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Childcare accessibility for children under 5 years of age across the urban and rural areas. Lessons from Wałbrzych district

Abstract

The question about the potential differences between the town/city and the countryside becomes important in relation to such a specific type of social service as childcare. These are the services whose accessibility can play the role of a factor in local development. Therefore, the paper aims to illustrate the state of accessibility to childcare for children up to 5 years of age in a comparative approach covering urban and rural areas. To achieve this aim, a set of research methods and techniques is used (elements of comparative analysis and document analysis supported by statistical data). The study on the accessibility of nurseries, children's clubs, and kindergartens covering the district under the discussion leads to the conclusion that the level of this accessibility, regardless of whether we are talking about the physical dimension (A1),

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qualitative dimension (A2), or economic dimension (A3), shows differentiation in the division into urban and rural municipalities. Due to the lack of detailed, specialist documents adopted at the strategic level, this statement refers to the operational level, which consists of the activities of entities providing care, i.e., nurseries, children's clubs and kindergartens operating in the eight municipalities in question.

Keywords: urban area, accessibility, rural area, childcare, Wałbrzych

Introduction

Accessibility is one of the most important dimensions of contemporary social policy, regardless of its sectoral area or level (local, regional, national) in question. The belief in the importance of accessibility for meeting collective social needs is reflected in the practice of functioning of many institutions, also in Poland. One should agree with Agnieszka Kanior and colleagues, who, placing the problem of accessibility in the context of the functioning of public cultural institutions, state: "In Poland, over the past few years, authorities introduced legal, organisational, and financial changes to support the implementation of accessibility. These changes have affected the functioning of many public entities, including state, and local government (...) institutions" (Kanior et al., 2024, p. 2). Raising the level of accessibility to social services is taking on a paradigmatic character, implementing the postulate of purposeful and coordinated action by public policy actors (see: Sroka, 2009; Zybala, 2012; 2013). In other words, the implementation of standards defined at the level of legislation not only national but also EU (Act, 2019; European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2025) allows us to assume that citizens are becoming beneficiaries of the growing level of accessibility of social services of diversified sectoral provenance. The accessibility of social services divided into cities and countrysides is a problem that can be observed at the local level and is of interest not only to researchers but also to practitioners².

The question about the potential differences between the city and the countryside becomes important in relation to such a specific type of social services as childcare (see: Tietze & Cryer, 1999). These are the services whose accessibility can play the role of a factor in local development. This is determined by the impact of this accessibility on the professional activity of parents and guardians of children and, consequently, on the development opportunities of local self-government units in which these parents and guardians live and/or work. As it results from the reports of the Committee for Economic Development (CED), the relationship between the accessibility of childcare and the level of local development is strong (CED, 2019).

Referring to official data, it can be stated that the issue of differences between urban and rural areas is current and significant. The scale of the disproportion is revealed by studies on the accessibility of childcare not only in Poland, but also in the European Union (Eurodice, 2025) and the USA (Malik et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2019).

² It is assumed that the terms city/town and countryside and urban areas and rural areas are synonymous.

Taking the above into account, it can be stated that the issue is current and requires analysis on a micro scale as Wałbrzych district in question.

The aim of the paper is to illustrate the state of accessibility to childcare for children up to 5 years of age in a comparative approach covering urban and rural areas. Taking into account not only the current research on this issue but also, and perhaps above all, extensive and complex empirical material relating to the functioning of entities providing childcare services in Poland, it was decided to focus on the accessibility of nurseries, children's clubs, and kindergartens in one district – Wałbrzych district. This is a district that, due to its wealth (relatively low level of income per capita) and structure (presence of both urban and rural municipalities), creates an interesting area of research in terms of explanation. The reflection on the accessibility of nurseries, children's club and kindergartens in the Wałbrzych district, which is a kind of laboratory of socio-economic challenges during the systemic transformation period (see: Przybyła, 2015; Glinka, 2014) as well as crisis period (see: Glinka et al., 2025), allows us to answer the question raised above about the potential differences between the city and the countryside.

Public policy, and in the analysed case – local social and (to a limited extent) educational policy is a theoretical perspective of the paper (cf. Daly, 2003). The local self-government administration is a main actor of this policy. Adopting the rational choice paradigm, the authors of the paper analyse the activities of the local self-government administration of the municipalities of the Wałbrzych district, the aim of which is to meet the collective needs and expectations of citizens in terms of the accessibility of childcare (see: Hausner, 2001; 2008; Sroka, 2009; Zybala, 2012; 2013; Mazur, 2014; Szarfenberg, 2016; cf. Moran et al., 2006; Sabatier, 2007; Howlett, 2011; Weimer & Vining, 2011; Dye, 2014). The authors' attention is focused on both the strategic and operational level of these activities. It should be emphasised that there is a perspective of the local self-government administration as an organiser of childcare (cf. Glinka, 2021; 2023), and not of parents and guardians of children or other actors (e.g., non-governmental organisations involved in childcare in question).

