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Now that kindergarten is free of charge: laying the foundations for future pre-school policy change in Bulgaria

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Since April 1, 2022, all children in Bulgaria attend nursery and kindergarten completely free of charge. This paper makes the argument that without improving the quality of kindergarten services, policy gains toward expanding access remain fragile. The public early education system will continue to be challenged to realize the full potential of its impact. Strengthening demand for high quality kindergartens could bolster efforts to enhance the supply of such services. This could be achieved by reframing the role of kindergartens to society, improving the capacity of parents to voice their demands, and creating opportunities for them to do so. Moreover, civil society could encourage the establishment and communication to the public of process quality measurement in an effort to secure a broad foundation of support for greater investment in early education.

KEYWORDS

early education process quality measurement, affordability of kindergarten, policy sustainability, demand for high-quality early education, issue reframing, public awareness, parental voice voice or exit

Introduction

In 2014 the Trust for Social Achievement (TSA), a Bulgarian non-governmental organization (NGO) initiated a nationwide project (the Springboard for School Readiness project, or SSR) in collaboration with the World Bank to gain high quality evidence on the most effective way to increase kindergarten enrollment and attendance among children from disadvantaged minority (Roma and Turkish) communities. This first impact evaluation, carried out using a randomized controlled trial, proved that fees were a burden. Their removal resulted in the halving of non-enrolled children and a 20% increase in attendance (Huillery et al., 2017). A follow-on evaluation carried out in 2017–2018 showed that 3 years of regular attendance helped the most at-risk children from minority communities catch up developmentally to their less at-risk peers (Huillery and de Laat, 2019).

The SSR project (which ran from 2014 to 2018) and the two reports on it formed the backbone of an advocacy campaign initiated in late 2017 by TSA and its 23 partnering NGOs. In 2019, the government announced its intention to provide partial funding to municipalities that wished to remove kindergarten fees for children in the mandatory preschool age range¹. This policy left the decision about which groups of children should benefit up to municipalities.

¹ Three years of mandatory pre-school are currently the law (ages 4–7) and kindergartens are the only early education institutions licensed to provide it.

A voucher scheme was approved starting in 2021 to compensate the high cost of private kindergartens for parents whose children were unable to secure a place in the free state system (Municipality of Sofia city, 2021).

Since that first legal amendment was adopted in 2020, Bulgaria has seen four parliamentary elections and cumulative inflation of 29% (National Statistical Institute, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have also contributed toward shifting societal priorities. Yet somehow, the removal of kindergarten fees not only survived as a fledgling public policy; it doubled in scope (to include nurseries as well) and became universal starting in April 2022. A comfortable majority in Parliament voted to remove fees as part of the State Budget Act for 2022, this time legally preventing municipalities from charging any fees² (Parliament of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2020). The estimated value of the policy for the 9 months of 2022 exceeds EUR 50 million (bTV News, 2022). In total, at least 244,000 children annually will benefit³. Enrollment in preschool education was also included as a key indicator in the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021–2030) (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021).

Informed by high quality evidence, achieved through a thoughtful process of agenda setting, evidence collection, awareness raising and ally-building, and sustained through advocacy toward decision makers and the public, this policy places Bulgaria as a European leader, alongside Latvia, in affordable early care and education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). What could possibly go wrong? These gains may not be as sustainable as they first appear, and they might not be sufficient to meet policy goals.

Cost of the fee removal policy

The World Bank's impact evaluation proved that removing the cost of attendance was the most economically effective way to increase enrollment, attendance and academic outcomes among Roma and Turkish children from disadvantaged communities (Huillery et al., 2017). Data shared with the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MOES) during the advocacy campaign projected that the total annual cost of removing fees for all children would be three times higher than the cost of removing fees just for children living under the poverty line and showed that residents of the capital city are not supportive of the removal of fees. Assuming that the government would not dare roll back social benefits once given to the people provides a false sense of security. The municipality of Targovishte removed kindergarten fees in 2015 (bTV News, 2015), only to have them reinstated in 2016 (Zname, 2016) when a different political party took the local seat of power.

