

EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE – THE PERSPECTIVE OF ROMANIAN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION*

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Abstract

This paper is intended as an attempt to equally surprise both the notions of the conceptual apparatus and the historicity of early education from the Romanian perspective. This conceptual approach, respects and relates itself, to the European and worldwide pedagogical concepts, the way they are understood and promoted in the light of educational policies.

The Romanian reality in the field of early education, may be and it is, authentic and innovating: authentic, based on the specific of educational policies, innovating, by the development and emergence of this segment of educational responsibility in Romania. Therefore, Romania offers and constitutes an example of good practice.

Key words: *Early education; Conceptual approach; The formal structure of the education system; Curriculum areas.*

1. Defining the concept of early education

The new European strategic framework, Education & Training 2020 (launched in 2009), proposes to all member states to archive the creation of values by knowledge, to develop the citizens' skills by creating societies which support inclusion and to create a competitive, connected and ecological economy.

This European framework views continuous learning and continuous education as fundamental processes for Lifelong Education. "Permanent education represents the totality of all learning activities realized by each person during a lifetime, in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, in order to train and develop skills from a multiple perspective: personal, civic, social or occupational. Lifetime learning includes early education, secondary education, tertiary education, continuous occupational education and training of adults" (National Education Law, 1/2011, art. 328).

Traditionally, the pedagogical phase of a 0-6/7 years old was considered pre-school education. The current educational policy does not include (or it does not do

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it declaratively) a specific section concerning the Early education of the 0-3 years child. In a practical way, the focus of the current educational policy when it comes to early education is on preschool education.

For a long time, the concept of early education referred to the education received before the beginning of schooling, known as preschool education, which takes place between the ages of 3 and 6/7 and is considered a systematized education, taking place in kindergartens.

The new perspective regarding the early childhood defined during the Jomtien conference (Thailand, 1990, Education for all, signed by the education ministers present during the Declaration, regarding the Education for all – Déclaration mondiale sur l'éducation pour tous et cadre d'action pour répondre aux besoins éducatifs de base) is strongly related to concept of lifelong learning and with a change of how is seen the moment in which education begins: Education begins at birth.

We assist at the enlargement of the concept of early education: going beyond the 3 years threshold. Horizontally, the concept was aligned with 2 other social priorities: protection and health (health and nutrition). Jomtien Conference names early education the early development of the child.

Focusing on early education and preschool years is important, because this is the phase during which children develop faster, and if the development process is neglected at this stage, it will be much more difficult and expensive to compensate for these losses later. It is well-known that the choices made now and the actions taken by parents and the society in early childhood have a broader and longer influence on the progress of the individual and the nations, in a broader picture.

By giving the children proper attention, ensuring its education and growth, we create the climate for developing a well-balanced and harmonious personality.

Specialists consider that early education takes place from birth until turning 8 years old, period in which the fastest brain development takes place. The first 2 years of life are the most important, as these are the years in which the most important intellectual, emotional, psychological and social changes take place.

Therefore, early education signifies the pedagogical demarche the follows the stages of child's life that spans between birth and 6/7 years.

General objectives of early education for children from birth to 6/7 years of age are:

- Developing freely, integrally and harmoniously the personality of children, according to their own pace and necessities, supporting their autonomous and creative formation;
- Developing their ability to interact with other children, adults and environment in order to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and new behaviors;
- Encouraging exploration, exercises, attempts and experiments, as autonomous learning experiences;
- The discovery, by each child, of his/her own identity and autonomy, and developing their positive self-image;
- Supporting the child in the acquisition of knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes necessary for his/her entry into school and throughout life;

- The child is an entity that evolves all along his/her educational path.

For the best preparation of the child for school and for life, it is of paramount importance to focus, in early childhood, on his/her development in all respects;

The areas of development are essential pedagogical tools in order to individualize education and learning, enabling the identification of both skills and difficulties of each child.