Literature review.

Childcare accessibility in the perspective of sector-oriented public policy

Access to social services is an important component of the quality of life, a determinant of the daily functioning of individuals in both formal (workplace) and non-formal (leisure, recreation) settings. In accordance with the sectoral approach developed in the Anglo-Saxon trend, appropriate to public policy, it reflects the level of satisfaction of the diverse and changing over time needs of citizens and is a kind of the guarantor of a decent prosperous life. In Poland, in accordance with the provisions of the Act of 19 July 2019 on the implementation of social services by social service centres, the catalogue of social services includes activities in the field of, among others: pro-family policy, family support, foster care system, social assistance, promotion and health protection, support for people with disabilities, public education, culture, physical culture and tourism, stimulating civic activity, or counteracting unemployment

and professional and social reintegration (Act, 2019, art. 2). The accessibility of childcare, which is the subject of the analysis, is an issue that should obviously be linked to the social services indicated by the legislator.

The reflection devoted to the critical view of the accessibility of a specific social service, and in the analysed case – accessibility to childcare – requires not only defining the concept of access, but also indicating the most objective criteria for its measurement. Penchansky and Thomas treat access as: “a concept representing the degree of ‘fit’ between the clients and the system” (1981, p. 129), at the same time distinguishing its five basic dimensions: availability, accessibility, accommodation, affordability, and acceptability. As Penchansky and Thomas argue, availability refers to the relationship between the scope and type of available services and the scope and type of clients’ needs. Accessibility is the relationship between the location of service provision and the place of residence/stay of clients (including the need to take into account the transport possibilities that clients have). The third dimension – accommodation – concerns the relationship between the system of organising the service (including working hours, methods of making appointments) and the ability of clients to adapt to the established rules. Affordability, in turn, is the affordability of the price and the relation of the price to the quality of the service provided. The last of the distinguished dimensions, namely, acceptability, includes the relations between the characteristics of service providers and the attitudes of customers (Penchasky & Thomas, 1981). Taking on the difficult task of expanding and updating the researchers’ approach, Emily Saurman (2015) supplements the catalogue defined by them with a sixth dimension. It is awareness, meaning the channels of communication (transferring data, information and opinions) of customers about the services used.

Taking the above into account, it can be assumed that while access is the possibility of using something (e.g., childcare as a social service), availability means the state in which this something (the aforementioned childcare) is available. Moseley (1979) defines accessibility: “as the degree to which someone or something is ‘get-at-able’”. John Farrington and Conor Farrington (2005) emphasise that accessibility refers to the level of life opportunities and is a necessary condition (although not the only one) for effectively “fighting” the phenomenon of social exclusion, which takes both institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms. Zbigniew Taylor emphasises the importance of the geographical dimension of accessibility, at the same time pointing out the fact that it refers to “(...) proximity, ease of spatial integration or potential contacts with functions” (1999, p. 12). Monika Stanny, Andrzej Rosner and Łukasz Komorowski (2023, p. 35) draw attention to the role of space (i.e. distance) and travel time in this context. Mikko Tervo and his team (2013) focus on the impact of the development of a given space on the ability of individuals to reach entities that provide social services. A similar position is presented by Karst Geurs and Jan Ritsema van Eck (2001, p. 200). According to the researchers, accessibility is “the amount of effort for a person to reach a destination”.

The accessibility of childcare for children up to the age of 5 is a subject of interest for researchers representing various scientific disciplines, which is reflected in the diversity of approaches and concepts presented in the literature. In addition to research conducted by lawyers and administrative specialists, it is worth emphasising

the achievements of economists, sociologists and political scientists who study the barriers to childcare (see: Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015; Lee & Ha, 2022), the forms of this care (see: Anderson & Mikesell, 2017), or the effectiveness of programmes and social initiatives focused on this care (see: Farfan-Portet et al., 2011; Alexiadou & Stadler Altmann, 2020; Subocz, 2019). The accessibility of childcare is also part of the practice of international organisations (e.g., European Union, Council of Europe, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), which publish reports and expert studies (European Commission, 2025b; Council of Europe, 2025; OECD, 2025).