Moreover, since impact was formally linked to enrollment, alternative policies to boost enrollment exist, such as investing in infrastructure expansion, making registration mandatory for 3-year-old children, or operating local intra-institutional action groups aimed at enrolling unenrolled children (first created in 2018). They are the primary government policies to reduce school dropout and non-enrollment

(European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022; Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2022), far cheaper than removing all fees for all children every year and likely to also carry political appeal.

Public perceptions of early learning

Kindergarten is still valued by society more so as a form of parental support than for its impact on child development. In a 2017 nationally representative survey commissioned by TSA, 63.1% of respondents thought that kindergarten fee removal would relieve family budgets, 60.7% thought that it would lead to increased attendance, but significantly fewer respondents thought that it would lead to improved school readiness (45.7%) and socialization skills (35.6%). The government (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022) and the political parties (Bulgarian Free Television, 2021) emphasized the financial support for parents rather than the promise of improved outcomes. Viewing kindergarten primarily as an adult-oriented service creates the risk that should the policy be revisited for better targeting, “need” would be defined mostly at the (working) parent level, leaving out the most marginalized. Again, the history of fee removal in Bulgaria points to relevant examples (Vladimirov, 2018).

Improving quality to defend access

TSA's larger policy goal was to improve school readiness⁴ nationally by increasing the participation in kindergarten by minority children from disadvantaged communities. The SSR impact evaluations register unsatisfactory advancement of Roma children in financial treatment groups after 9 months of attendance and negative spillover effects on less disadvantaged Roma children after 3 years of attendance, caused when kindergarten groups swell with many new highly disadvantaged children. Ethnic Bulgarian and Turkish children are not affected. These results speak to challenges with the universal quality of kindergarten and point to a need to improve service quality and its measurement, findings echoed by others (Open Society Institute–Sofia Foundation, 2020; World Bank Group, 2022). Providing free access is a critical step toward improving participation in kindergarten. For students from low socioeconomic status and those who do not speak Bulgarian at home, it takes a full 3 years of kindergarten attendance to see significant improvements in later academic outcomes (Gortazar et al., 2014; Mavrodiya, 2019). Greater efforts are needed to raise the quality of learning for each and every child. Further improving child outcomes – and their measurement – could in turn be used as an argument to defend the fee removal policy.

Encouraging the demand for high quality kindergarten services

At the same time, parents appear to lack a critical understanding of what a high-quality kindergarten service is – what they and their

² The Preschool and School Education Act (2015), The Local Taxes and Fees Act (1998), The Corporate Income Tax Act (2007) were amended.

³ Author calculations based on National Statistical Institute data. [Online] 2022. Accessed July 13, 2022 from www.nsi.bg.

⁴ TSA applies a holistic understanding of the term “school readiness” to include not just pre-academic skills but also and mostly life skills such as ability to socialize, self-regulation, curiosity, problem solving, approaches to learning.

children should expect to experience, see, hear, and feel when at the kindergarten. [Yosifov et al. \(2018\)](#) find that over half of parents of children in kindergarten rate the quality as “very good” or “excellent,” while at the same time only a third assess discrete components of quality – such as the individualization of activities – as high. A discrepancy between reported satisfaction levels and true satisfaction as reflected in actual behavior of Roma parents has also been reported ([World Bank, 2012](#)). Parents appeared to misinterpret the quality of kindergarten services before the adoption of the kindergarten fee removal policy. In this new era of expanded access, will parents even have the motivation to expect higher quality from their local center and government? Research suggests that wealthy parents could exercise their extended options to exit the state system, and this would demotivate them from advocating for the improvement of educational quality, whereas those left behind would care more about the cost and supply shortages than the quality of the service ([DiJohn, 2007](#); [King, 2014](#)). Supporting such an assertion is the 2021/2022 uptick in what was already an impressive growth rate in the number of private kindergartens, possibly owing to the new voucher scheme ([National Statistical Institute, 2022](#)).

A wider effort is needed to increase the public’s recognition of the importance of early education and the importance of quality in early education. Such a strategy would not aim to replace direct approaches toward teachers and policymakers at various levels, but rather complement, enhance, and buttress current efforts by laying a broad foundation of public support for national reforms in early education.