Table 1. The synoptic of the evolution of the development cycles after the cycle of child's early development

Cycles	Objectives	Description
Fundamental acquisitions cycle (kindergarten - 2 nd grade)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initial alphabetization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assimilation of the basic principles of the main conversational languages; ▪ Stimulation of child's creativity, intuition and imagination; ▪ Building learning motivation, understood as a social activity.
Development cycle (3 rd grade-6 th grade)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Building the basic capacities required for continuing studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Development of structured thinking and of the competence of applying problem solving; ▪ The familiarity with multidisciplinary approach of the knowledge fields; ▪ Building a values system; ▪ Developing a responsible attitude.

Trying to define early education places the concept in an integrate and procedural approach, within which, interdependent and convergent are the priority areas for the century in which we are living: social, cultural, economic.

Longitudinally, defining early education is at the intersection (interpenetration) of three complementary areas: health, education and child's protection. Transversely, early education is convergent with another concept/tendency: the opportunity of small child care outside the family, in specialized services and, therefore, switching from family care to private services, called care services and education outside the family ("out of family", Curriculum for children education aged birth to 6/7).

1.1. International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 1997)

International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) was designed to facilitate the compilation and comparison of statistics on education both on the inside and outside national borders. It combines two transversal variables (education levels and domains) with the type of education (general/vocational/pre-vocational) or intentional destination of students (higher education or direct input on the labour market).

The current version, ISCED 97 distinguishes seven levels of education:

- ISCED 0: Pre-primary education is defined as the initial stage of organized instruction. It takes place in an educational environment or centre and is designed for children of at least 3 years of age.

- ISCED 1: Primary education is the level that begins between 5 and 7 years, is compulsory in all countries and it usually lasts between 4 to 6 years.

- ISCED 2: Lower secondary education. Continues the basic programs of primary education, although teaching is typically focused at a greater extent on the discipline of study. Usually, the end of this level coincides with the end of compulsory education.

2. Linked definitions of the *Early Education* concept

- Education and early care of young children (Early Childhood Education and Care – ECEC): it refers to subsidized and accredited structures and public services that address children below mandatory school age. The terms "education" and "care/assistance" are used together in order to underline the fact that children's services are able to combine care with studying and the development opportunities.

- Education and care of pre-schoolers (EICP): Services offered to children since birth to the beginning of primary school, which according to the national regulation, for example, have to comply with a set of rules and minimal standards and/or submitted to an accreditation process.

- Children with additional educational needs: children who are exposed to the risk of obtaining poor results over their educational development and who demand supplementary support for them to achieve their maximum potential. More often than not, these children originate from disadvantaged environments such as immigrant groups, ethnical minorities or with a reduced social and economic status.

- Additional needs are perceived as educational needs of children which derive, first of all, from the social, economic, cultural and/ or linguistic factors.

- Children at risk: There is no official national definition for children found in risky situations, although the concept is often used in certain preventing measures with the purpose to support children in difficult situations or belonging to more vulnerable groups. The concepts cover a wide range of circumstances and the risk itself is interpreted in terms of "categories" rather than "individuals" with criteria linked to parental circumstances.

2.1. Examples of care and pre-primary education

There are three important models of providing early education services:

- The first and most important model, one that represents the great majority of pre-primary educational structures, adopts the institutionalized model, aimed at the child and a professional strategy of delivering services. This type of structure includes institutionalized child care in a traditional specialized centre in which there are being developed pre-primary studying programs and general primary education (these are usually public pre-primary schools, kindergartens or training classes for primary schools);

- The second model consists of different care services and educational programs for children focused on the child himself while some can even take place at home.

This is the case with service delivery agents, non-professionals workers or with relative training for them to practice in this domain – for example, parents and other semi-professional categories of workers;

- The third model consists in a wide range of support programs focused on either parents or families. Usually, systems and family assistance programs offer a variety of services and activities adapted to multiple family needs (Primary school and child protection in Europe).

We are talking about some concepts:

Care includes all actions of parental and non-parental careers, as well as of the community, to ensure the health, nutrition, psychosocial and cognitive development of the child. It defines all practices followed by parents, non-parental careers (teachers, doctors) and communities, which protect and promote health, nutrition, psychosocial and cognitive development of the child.

Some reflections:

- The educational environment provides respite care child by another person than parents. Child care should provide a safe environment for the healthy growth and development.