It should be emphasised that the European Union treats access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a right belonging to EU citizens. Highlighting its importance, Akvile Motiejunaite (2021) advocates the introduction of an ECEC condition indicator which consists of: integrated management, guaranteed places in the facility, the level of education of staff and the development of a guide to the educational process based on European and international guidelines. Irina Abankina and Liudmila Filatova (2018) believe that the accessibility of childcare is determined primarily by the number of places in facilities and the financial possibilities of parents. At the same time, they draw attention to the importance of the perception of facilities by parents and all those involved in the care process, their motivation, assessments of physical and mental barriers. Equally valuable conclusions can be drawn from analyses, the authors of which examine accessibility by comparing the number of available places in facilities with the number of children per parent and/or guardian (Bassok et al., 2011). Research on accessibility provides interesting insights into which actors take into account the distance that must be travelled in order to access care from the nearest facility providing appropriate services (Davis et al., 2019).

An increasingly important trend in research on the accessibility of childcare includes analyses focused on its spatial (locational) conditions. These are studies that examine accessibility either in urban areas (see: McLean et al., 2017; Moussié, 2021; Alm & Forsberg, 2023; Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023; Pennerstorfer, et al., 2024; Kang & Hwang, 2024), or in rural areas (see: Atkinson, 1996; Davis & Weber, 2001; Halliday & Little, 2001; Morrissey et al., 2022), or comparative studies that consider similarities and differences in institutionalised childcare in urban and rural areas (see: Atkinson, 1994; Miller & Vortuba-Drzal, 2013; Gordon & Chase-Lansdale, 2001; Maher et al., 2008; Bucaite-Vilke, 2021; Agyekum et al., 2023; Crouch et al., 2024). As Astrid Pennerstorfer and her colleagues argue, the accessibility of this type of care in cities is a function of the activity of public administration, including local self-government, which implements specific programmes and initiatives (2024). As Vivianna Cordero-Vinueza and her team claim, accessibility is such a complex category that it should be placed in a significantly broader context of creating appropriate conditions for childcare, a certain positive climate related to this care, which translates into legal, financial, and logistical solutions implemented in the city (2023). It is hard to disagree with the results of Taryn's research who, together with his colleagues, proves that the accessibility of childcare in rural areas is correlated with the financial support that entities providing such services receive from the central budget, regardless of whether

they are run by local self-government administration or private or social entities, e.g., non-governmental organisations (Taryn, 2022).

The search for differences and similarities between urban and rural municipalities of the Wałbrzych district means that this paper certainly fits into the trend of research on the accessibility of childcare that takes into account its spatial (locational) conditions. This issue is important because, as Katie Beck and Marie Kaune note, the accessibility and standard of childcare in rural areas are usually worse than in urban areas, although not always, as evidenced by the research on the accessibility of this type of social services in densely populated metropolitan areas (2025). In Polish reality, the local self-government administration is an actor responsible for providing childcare, regardless of whether we are talking about urban or rural areas (see: Kurowska & Szczupak, 2016; Stolińska-Poborska, 2012). It is this administration, guided by economic calculation and the need to meet the collective needs of citizens, which takes actions to ensure its accessibility.

Research design

Taking into account the legal and organisational conditions of care for children up to 5 years of age in Poland, the study covered such forms of care as indicated in the Act of 4 February 2011 on the care of children up to 3 years of age and the Act of 14 December 2016 – Education Law. These are (1) nurseries, (2) children's clubs, and (3) kindergartens.

As mentioned, the concentration on the Wałbrzych district has a twofold justification. It is not only the level of its wealth resulting from the systemic transformation process (manifested by the closure of mines and heavy industry plants and the liquidation of state-owned farms), but also its spatial and administrative diversity.

Firstly, it should be emphasised that the Wałbrzych district is a particularly interesting example of the functioning of a local self-government unit, which, as a result of the collapse of the bipolar division of the world after 1989, is facing numerous economic and social problems. Therefore, it could serve as a laboratory for changes and challenges in the field of social policy, including childcare for children under 5 years of age. The Wałbrzych district is, alongside the Śrem and Wrocław districts, by far the poorest rural district in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship. In the ranking of the wealth of voivodeships in Poland, it ranks relatively far away, 241st in Poland (out of 314 positions) with income per capita at the level of PLN 968.57. The scale of the disproportion between the Wałbrzych district and the richest districts is reflected in the fact that in the case of the latter, the level of this wealth is at least twice as high³. The low level of income makes the issue of providing childcare particularly important. As a result, it seems to be a factor that does not facilitate the childcare accessibility for children under 5 years of age.