Key strategic initiatives in early education remain on hold, such as the National Strategy for Early Childhood Development ([Open Society Institute–Sofia Foundation, 2020](#)) or the introduction of a performance measurement system. Early education is a declared national priority area and yet reforms have focused mostly on access, and even there, challenges persist ([World Bank Group, 2022](#)). Investing in the quality of public early education might be easier when an informed body of users demands this type of investment, in addition to accessibility and availability. Nudging demand for quality in early education could spur changes to its supply, given that supply-side policies have not prioritized quality ([World Bank Group, 2022](#)). It is hoped that this can be achieved in the context of inelastic demand for kindergarten services, as discussed below.

Reframe the role of early education

Stepping on scientific advances in the understanding of how human preferences form ([Tversky and Kahneman, 1981](#)), issue framing has been elevated over time as a critically important strategy for policy advocates wishing to gain the public’s support ([Dorfman et al., 2007](#)). Using this approach, civil society could reframe the public’s perception of early education as first and foremost a child service and a societal service in addition to an individual (adult) service. Shifting public attention from individual to public responsibility has proven an effective approach for several policy change initiatives, such as with tobacco ([Dorfman et al., 2007](#)) or climate change ([Bolsen and Shapiro, 2017](#)). From the results of the nationally representative survey commissioned by TSA we can infer that adults in Bulgaria have a weak belief that it is the kindergarten’s responsibility to prepare children for transition to school, or at minimum that kindergartens are actually fulfilling this objective. Then logically they must believe that this is the parents’ obligation, or that it falls to the parent, fitting well with a worldview of individual

responsibility ([Dorfman et al., 2007](#)). This cultural ideal is also reflected in the fragmentation of early childhood development services in Bulgaria ([World Bank Group, 2022](#)) and in how professionals view parents as the natural coordinators of care for young children ([Yosifov et al., 2018](#)).

Early education should be projected as an integral part of the lifelong learning process as this is not guaranteed to happen automatically. The very understanding of early education needs to be challenged to include the acquisition of socio-emotional competences, executive functioning, and approaches to learning. These competences are now codified in a national strategy for lifelong learning, except no effort has been made yet to “translate” them into practical teacher-level instruments ([World Bank Group, 2022](#)), let alone into concepts that parents can understand.

To successfully reframe the issue for the public, policy advocates should actively pursue the private sector, which can help shift the perception of early education from holding “value to the employer and the worker” to holding “value to the society, the employer, and the worker.” The private sector has shown a fledgling interest in improving the quality of early education ([Business Foundation for Education, 2020](#)). Together, businesses and civil society can reimage the value of quality in early education, for example through initiatives such as media campaigns, product campaigns, and corporate environmental, social, and governance initiatives. To influence perceptions of early education, policy activists and researchers can arm the media with locally generated evidence about the impacts of high-quality early education and showcase real-life examples. Partnerships with businesses could also provide an appreciated combination of expertise to the state toward formulation of policies on taxation, investments, and education funding, as was the case in Romania ([Ready Nation International, 2017](#)).

Policy advocates should also try to reframe the public’s visual associations relating to the quality of early education. Civil society organizations focusing on implementation of activities to support the improvement of quality in early education could have a significant role to play by promoting and replicating success stories and images that closer match actual service quality (creative cozy atmosphere versus clean and tidy spaces).

Strengthen “voice”

Hirschman’s seminal 1970 book on how individuals respond to organizational decline posits that when dissatisfied with the public education service, individuals will either “exit” (through change of school or dropping out altogether), or “voice” their frustrations hoping to improve the situation ([Hirschman, 1970](#)). Hirschman identified extreme inelasticity of demand, as when services for young children are geographically dispersed or when there are too many children competing for each open place, as a strongly influential factor for “voice.” He contended that the ultimate outcome would depend on the responsiveness of the system to either “voice” or “exit,” at least in situations where quality is a multidimensional concept, that is, parents have heterogeneous understandings of what quality means. Supporting the assumption that Bulgaria’s parents hold quality in education to be a multi-dimensional concept is the fact that the lack of Roma teaching staff is cited as a key reason for non-enrollment by Roma parents ([World Bank, 2012](#)) whereas almost three quarters of ethnic Bulgarians are estimated to not be comfortable with their child’s teacher being of Roma origin ([Simeonova et al., 2005](#)). Systems with state-subsidized private

service provision where funding follows the child or student, such as Bulgaria's, would be viewed as incentivized to respond to "exit" behavior. Despite additional subsidies to kindergartens working with disadvantaged communities and a range of initiatives to promote parental engagement and inclusive education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022; World Bank Group, 2022), secondary segregation persists in both schools (European Commission, 2018) and kindergartens (World Bank Group, 2022), and attendance is historically low in both the capital city (Data for Good, 2022) and among Roma communities (Trust for Social Achievement, 2022).