- The increasing need of care for children increased lately and is a reflection of several economic and cultural factors.

- How care is appropriate for the age level of the child's personality and development.

- Staff dealing with child care must be experienced, responsible and caring.

- The state provides access to public education in institutions for children with disability or certain conditions that will require special care. Therefore, it must investigate all the options available for such care.

Therefore, **care is the key-factor** to successful development of the child.

Children's **growth** relates to the specific physical changes and increase in size.

Growth also means differentiation, transformation, organization, biological maturation and regression. Raising a child is considered one of the most difficult responsibilities of an adult. Most people get knowledge about child rearing from people around or from their own childhood. Consequently, when they become parents, repeated patterns of interaction from their childhood that may be inappropriate for their children. Worse, they argue their children with phrases that parents used to use them.

Discipline allows parents to show children acceptable behavior and unacceptable behavior. By setting limits, the child is helped to learn what is expected of him and how to behave in society. These things are necessary for the child to become a responsible adult.

Development is defined as the increase in complexity, or change, from simple forms to more complex and more detailed forms. It is an orderly, continuous process, in which children get extensive knowledge, while developing more varied behavior and more diverse skills. Although the development model is generally the same for all children, **the pace of development varies from one child to another**. The pace and quality of children's development are related to their physiological maturity of

the nervous, muscular and skeletal systems. Hereditary and environmental factors, unique for each child, also influence pace and quality.

We believe that Early education and care is a structured, theoretical and methodological response, significant challenges in the last period of growth and development of the young child. These challenges are related to educational reform strategy and practice in educational institutions offering early education, and determines a reorientation of teacher training towards dynamism, openness and diversification in professional didactic approach. The acquisition of knowledge and practices to stimulate the development of children from birth in the family is a requirement not only professionals, but also all parents.

2.2. The educational approach of curricular content

Early education has the following functions: social, educational and children' care. Pestalozzi, Frobel, Dewey and Montessori have developed their own approach in matters that concern the practices of education and care of children in educational structures like the "asylum" type and in primary schools of their era.

Pestalozzi, Frobel and Dewey have seen pre-primary schools that addressed early education as an extension of and ideal family environment and they have underlined the importance of emotional safety and of an affectionate attitude which the teacher ought to have in the relationship with students. This meant that "the teacher should not resort to a strict discipline inside the classroom, but that he should guide the students in activities that allow them to discover the world, instead of focusing only on teaching their subject. Nowadays, this approach might be called developing".

Montessori has extended this approach to a much more individualized curriculum, having considered the differences in the development rhythm and intrinsic motivation that each child has during the period of accumulating information through studying. Currently, this picture is represented through the notion of education "centred on the child", the importance of child initiative being underlined, along with the development of his capacity of choosing and self-determination.

Another characteristic of these primary approaches regarding education and early care was the insertion of real activities (Frobel) and project work (Dewey), which was the equivalent of stimulating the participation of children in activities similar to those of the adults from the community to which they belonged to. At present, the approach through the means of implementing cultural practices from the adults' world in the curriculum that addresses young children could be qualified as "authentic".

The role of the teacher is not limited to creating conditions for optimal, self-propelled development. The teacher should likewise initiate the children deliberately in different cultural domains, like the ones taught at school (or academic), language courses, Literature, Arithmetic, Mathematics and Science and he should interact with children in order to build a "scaffolding" of the further development of the children in these domains.

2.3. Access to education and early care

There is an established form of subsidized and accredited education and early care services for preschool children. The difference consists in the way of organizing qualified authorities and the age at which children have access at these services.

We can distinguish two main models of ECEC institutions in Europe: (Pre-School Education in the European Union. Current Thinking and provision, 1995, in "*Curriculum for Preschool Education*", 2008, p. 34):

- When it comes to the first model, the schooling of young children is accomplished in unitary structures and it is organized in one stage for all pre-schoolers. Each institution has one managerial team that deals with children of all ages, and the staffs responsible for the education of children generally has the same qualification and the same salary regardless of the age of children they're looking after.