³ The highest in the ranking for 2023 were: Człuchów district (PLN 2,154.20), Przysucha district (PLN 2,043.64) and Opatów district (PLN 1,971.00) (Wspólnota, 2023).

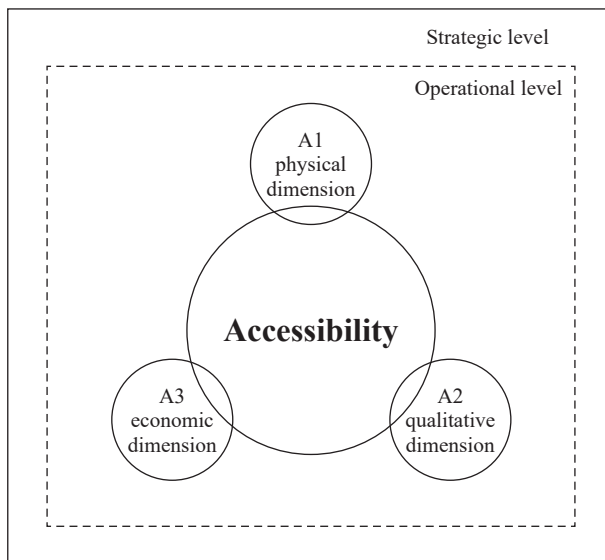
Secondly, within the administrative boundaries of Wałbrzych district, there are both urban municipalities (Boguszów-Gorce, Jedlina Zdrój, and Szczawno-Zdrój) and rural municipalities (Czarny Bór, Stare Bogaczowice, and Walim). Urban-rural municipalities (Głuszyca and Mieroszów), which are an intermediate variant between urban and rural areas, were also included in the study. In total, these are eight municipalities which create an area diversified in terms of the location of entities providing social services related to childcare.

Placing the paper in the stream of research whose authors emphasise the importance of territorial differentiation of public services (urban areas *versus* rural areas), a hypothesis was formulated according to which the level of accessibility of childcare in nurseries, children's clubs, and kindergartens in urban municipalities is higher than the level of this accessibility in rural municipalities. Writing about accessibility, the authors take into account its three dimensions (see: Graph 1):

1. Physical accessibility (A1) understood through the prism of the very fact of functioning of entities providing childcare in nurseries, children's clubs, and kindergartens and the number of children who potentially require such care;
2. Qualitative accessibility (A2), which includes the hours of operation of entities providing childcare in nurseries, children's clubs, and kindergartens and the provision of care for children with disabilities;
3. Economic accessibility (A3) defined through the prism of fees for childcare in nurseries, children's clubs, and kindergartens.

The hypothesis is accompanied by the following research questions: (1) Do all dimensions of childcare accessibility differentiate urban and rural municipalities to the same extent? (2) If the extent of this differentiation is varied, which dimension or dimensions of accessibility play a key role in this respect?

Figure 1. Dimensions of accessibility of childcare for children up to 5 years of age



Each of the three dimensions is the subject of analysis conducted on two levels. The first (strategic) includes documents (strategies, plans, programmes, etc.) devoted to childcare which are prepared by the local self-government administration of the municipalities studied. The second (operational) level consists of specific activities carried out by the entities subordinate to these administrations – nurseries, children’s clubs, and kindergartens. The combination of the two levels provides a possible full picture of the socially-oriented local policy.

According to the adopted approach, accessibility has a broad meaning and is not limited to its understanding that focuses on minimising or eliminating barriers for people with disabilities or other deficits, e.g., cognitive ones (see: Goering, 2015). The hypothesis can be said to be positively verified when the “advantage” of urban municipalities over rural municipalities includes most of the accessibility variants: A1, A2, and A3. The hypothesis was verified using several research methods and techniques, primarily elements of comparative analysis and document analysis (Della Porta, 2008) and a diverse set of source materials which are: strategic documents, official websites of municipalities, official websites of nurseries, children’s clubs, and kindergartens and primary schools, accessibility declarations and the data provided by the Central Statistical Office. The authors analysed the indicated sources in terms of the availability of data that they used in the comparative analysis. The data was obtained from three types of documents that municipalities are obliged to make publicly available (see: Table 1). The analysis was focused on, firstly, the very fact of developing (or not) the document, and secondly, their main assumptions relating to forms of care for children up to 5 years of age. Accessibility declarations (all public institution have to publish on their websites information regarding the current accessibility of their buildings and services for people with special needs, however, not all institutions have such declarations) were additionally taken into the account.