Parents of children aged 2 to 7 (the possible range for kindergarten) are therefore already facing headwinds when trying to "voice" their dissatisfaction with the quality of early education. Continued migration to better quality life and educational opportunities has left many rural areas with a high percentage of socially and economically marginalized populations, mostly Roma, whose "voice" is frequently altogether missing. Within large cities, private enrollment is expanding (National Statistical Institute, 2022) with the help of the state (Municipality of Sofia city, 2021) and drawing away from the public system the most vocal advocates for quality. Those "squeezed" in the middle have little alternative to their nearest free of charge kindergarten, securing a place in which has in some locations been likened to playing the lottery.

Efforts to strengthen the capacity and expand opportunities to "voice" for parents of both middle-income and low-income backgrounds could include initiatives to inform, such as voter education activities or informing parents of specific elements of quality they could demand from their local provider (such as regularly reviewing and discussing the child's portfolio); or initiatives to engage, such as involving parents in the life and governance of the kindergarten or training community advocates. Expanding "exit" options – such as through the establishment of early education service in villages with even just a handful of children or by using available state funding for private kindergartens to alleviate the shortage of places in large urban ghettos – could also lead to a shift of parental priorities away from "access" and closer to "quality," further bolstering "voice." Admittedly, it is a difficult undertaking to focus the public's attention on quality when access is hampered by a shortage of places in large cities and increasing distances to the nearest kindergarten in rural areas (Junction Bulgaria, 2021), thereby greatly limiting parents' choices.

Nurture the early education system's capacity to respond to "voice"

Within the context of multi-dimensional quality, the way in which quality in education is measured, managed, and communicated to the public has been claimed to affect the incentives for the public education system to respond primarily to one or the other, "voice" or "exit" (Wilson, 2008). In Bulgaria, results from early education are measured mostly via input measures such as enrollment rates, number and qualifications of teachers, and staff to child ratios (World Bank Group, 2022). An attempt to introduce outcome measures – a standardized school readiness test – remains on hold to this day (World Bank Group, 2022). The concept of process quality, which unlike outcomes is free of input selection bias, has only just been introduced *via* the piloting of a national quality framework for early education and care (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2022). Going a step further, process standards at the individual teacher level would describe the behaviors that best lead to, for

example, the individualization of learning approaches for each child (including use of teaching methods for second language learners), the maintenance of inviting rather than clean spaces, or the use of child-directed learning (Tankersley et al., 2010).

Measuring and rewarding process quality could allow the early education system to respond to the "voice" of all children and parents more effectively. Communicating measures of process quality to the public could raise the profile of the kindergarten teacher and thus bolster support for continued investment in the sector. Civil society can play an important role in sustaining such efforts, for example by piloting instruments for the measurement of process quality, training teachers in the use of process quality principles, promoting a diverse workforce, facilitating the transformation of kindergartens into self-improving organisms, and educating the public about the concept of process quality. Moreover, civil society can share its valuable advocacy skills with kindergarten principals and other early education government officials to increase the effectiveness of their own "voice" for reform from within the system. Research efforts can be directed to support the selection and evaluation of process quality indicators.

Conclusion

Recent policy advances in Bulgaria raise hopes of expanding access to early education to the most marginalized communities. Civil society can affect the long-term sustainability of access policies, as well as the supply of high quality public early education, by securing a broad foundation of public support for the importance of early education and the importance of quality in early education. This could be achieved by highlighting the value of early education to the child and to society, strengthening the capacity and motivation of parents to voice their priorities, and supporting the introduction and communication to the public of standards to measure process quality.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

EV was responsible for the SSR project implementation and advocacy efforts to remove kindergarten fees, and currently leads a variety of initiatives to improve the quality of kindergarten services at both the teacher and the system level.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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