- With the second model, the ECEC services are structured according to the child's age (usually aimed at children from 0 to 3 years and from 3 to 6 years). Each type of institution/educational centre can be found in the subordination of different ministries. This mode is the most prevalent one in Europe. In some countries both models coexist.

2.4. Education and professional training of the staff represents a fundamental aspect for the quality of ECEC services

In most countries, the offer for children below the age of 2 years and the preschool offer (above 2-3 years old) are under the jurisdiction of different public authorities.

The permanent staffs that takes care of smaller children (below the age of 2 years) is, generally, trained at ISCED level 3 or 4: In Romania, where in the past few years there has been adopted a more educational approach, the personnel from nurseries is still trained from a paramedical point of view and this is a priority when it comes to professional training.

Furthermore, in all countries, except Belgium, Estonia and Spain (age 0-3) and Romania, the staffs from ECEC structures includes qualified assistants or less qualified ones that conduct activities regarding children care. The educational work is assigned to a qualified staff, while changing diapers, nurturing and other tasks like that are left in the auxiliary staff's care.

Therefore, it is obvious that there are many members of the staff with alternative roles, involved in the process of taking care of children, which could ultimately lead to a lack of continuity in the education of children and building relationships.

3. Key-data regarding the education and care of pre-schoolers in Romania (years 2012/2013, according to the Eurydice and Eurostat rapport, 2014 edition, pp. 25-28)

- Organization

Up until the age of 3 years old, children benefit of care in institutional structures called nurseries. From the age of 3 (sometimes even 2) until 6 years, children can attend kindergartens. The Ministry of Education is responsible for

facilitating early childhood education and children above the age of 3 are the ones who benefit from it in kindergartens.

In the case of children below the age of 3, this responsibility is split between the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Work, Family, Social Protection and the Elderly. Primary school starts at the age of 6. Before the approval of the National Law of Education (no. 1/2011), parents were able to choose where to enlist their children. Consequently, at the age of 6, a child could either go to kindergarten or to school, as first grader.

- Taxes

In public institutions of education and care of pre-schoolers there are no perceived taxes; however, parents do pay for the child's meal. Children who come from families with low income have the possibility of free meals.

3.1. Legal stipulations concerning early education of a child with the age between 0 to 3 years

In this area there are a number of laws and regulations for the protection of child rights below 3 years old. However, they all refer to the nursing of the child, health, nutrition and social protection. Many government decisions are especially linked to child's rights and protection, but there is no specific law for early education in general.

A characteristic of the current early educational system in Romania is the following: due to the lack of legislation regarding the education of children from 0 to 3 years, a number of nurseries and kindergartens have developed without any consistent structure or without clear educational standards.

There is a diversity of institutions for early education, some of which are listed below:

- Daily care centres for children below the age of 6 found in risk situations, coordinated by Direction of Social Assistance and Child Protection;
- Daily care centres or private kindergartens for children below the age of 6, approved by the Ministry of Education, which offer good examples of practice in the domain;
- Kindergartens with nurseries for children from the same age group as the ones from daily care centres;
- Kindergartens for children from age 3 to 6/7 years old. These are funded by local councils and they are coordinated by the Ministry of Education;
- Nurseries for children from 4 months to 3 years old who can also accommodate children over 3 years in order to maintain the hired staff. These are funded and coordinated by local councils, without a direct and professional supervision and without any kind of educational standards.

Services for children with the age between 0 and 3 years old are funded through nursery systems that offer some types of medical care without any component of early education. In the past, nurseries were the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. However, in 2002, the Ministry of Health absolved itself of this responsibility and the nurseries were left without any kind of formal identity or governmental support. At

present, nurseries are funded by local authorities while kindergartens are funded by the Ministry of Education (The strategy regarding early education).

4. The major benefits gained through Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

The major benefits gained through Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are much more recognized at social level, beginning with the economic advantages for all the society and ending with the improvement of school performance (The differences at European level of education and caring of preschool children, 2014). ECEC can help decreasing the future public costs for social assistance, health and even justice if it provides quality educational programs. Through a reliable base for the successful continuous learning process, ECEC provides individual benefits for all the children, especially for those who come from social disadvantaged environment. ECEC presents a base for more equitable and performing educational systems.