The way of defining the accessibility of childcare adopted for the purposes of the paper, due to its multidimensionality, allows for the most comprehensive illustration of the differences and similarities that can be observed between urban and rural municipalities. It fills (partially) the gap in research on local public policy focused on childcare, providing evidence of the existence of disproportions in the accessibility of this care in the district which, as a result of systemic transformation, is facing the problem of social exclusion (Zakrzewska-Półtorak, 2010).

Analysis. In search of differences in the Wałbrzych district

Strategic level

As mentioned, the first level of analysis includes currently in force (in 2025) official regulations (strategies, programmes, plans, etc.) that define the goals, directions, and forms of local social and (partly) educational policy. As it results from the analysis of the data presented in Table 1, strategic management concerns all municipalities, both urban and rural ones.

Each municipality has a strategy for solving social problems, which results from the obligations imposed on local self-government administrations by the Act of 12 March 2004 on social assistance (Ustawa, 2004). These strategies do indeed address the issue of childcare for children up to 5 years of age, but only in a general, limited way. A few municipalities (Jedlina Zdrój and Szczawno-Zdrój) have made an effort to prepare other documents devoted to family support and/or the provision of social services (in Jedlina Zdrój these are two documents, in Szczawno-Zdrój – one). However, the issue of access to childcare for children up to 5 years of age is only presented in them fragmentarily. It is, therefore, difficult to treat these documents as separate specialist documents devoted to this accessibility. Even though development strategies include threads devoted to childcare it is also difficult to treat them, generally, as separate, specialised strategic documents (see Table 1)⁴.

Table 1. Childcare for children up to 5 years of age in the municipalities of the Wałbrzych district – strategic documents

Municipality	Strategic document (specialised strategy)	Strategic document (development strategy of local government unit)
Boguszów-Gorce*	Yes	Yes
Jedlina Zdrój*	Yes * 3	Yes
Szczawno-Zdrój*	Yes * 2	Yes
Głuszyca**	Yes	Yes
Mieroszów**	Yes	Yes
Czarny Bór	Yes	Yes
Stare Bogaczowice	Yes	Yes
Walim	Yes	Yes

Source: Own study based on the data provided by the offices of the surveyed municipalities: Boguszów-Gorce (2025), Jedlina Zdrój (2025), Szczawno-Zdrój (2025), Głuszyca (2025), Mieroszów (2025), Czarny Bór (2025), Stare Bogaczowice (2025), Walim (2025). An asterisk (*) indicates urban municipalities, two asterisks (**) – urban-rural municipalities. No marking indicates a rural municipality.

While attempting to explain the causes of deficits, it should be noted that all municipalities are relatively small local self-government units that do not have extensive organisational and personnel resources, and such resources are usually responsible for developing strategic documents. One can also risk a statement that the problem of childcare for children up to 5 years of age is not treated as an issue that requires the development of a separate document. For this reason, the accessibility of childcare, regardless of the analysed dimension (A1, A2, A3), does not really fit into the framework of properly understood strategic management.

⁴ To sum up, the analysis covered strategies for solving social problems, other documents devoted to family support and/or the provision of social services as well as development strategies of local government units in question. In total, 19 documents were examined.

Operational level

In order to achieve the main objective of the paper and to verify the research hypothesis, the authors verified first the physical dimension of the accessibility of nurseries, children’s clubs, and kindergartens providing care services within the administrative boundaries of the eight studied municipalities (A1). As indicated, this dimension consists of entities providing these services in relation to the number of children living in the studied municipalities (see: Table 2).

Table 2. Children aged 0–6 years in the municipalities of the Wałbrzych district divided into urban municipalities and rural municipalities

		Urban municipalities			Rural municipalities			Total	Total	Total
Municipality	Age	0–3	3–5	6	0–3	3–5	6	0–3	3–5	6
Boguszów-Gorce		256	332	108	–	–	–	256	332	108
Jedlina Zdrój		58	99	35	–	–	–	58	99	35
Szczawno-Zdrój		75	107	44	–	–	–	75	107	44
Głuszyca		86	119	43	20	51	23	106	170	66
Mieroszów		59	71	30	39	34	24	98	115	54
Czarny Bór		–	–	–	94	146	53	94	146	53
Stare Bogaczowice		–	–	–	69	113	38	69	113	38
Walim		–	–	–	93	117	48	93	117	48

Source: GUS 2024.

It is worth mentioning that nursery care (clubs, daycare providers, nannies, and financially supported care provided by grandparents) and preschool care are actually separate forms of childcare, which, of course, do not change the fact that they can be analysed together. However, the authors of the paper are aware of these obvious and well-recognised differences. It should be emphasised that, for example, the development dynamics of both of them can vary, which could related to the fact that, in the case of the youngest children, parents are able to take paid leave, and nursery care often only be applicable and used when the child turns one.

