

DEVELOPING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION COMPETENCES (EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE, ECEC)

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Abstract: *Early education is of increasing concern to specialists in the field: pedagogues, psychologists, sociologists, and not only them, the society as well, especially the family and parents, as well as many governmental and non-governmental organizations, which recognize the role of early educational intervention in the normal development of a child. Early education is a fundamental part of education and lifelong learning, and its central role is focused on educating and raising children in a stimulating educational environment. Early education with its components: teaching, learning, care, child safety, can be optimized by creating the best learning opportunities in the first years of a child's life. Early education supports and monitors physical and mental well-being, including social, cognitive and emotional development, and helps prevent any difficulties that may arise during their lifetime. Early education imposes a holistic vision on the actions exerted on the child, the different areas of development not being separated. Care is an integral part of this approach in a stimulating, integrative educational environment. Thus, it is necessary to train educators and teachers to achieve a quality education for all children, without discrimination, in an educational environment appropriate to their age, with the support of family and community. In this article we outline some directions that aim to train the professional skills of specialists in early education.*

Key words: *early education; professional skills; children; directions of action.*

Introduction

From the studies conducted on early education in different European countries, together with the recommendations of the European Commission, we identified some priority directions in the training of teachers who specialize in teaching in the field of early education.

A professional in early education will use interactive, child-centered teaching strategies, active methodologies, practical learning methods understood as a way of approaching the educational process based on the child's needs, interests, aspirations, to promote the free and autonomous child development. The design of teaching activities will respect the teaching principles, intuitive, cooperative learning, learning by discovery, encouraging experiential learning and self-directed learning. Educational interventions need to be adapted to current theories on early childhood education and preschool development areas, focusing on the following content:

- early development;
- education and early care;
- training policies for teachers of early education;
- designing early education activities in areas of development: socio-emotional development, language development, communication, reading and writing, cognitive development, knowledge of the world (STEM), physical development, personal health and hygiene, learning skills and attitudes;
- assessing the child's progress;
- inclusive early education, quality of early education services - monitoring and evaluation.

Professional competences

- Psycho-pedagogical knowledge about the child's development, the factors that contribute decisively to the child's physical and mental development;
- Pedagogical knowledge regarding the educational process, the stimulating factors that stimulate the development of the child's interest in knowledge;

- Knowledge of the role of the educational environment for the child's natural
- Specialized knowledge regarding the conception, design and implementation of educational activities;
- Essential knowledge of maintaining the child's well-being, physical and mental health.

An increase in the quality of early education presupposes economic and social conditions in addition to the teaching staff trained effectively so as to lead to the provision of a true early education. It is clear that the relationship between socio-economic conditions and quality schooling is crucial, but also for the subsequent achievement of children, for their subsequent professional success. Experience and training during early age is critical for the assimilation of children's future skills, coping skills, health, academic success and socio-cultural integration. Research demonstrates the benefits of early childhood education, helping children to promote the acquisition of social skills throughout life, which will help him/her to improve the educational and subsequent occupational profession in the social system. Improving good living conditions in early childhood by ensuring early education and well being in competent centers or institutions that integrate education, care, health, safety, and support for raising children, will reduce inequality, will increase the predisposition to effective development of children.

In addition to this theoretical knowledge, an educator who wants to deal with the field of early education must have skills (vocation), so as to know how to address to them according to their level of understanding thus ensuring the necessary conditions for a full, free, integral and harmonious development of the child's personality according to its rhythm and needs, to ensure the differentiated stimulation of children, aiming at the intellectual, affective, social and physical development of each child without any discrimination. Children are different in terms of physical and mental development, so the need to respect their own rhythm and needs must be constantly taken into account, supporting their autonomous and creative formation. The permanent interaction with the child within the community through communication and play will lead to the development of its capacity to interact and socialize. In an organized, institutional setting, children are directed, stimulated and encouraged to explore the environment in order to acquire new knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. The exercises and experiments in which children take part in educational institutions help children assimilate autonomous learning experiences, discover their own identity, develop a positive self-image. In these learning activities the child is supported to

acquire knowledge, to develop skills, habits and attitudes necessary for social life, in order to successfully integrate into school and life. A specialized educator for the field of early education will be able to:

- Establish appropriate socio-emotional relationships with children.
- develop projects, programs and educational activities.
- develop harmonious relationships with the members of the work team, with parents and collaborators.
- Act effectively in emergency situations.
- continuously evaluate each child, intervening and permanently supporting his/her evolution using elements for evaluating the preschool progress (Systematic observation / formative evaluation).
- reflect on one's own professional practice (understanding the importance of educational research and continuous training).