In Romania, after the bias according to which, during the first period of the child's life, this one only needs food and warmth, in 2020 took place the passing of administrative responsibilities from the sanitary sector to the local public administration. This change however did not adjust the organization and the functioning of nurseries as services of care and education for little children.

The New National Education Law (1/2011) provides that, early education is the first stage of preparing for the formal education and it is addressed to the children from their birth until the age of six or seven years old, offering specific conditions for developing, depending on their individual evolution and their ages.

According to the global Monitoring Report of education for all (2012), early education supports survival, growth, development and learning from a child's birth till attending elementary school, including nutrition, health, hygiene and cognitive, social, physical and emotional development of children. Early years are the base of children's personality and to support their educational success it is required to be trained all of the social actors with influence on the children: family – institutions – community.

This new perspective on the period of early education, considering the evolution of the family and the woman's role into society and the new discoveries and theories on child's development, have boosted another government speech regarding integrated services and have led to specialists' orientation concerning the next idea: the opportunity of taking care of the little child outside the family, into specialized services, and the transition from private family care to public services, the so called services of taking care and education outside the family.

The new perspective regarding the family and the little child, like the important moments of the 1990 year in this area, which marked the politics of early development of the child, helped on shaping the basic principles of the United Nations Conventions on Children Right which highlights that the child wellbeing and development are the result of a convergent approach, including health, education and child protection.

4.1. The educational outcomes

The educational ideal of the Romanian society, according to the 2nd article of the Law of National Education (2011), consists in fully and harmonious development of human individuality, in the formation of autonomous personality and in taking a value system necessary for personal fulfilment and development, for development of entrepreneurship, for active citizenship in society, for social inclusion and employment on the labour market”, while the educational finalities by educational stages constitutes a materialization of finalities of the educational system for its various levels, describe the specifics of each level of education in terms of educational policy and represents a reference system for both curriculum development and orientation of teaching in the classroom.

At the level of pre-primary and primary education, the educational finalities seek to ensure the elementary education for all children, the formation of child personality, respecting the level and rhythm of its development, providing the child with knowledge, skills and attitudes to stimulate the creative and effective reporting to the social and natural environment allowing continuity of education.

The curricular cycles are periods of schooling which bring together several years of study and which have, within each discipline, general objectives/ common specific skills.

These periods of schooling overlap the formal structure of the education system in order to focus the act of learning on the major objective of each educational stage and to adjust the educational process by curricular interventions.

The introduction of curricular cycles has generated curricular changes through:

- changes in the educational curriculum framework, regarding the grouping of subjects,
- the time of placing certain subjects in educational curriculum framework,
- the share of disciplines in the economy of the educational framework,
- conceptual changes on the programs and textbooks,
- Teaching strategy changes (conditioned by the rethinking teachers' initial and continuing training).

The objectives of cycles give to the various stages of schooling, a series of dominants which are reflected in the structure of the curricula. Thus, the structuring of the education system in curricular cycles contributes to:

- creating continuity in the transition from one level of education to another (preschool - primary, primary - middle school, middle school - high school),
- continuity at a methodical level through the transfer of methods from one cycle to another, establishing explicit connections of curricula through the set of general objectives,
- building a structure of the education system better correlated with the psychological age of students.

5. Personal interpretations

In the Romanian education system it is necessary:

- to improve the current infrastructure system of early education for children from 3 to 6/7 years through rehabilitation and development of educational units;
- to improve the quality of preschool education;
- to foster the development and career development in areas of scientific training oriented directly towards lower ages of children (from 0-8 years) and mobility in careers as part of the validation of initial and continuous training of teachers and specialists;
- to provide adequate training to all who want to understand and appropriately address the growth and development of young children (from 0-8 years).

6. Conclusions

An effective education program is a program which aims to take into account **the child** from the first moments of its existence and involving all educational agencies that contribute to his growth and development.

Education institutions cannot replace family, but it supports and contributes to the development of intra- and extra family relations.

The primary beneficiaries of early education are children and secondary beneficiaries are parents, teachers and all educators in the community, and, by the effects, society in general.

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