildings.

Initially the teachers signed temporary service contracts. In the next year they signed employment contracts with the Jednorożec District Council. Now they have signed employment contracts with the local education, arts and sports unit. Before the community had received the European Social Fund grant, a portion of the teachers’ salaries was paid by the Labour Office under intervention programmes. Most of the outlays were used to purchase fixed assets (playground equipment, furniture and other resources). Apart from local funding and aid from the local Alcohol Abuse Prevention Committee, the community also received a subsidy of 60,000 zlotys from the Province Office under the local ‘Equal Education Opportunities’ programme.

THE HISTORY OF THE PRE-SCHOOL CENTRES IN JEDNOROŻEC

Initially we were interested in Pre-school Centres not because we were aware of the significance of early childhood education, but because of the shrinking number of children in our small rural schools. We wanted more children to use these schools, so we started looking for ways to provide activities for children aged 3-5 years without setting up new local authority pre-schools. We heard about the Comenius Foundation on the radio. They said the Foundation worked in partnership with local authorities to open Pre-school Centres. We contacted the Foundation, and went on a study visit with a few local councillors, school principals and parents to see how the Pre-school Centres were run in nearby Grudusk. We realised that the Centres offered a solution to a number of
problems, not only to our main problem. First, they provided a fair chance for rural children to do well in a reception class and in primary school. What’s more, parents and carers learnt basic skills to help educate their children, because they were present in the playroom. Second, setting up a Centre meant helping young teachers to gain experience and enter the labour market, improving their employment prospects. Third, the cost of education per child was much lower for a Pre-school Centre than for a local authority pre-school. There were also prospects of getting some funding for the Centres from an outside source, and they did materialise quite soon. In the first year we got 60,000 zlotys as an award from the province governor in the ‘Equal Opportunities’ competition. In the next year we got as much as half a million zlotys from the European Social Fund under the ‘Pre-schools without Borders’ programme. Now Jednorożeć has nine Pre-school Centres, all of them well-equipped, benefiting children aged 3-5 years and their parents. The local pre-school enrolment rate has doubled to about 80 per cent in 2007.

3. GARBÓW DISTRICT, LUBELSKIE PROVINCE

- year of opening the first Centre under ‘Where There Are No Preschools’: 2005
- number of Centres funded by local authorities: 3 (38 children)
- annual cost of Centres paid by local authorities: about 9,300 zlotys (teachers’ salaries) (Total cost including furniture and repairs: 13,300 zlotys.)
- annual cost per child: about 400 zlotys (not including the purchase of furniture as a fixed asset)
- type of arrangement: Centres run by the community public library as special-interest clubs
- opening hours per week: 12
- availability (months per year): 10 months
- number of Centres funded by the European Social Fund: 2 (30 children)
- other pre-school services available to local children ages 3-5:
  - two playgroups for five-year-olds at two primary schools (41 children), and
  - a private pre-school run by Salesian Nuns (37 children)
- local pre-school enrolment rate for children ages 3-5 (all services): 59%

In 2005 the community opened one Pre-school Centre, funded by the local authorities. A few months later the community joined the ‘Pre-school Centres: A Chance for a Good Start’ programme operated by the Comenius Foundation, and received funding for another two settings. In 2006 and 2007 local parents were the driving force behind the opening of two more Pre-school Centres funded by the local authorities.

The Centres are formally run by the community public library as ‘special interest clubs.’ They are located in school common rooms or in separate classrooms in primary school buildings. Teachers work part-time on fixed-term employment contracts (for the school year) as instructors on the community public library’s special interest team. They are entitled to holidays in line with the Labour Code.
4. LUBAWA DISTRICT, WARMIŃSKO-MAZURSKIE PROVINCE

- year of opening the first Centre under ‘Where There Are No Preschools’: 2006
- number of Centres funded by local authorities: 3 (45 children)
- annual cost of Centres paid by local authorities: about 12,000 zlotys (including the purchase of furniture and equipment as fixed assets)
- annual cost per child: 600 zlotys
- type of arrangement: educational programme operated by the Social Welfare Centre
- opening hours per week: 12
- availability (months per year): 10 months
- teachers sign temporary service contracts
- number of Centres funded by the European Social Fund:
  - in conjunction with the Comenius Foundation: 2 (42 children);
  - in conjunction with another NGO (the Democratic Union of Women): 3 (41 children)
- local pre-school enrolment rate for children ages 3-5 (all services): 41%

In 2005 Lubawa joined the ‘Pre-school Centres: A Chance for a Good Start’ programme operated by the Comenius Foundation and sponsored by the European Social Fund. As a result, three Pre-school Centres were opened, funded by the European Social Fund. Soon afterwards the local authorities realised that more Centres were needed and decided to spend some money on another two, and then another one Pre-school Centre. All the Centres are run in partnership with the Comenius Foundation under the ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ programme.

A Social Welfare Centre employee has been appointed to act as a local leader on the ‘Pre-school Centres: A Chance for a Good Start’ programme and on the ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ programme. The Centres are located in school buildings.