As it results from the analysis of the data presented in Table 3, there are 5 nurseries and children’s clubs in the Wałbrzych district. These two are in urban municipalities (Boguszów-Gorce, Jedlnia Zdrój), other two in rural-urban municipalities (Głuszyca, Mieroszów – importantly, they are located in towns), and one in a rural municipality (Stare Bogaczowice). The disproportion between the urban areas and rural areas is clear in this case. It is noteworthy that in two rural municipalities (Czarny Bór and Walim) there is no entity providing care services for children up to 3 years of age. It is also worth emphasising that a private nursery, i.e., one that is not run by local self-government administration is the only nursery operating in a rural municipality. The analysis of the total number of children up to 3 years of age allows for similar conclusions. Taking into account the data from 2024, it should be noted that it is 315 in rural municipalities and 537 in urban municipalities. Comparing these numbers with

the number of places offered proves that in urban areas the level of “saturation” of care in nurseries and children’s clubs is much higher than in rural areas.

Table 3. Accessibility of nurseries and children’s clubs in the municipalities of the Wałbrzych district – physical dimension (A1)

Municipality	Number of public nurseries/ children’s clubs	Number of private nurseries/ children’s clubs	Number of places taken/number of places available
Boguszów-Gorce*	1	0	58/72
Jedlina Zdrój*	1	0	22/34
Szczawno-Zdrój*	0	0	0
Głuszyca municipality**	1	0	35/45
Głuszyca (town)	1	0	35/45
Mieroszów municipality**	1	0	24/30
Mieroszów (town)	1	0	24/30
Czarny Bór municipality	0	0	0
Stare Bogaczowice municipality	0	1	16/25
Struga	0	1	16/25
Walim municipality	0	0	0

Source: Own study based on data from websites of entities, reports on the condition of municipalities, accessibility declarations. An asterisk (*) indicates urban municipalities, two asterisks (**) – urban-rural municipalities. No marking indicates a rural municipality. Gray refers to the eight municipalities studied.

Disproportions are also revealed by the analysis of the data included in Table 4. There are 17 kindergartens in the Wałbrzych district: 9 in urban municipalities, three in urban-rural municipalities (mainly in towns, with the exception of Sokołowsko) and five in rural municipalities. The vast majority of kindergartens are public kindergartens, i.e., those supervised and run by local self-government administration. The total number of kindergarten places in urban municipalities is 702, while the number of children entitled to use this form of care is 725 (in 2024). This means that almost every child living in urban municipalities is provided with kindergarten care. The situation is clearly different in urban-rural and rural municipalities. It turns out that only 604 children were provided with places in kindergartens (compared to 920 children who lived in the surveyed rural municipalities in 2024).

Table 4. Accessibility of kindergartens in the municipalities of the Wałbrzych district – physical dimension (A1)

Municipality	Number of public kindergartens	Number of private kindergartens	Number of places available
Boguszów-Gorce*	3	1	372
Jedlina Zdrój*	1	1	138
Szczawno-Zdrój*	1	2	192
Głuszyca municipality**	1	0	130
Głuszyca (town)	1	0	–
Mieroszów municipality**	2	0	168
Mieroszów (town)	1	0	–
Sokołowsko	1	0	–
Czarny Bór municipality	1	0	100
Czarny Bór	1	0	–
Stare Bogaczowice municipality	0	2	83
Stare Bogaczowice	0	1	–
Struga	0	1	–
Walim municipality	2	0	123
Dzieńmierowice	1	0	–
Walim	1	0	–

Source: Own study based on official websites of kindergartens, reports on the condition of municipalities and declarations of accessibility. An asterisk (*) indicates urban municipalities, two asterisks (**) – urban-rural municipalities. No marking indicates a rural municipality. Gray refers to the eight municipalities studied.

The assessment of the second dimension of accessibility, the qualitative dimension (A2), concerns the duration of care services and the adaptation of entities providing these services to the needs of people with disabilities.

Considering the service provision time, it should be emphasised that no significant differences were identified between urban and rural municipalities. Entities, both nurseries and children's clubs, and kindergartens, are open on average between 6:00 and 17:00, from Monday to Friday (see: Table 5, Table 6). Therefore, the implementation of the care standard is characteristic of this type of entities, not only in the Wałbrzych district in question, but also in many other local self-government units in Poland. However, it should be remembered that residents of rural municipalities usually commute to work in the town/city, which means that they need more time to return to the municipality and pick up their child from the facility. For that reason, it can be assumed that in many cases the actual time of childcare is shorter due to the commuting time to and from the nursery or kindergarten which must be taken into account.

Nurseries and children's clubs operating in urban municipalities are much more often adapted to the needs of children with disabilities. These are 3 out of 4 entities. A similar disproportion concerns kindergartens and kindergarten departments at primary schools. Those located in urban municipalities are often more adapted to the

needs of people with disabilities than those operating within the boundaries of rural municipalities (see: Table 5, Table 6). Not in every instance the provision of adaptations is full, in many cases entities providing care services are only partially adapted to the needs of people with disabilities. Nevertheless, even after taking this fact into account, the advantage of kindergartens operating in urban municipalities over kindergartens operating in rural municipalities, is noticeable.

According to the adopted assumption, the essence of the third dimension of accessibility, namely, economic accessibility (A3), is determined by the amount of fees paid for the care and educational services provided. The data presented in Table 5 prove that all nurseries and children's clubs in the Wałbrzych district charge fees for care services. Significantly, these fees are higher on average in nurseries and children's clubs located within the administrative boundaries of rural municipalities than in the case of those operating in urban municipalities.

Table 5. Accessibility of nurseries and children's clubs in the municipalities of the Wałbrzych district: economic (A2) and qualitative (A3) dimensions

Municipality	Number of entities (total)	Opening hours	Adaptation to the needs of children with disabilities (Yes/No)	Amount of fee (in PLN)
Boguszów-Gorce*	1	6.30–16.30	Yes	1800,00
Jedlina Zdrój*	1	6.00–16.00	Yes	1300,00
Szczawno-Zdrój*	0	–	–	–
Głuszyca municipality**	1	–	–	–
Głuszyca (town)	1	6.00–16.00	No	2850,00
Mieroszów municipality**	1	–	–	–
Mieroszów (town)	1	6.00–16.00	Yes	1850,00
Czarny Bór municipality	0	–	–	–
Stare Bogaczowice municipality	1	–	–	–
Struga	1	6.00–17.00	No	1600,00
Walim municipality	0	–	–	–

Source: Own study based on official websites of nurseries and children's clubs, reports on the condition of municipalities and declarations of accessibility. An asterisk (*) indicates urban municipalities, two asterisks (**) – urban-rural municipalities. No marking indicates a rural municipality. Grey refers to the eight municipalities studied.

Considering the care provided by kindergartens, it should be noted that in public kindergartens it is free for five hours a day (Table 6). For each additional hour of care, as well as for meals used by children, a fee is charged. It is worth noting that the amount of these fees is similar in both urban and rural municipalities⁵.

⁵ It should be noted that there are objective problems in obtaining data on the costs of childcare in kindergartens, exceeding the 5 hours required by law. For this reason, this data is not included in Table 5.

Table 6. Accessibility of kindergartens in the municipalities of the Wałbrzych district: economic (A2) and qualitative (A3) dimensions

Municipality	Number of public kindergartens	Opening hours	Adaptation to the needs of children with disabilities (Yes/No/Partially)	Amount of fee
Boguszów-Gorce*	4	6.45–16.30 6.00–16.30 6.00–16.30 5.30–17.00	No Partially Partially Yes	Free care Free care Free care 450,00
Jedlina Zdrój*	2	7.00–16.00 5.30–16.30	No No	Free care 350,00
Szczawno-Zdrój*	3	6.30–16.30 6.00–17.00 7.00–17.00	Partially Yes Yes	Free care 460,00 480,00
Głuszycza municipality**	1	–	–	
Głuszycza (town)	1	6.00–16.30	Partially	Free care
Mieroszów municipality**	2	–	–	
Mieroszów (town)	1	5.30–16.00	Partially	Free care
Sokołowsko	1	7.00–16.00	No	Free care
Czarny Bór municipality	1	–	–	
Czarny Bór	1	7.00–16.00	Partially	Free care
Stare Bogaczowice municipality	2	–	–	–
Stare Bogaczowice	1	6.00–17.00	No	No data available
Struga	1	6.00–17.00	No	No data available
Walim municipality	2	–	–	
Dzieńmrowice	1	6.30–16.30	Yes	Free care
Walim	1	6.30–16.30	No	Free care

Source: Own study based on official websites of kindergartens and primary schools, reports on the state of municipalities and accessibility declarations. An asterisk (*) indicates urban municipalities, two asterisks (**) – urban-rural municipalities. No marking indicates a rural municipality. Gray refers to the eight municipalities studied.