HOW THE LUBAWA DISTRICT INTRODUCED ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES:

- On 3 August 2006, the Lubawa District Council adopted Resolution XL/233/06 to join the ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ programme operated by the Comenius Foundation for Child Development.
- On 24 August 2006 the Lubawa district administrator issued Guidelines 224/2006 to appoint the Lubawa Social Welfare Centre as the operator of the ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ programme.
- The guidelines were issued pursuant to the Social Welfare Act of 12 March 2004. Article 17.1.13 of the Act says that local authorities must create a local system of intervention and care programmes for children and families.
- The local authorities have developed a local child and family support policy for 2006-10 (approved by the District Council). One of the policy objectives is to provide better access to community-based efforts for family support, including the educational programmes in question.
On 28 September 2006 the Lubawa district administrator signed a partnership agreement with the Comenius Foundation for Child Development to implement ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools.’

In August and September 2006 the head of the Lubawa Social Welfare Centre signed agreements with local schools to open Pre-school Centres on their premises.

5. KORONOWO DISTRICT, KUJAWSKO-POMORSKIE PROVINCE

- number of Centres funded by local authorities: 6 (75 children)
- annual cost of Centres paid by local authorities: 22,500 zlotys
- annual cost per child: 400 zlotys
- type of arrangement: educational programme operated by the CORONA Education Association
- opening hours per week: 9
- availability (months per year): 10 months
- 1 teacher on an employment contract, the other teachers on temporary service contracts
- number of Centres funded by the European Social Fund: none
- other pre-school services available to local children ages 3-5: a local authority pre-school and playgroups (113 children)
- local pre-school enrolment rate for children ages 3-5 (all services): 23%

In 2001 Koronowo joined the ‘Where There Are No Pre-schools’ pilot project, offering the first alternative pre-school services in Poland. The local authorities decided that local Pre-school Centres should be run by an NGO. Initially there were three Centres with four groups of children, but new Centres were opened soon, most recently in September 2007. The teachers are employed by the CORONA Education Association, which works closely with local schools, arts centres, community centres, the Alcohol Abuse Prevention Committee and the Social Welfare Centre.

The Centres are located in a primary school building, in an old schoolhouse, in a room shared with a youth drop-in centre, and in rural community facilities. All these premises are provided free of charge.

One teacher, who teaches three groups, works part-time on a fixed-term employment contract (from September to June). The other teachers are on temporary service contracts because the opening hours are not long (up to nine hours a week). One of them is employed elsewhere, and the other is a college student.

Funding for the Centres is provided under programmes operated by the local Alcohol Abuse Prevention Committee.

The CORONA Association raises additional funds from outside sources, including the Province Management Committee’s contracts, grant aid provided by the Province Administration Office for community-based programmes, and donations from local businesses and institutions.
II. ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES PROVIDED WITHIN THE LOCAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

Funding provided by the European Social Fund made it possible for the voluntary sector to implement alternative early education services as a pilot project in order to find out if these services were feasible. About 100 rural communities took part in the pilot phase. In January 2008 the Education System Act was amended, citing ‘other forms of pre-school provision’ besides traditional pre-schools. Below is a summary of the key changes and the regulation concerning ‘other forms of pre-school provision.’

THE LEGISLATION

In September 2007, Polish Parliament adopted an amendment to the Education System Act to broaden the scope of early education and care provision. The amendment became effective as of 1 January 2008 (Journal of Laws DzU.2007.181.1292). Under the new law:

1. It is possible to set up and run other publicly-funded and private forms of pre-school services, not only publicly-funded and private pre-schools (Article 5). Where appropriate for demographic and geographic distribution reasons, the District Council may incorporate other types of pre-school provision into the existing network of publicly-funded pre-schools (Article 14a.1a).
2. The Ministry of National Education is responsible for issuing detailed regulations to define other forms of pre-school provision, their establishment, arrangement and organisation in the context of local needs and capacities (Article 14a.7).
3. Individuals and bodies corporate other than local government bodies, who wish to provide other publicly-funded forms of pre-school services, must apply for a permit to the local authorities. Applications must contain a provision organisation plan (Article 59). Private services must be registered with the local authorities (Article 89a).
4. Individuals/bodies corporate providing alternative pre-school services receive from the local budget a subsidy for every child beneficiary. The subsidy may not be less than 50 per cent of operating expenses per child in a publicly-funded pre-school in the district (Article 80.2b). Private service providers receive from the local budget a subsidy of not less than 40 per cent of operating expenses (Article 90.2d).
5. Publicly-funded pre-school services provide education and care free of charge, ensuring the implementation of basic curriculum standards. Education and care is provided by persons with relevant qualifications (Article 6).

The aim of these changes is to facilitate access to early childhood education and care services for children aged 3-5 years (sometimes also for two-year-olds), especially in rural areas where traditional pre-school services are unavailable for a variety of reasons. As a rule, alternative pre-school services should be offered in the young beneficiaries’ neighbourhood. The type of activities offered and the opening hours should take into account local needs and capacities.