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the accessibility of childcare for children up to 5 years of age covering the Wałbrzych district leads to the conclusion that the level of this accessibility, regardless of whether we are talking about the physical dimension (A1), qualitative dimension (A2), or economic dimension (A3), shows differentiation in the division into urban and rural municipalities. Due to the lack of detailed, specialist documents adopted at the strategic level, this statement refers to the operational level, which consists of the activities of entities providing care, i.e., nurseries, children's clubs, and kindergartens. The formulated hypothesis can be confirmed, although not fully, because the "advantage" of urban municipalities over rural municipalities, concerns the physical dimension (A1) in full, and only partially the qualitative dimension (A2), and economic dimension (A3). Regardless of the degree of positive verification of the hypothesis, the obtained results correspond in at least several points with the results of the findings relating to a larger scale.

According to the report of the Supreme Audit Office, only 25% of children up to 3 years of age can count on a place in a children's club or nursery. Moreover, in over 45% of municipalities, and these are mostly rural municipalities, there is not a single facility of this type (NIK, 2024, p. 9). Other conclusions accompany the analysis of the accessibility of kindergartens. As it results from the data of the Central Statistical Office, the percentage of children aged 3–6 using preschool education is at the level of 96.1%, which indicates an incomparably larger number of facilities providing services, both public and private ones (GUS, 2024, p. 16). In most cases, these are kindergartens operating within the administrative boundaries of towns and cities. Of the total number of 76,276 branches, 49,785 branches operate in towns and cities, while 26,491 branches – in countrysides (GUS, 2024a). Relating these data to the situation in the Wałbrzych district, one may be tempted to say that the dividing lines between the urban areas and rural areas are noticeable. The identified disproportions, which correspond to national data and fit into the aforementioned trend of research on childcare taking into account the importance of spatial (location) conditions, lead to the formulation of at least several conclusions.

Firstly, one can make a very cautious assumption that the development and adoption by local self-government administrations of separate specialist documents regulating the issue of childcare (strategic level) could affect the level of accessibility of this care. Research shows that professional strategic management can be a factor that dynamises and increases the scope of the activities carried out at the operational level (cf. Hausner, 2001).

Secondly, while the lack of clear differences in the scope of childcare time in nurseries, children's clubs, and kindergartens may be treated as the implementation of the postulate to provide this care in such a way as to enable parents and guardians to be professionally active, the disproportions regarding adaptations to children with disabilities are an expression of a different approach implemented by entities providing care in nurseries, children's clubs, and kindergartens in urban and rural municipalities. The differentiation of the qualitative dimension of accessibility (A2) related to adaptations may also indicate the efficiency of local self-government administrations,

which are able to obtain appropriate financial resources for the adaptation of nursery and kindergarten buildings (which is the case in urban municipalities), or for various reasons do not make such efforts, or make them insufficiently (as confirmed by the example of rural municipalities).

Thirdly, the relatively low level of differentiation in the accessibility of preschool care in the economic dimension (A3) is the result of the legal and organisational solutions in force in Poland. As mentioned, children up to the age of 5 are provided, children with 5 hours of free preschool care, regardless of whether the entity providing such a service operates in urban or rural areas. In the case of care provided by nurseries and children's club, such solutions are lacking. This deficit translates into differences between the urban areas and rural areas. The costs of care for children up to the age of 3 are noticeably higher in rural municipalities. This also confirms the thesis about the decisive influence of local self-government administration as the initiator and implementer of local sectoral policies on the accessibility of key social services.

The fourth conclusion, and this is a conclusion referring to further research on the accessibility of childcare for children up to 5 years of age in the Wałbrzych district, refers to the strategies for dealing with accessibility deficits implemented by local self-government administrations (as care organisers) and parents and guardians of children (as beneficiaries of care). In this case, it is research taking into account a dual perspective (local self-government administration versus parents and guardians of children) based on the analysis of empirical material, e.g., structured interviews. This is a direction that allows for an in-depth and multi-factorial illustration of the opinions, motivations and actions of organisers and beneficiaries of, as has been proven, a clearly diversified childcare system in Poland.

The fifth conclusion concerns the recommendations addressed to self-governments' administrations responsible for ensuring the childcare accessibility for children under 5 years of age. Regardless of whether we are talking about local self-government administration operating in urban or rural areas, it is necessary to emphasise the need to increase financing for childcare for children up to 5 years of age and to cooperate, where possible and justified, with external entities (private and social) that can provide such care. It seems that, given the objective financial and organisational deficits that affect the functioning of districts such as Wałbrzych, appropriately planned childcare is essential. Such programming requires the development and adoption of specialised strategic documents, which, even when they exist, do not always meet the criteria of professionalism.

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