The minister of education is responsible for issuing detailed regulations to define other forms of early education and care provision, their establishment, arrangement and organisation.
ALTERNATIVE PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES INCLUDE:

1. **Itinerant teachers.** They may provide learning experiences for children ages 3-5 (possibly also for two-year-olds), for example for 4-5 hours a day, three days a week. Activities are arranged in a well-equipped room rented by local authorities. The provision of meals/soft drinks is not necessary, but parents may do the catering.

2. **Children’s sessions.** These sessions are offered at weekends to groups of about ten children. Activities may be arranged in a playroom or in a school classroom. Parental involvement should be actively encouraged.

3. **Family sessions.** These sessions may be offered to children aged 2-5 years for 4-5 hours a day, three days a week. Activities may be arranged in pre-school playrooms, parish rooms, or other suitable facilities. Parents should take part in activities. They should also have the opportunity to consult education and care experts.

4. **Pre-schooler’s Clubs.** Activities are offered to groups of 10-15 children aged 3-5 years, for 3-4 hours a day, three to five days a week. Activities may be arranged in a suitable facility provided by the community council, district council, housing co-operative or by any other body or institution. Parents are responsible for doing the catering. They should take part in activities.

These are all forms listed in the amendment to the Education System Act. Only the first one is markedly different – the others differ in name only. We expect, however, that are cited just as examples and that other forms of day care will also be permitted, depending on local contexts and needs.

Various providers – bodies corporate (local authorities, NGOs, associations) and individuals – may offer alternative pre-school services (publicly-funded or private). In Poland, activities offered as ‘other forms of pre-school provision’ may be organised by teachers who are qualified to work with young children. The provision must be available for at least five hours a day on every week day.

A publicly-funded pre-school service must have a permit from local authorities, whereas a private pre-school service must be registered. In either case, the service operator must supply a provision organisation plan.

The amendment obligates the provider to monitor the service’s finance and administration, and the local education authority must ensure educational supervision.

For monitoring and supervision to make sense, the monitoring and supervision standards should be defined in relevant regulations.

The amendment also defines the level of local subsidising available to an alternative form of pre-school provision, publicly-funded and private. At present, the subsidy level per child in a publicly-funded pre-school service run by an individual or a body corporate other than the local authority equals 100 per cent of projected operating expenses per child in a publicly-funded pre-school run by the local authority, with activities offered for at least 12 hours a week (compared to the minimum standard of 25 hours a week in a local authority pre-school). Therefore, the recommended minimum subsidy level is 50 per cent of the above-
mentioned operating expenses for a publicly-funded form of pre-school provision, and 40 per cent of the above-mentioned operating expenses for a private form of pre-school provision.
(Compiled by Elżbieta Czyż, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights)

THE REGULATIONS

Detailed rules for the provision of alternative pre-school services under the Education System Act can be found in the regulation concerning types of other forms of pre-school provision, their establishment, arrangement and operation, issued by the Minister of National Education on 10 January 2008.

KEY REGULATION PROVISIONS:

Other forms of pre-school provision may operate as ‘pre-school classes’ (open on some days in a week) or as ‘pre-school settings’ (opened daily).
Activities are provided to groups of 3-25 children.
The minimum daily opening time-frame is three hours. The minimum weekly opening time-frame is twelve hours. The teacher must be present.
Parents may take part in activities.
The teacher must:

- implement basic or selected pre-school curriculum standards
- work in partnership with parents and experts providing special assistance and care including psychologists, education and care experts, and health workers
- ensure the suitable quality of play and learning experiences
- observe children’s development.
ABOUT THE COMENIUS FOUNDATION FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

OUR MISSION

The Comenius Foundation for Child Development has been established to create the best possible conditions for children to build their own self-esteem, to develop self-reliance and creativity, and to inspire their natural curiosity.

We are particularly concerned with the wellbeing of those children who are less likely to get a good start in adult life because they come from small communities, and from economically and culturally disadvantages backgrounds.

We work closely with parents, teachers, non-governmental organisations, local authorities and child-serving institutions to promote modern educational approaches and high educational standards.

When it comes to early childhood services, we are not interested in temporary solutions. We want to introduce long-term systemic changes to facilitate support for the development of young children.

OUR MAIN GOALS

- To ensure access to high quality early education to all children
- To increase the quality of early education in Poland
- To increase social participation in educational policy-making
- To increase social awareness about the significance of early education

OUR EFFORTS BENEFIT

- **children** by facilitating the development of their full potential
- **parents** by facilitating parenting and helping them influence their children’s education
- **teachers** by encouraging them to use modern teaching approaches in order to help children develop creativity, self-reliance and social skills
- **pre-school and primary school principals** by helping them introduce new educational schemes
- **local authorities** by promoting a better understanding of the role of education in children’s development and later life
- **non-governmental organisations** by supporting their child- and family-oriented efforts

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