Among the personality traits of a good educator we mention:

- Emotional balance (conveying confidence and security to children, avoiding contradictory messages).
- Patience and tolerance.
- Empathy.
- Sense of observation.
- Ability to adapt to the characteristics of the group of children and of each child.
- Initiative and responsibility.

The relationship educators – family - community

The educator-family relationship is especially important to provide children with a unity of educational requirements and the best opportunities to learn and develop. Proactive parental behaviour, educational partnership established with the educational institution lead to the child's well-being.

Strengthening the children's self-esteem can be achieved through positive learning experiences and encouragement, as well as opportunities for diverse interactions with others. Children's experiences should be enriched by encouraging them when trying to find new areas of interest. The educational action of the family and the educational institution will address the positive concept of children's well-being, strengthen self-confidence, focus on their personal abilities in accordance with their age and innate abilities. (Principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach -Loris Malaguzzi.
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Educational Environment

The success of children's acquisitions and personality development is deeply affected by the quality of the educational environment. That is why we will insist on creating a good physical, psychological and social environment in child care and preschool institutions. An optimal learning environment is interactive, stimulating and safe, reflecting the children's diverse identities and needs. This environment must be flexible and can be changed according to the topics addressed and the interests of the child. Teachers organize the environment according to learning objectives ensuring the children's physical and mental safety, an educational environment that effectively contributes to their development. Interacting within the team develops different relationships among children, between children and adults, in which the emphasis is on the development of positive relationships, collaboration, acceptance, support and participation.

The environment in the group has to provide a safe, functional, aesthetic and suitable organization for educational interventions. This environment must respond to children's epistemological curiosity, support and stimulate learning, help facilitate the discovery, structuring of knowledge and the development of all mental processes. The organization of the room must be done in areas and centres of interest that capture the children's attention and determine them to participate in their own training. The organization of the educational space on areas identified for different activities, with games, toys, tools and equipment made available to the child becomes a learning environment that the child is free to choose according to the current interest. The organization of the room, the furniture, the teaching aids, the equipment and all the materials found in the room must respect all sanitary norms of hygiene and safety and be adapted to the children's age and interests.

Orientation of educational activities

Didactics of the educational process for early education (0-3 years) aims at learning natural sciences, social sciences and mathematics; reading and writing; musical, plastic expression and body language. Nursery and kindergarten educators are responsible for the care and education of the little ones, using the modern concepts of early education. This involves respecting the uniqueness of the child and, as such, differentiated treatment of the little ones; the right to equal opportunities, to develop the child's maximum potential; understanding education as a continuous process, which begins with the birth of the child and takes place throughout its life; understanding any act of child care as an implicit act of education etc. The activities carried out with children in the institutions that offer early preschool education services are based on a specific curriculum that includes: activities based on symbolic games, sensory games, games with sand and water, construction games, didactic games.

- artistic-plastic activities: drawing, painting, modelling,
- practical activities: practical and household activities.
- music and movement activities: auditions, music games, text and song games, songs, eurhythmy.
- communication and creativity activities: stories, poems, reading pictures and illustrations from books
- knowledge stimulation activities: observations, image reading, mathematical activities, discussions, teaching games, experiments.
- outdoor activities: walks, sand games, games and sports activities.

The mentioned educational actions will reach their efficiency if the organization of the learning environment and the ergonomics of the educational space are adapted to their age, individual development, and if they are accompanied by appropriate demonstrative and illustrative materials: toys, games, chips, illustrations, books and so on. The children's cognitive, psycho-motor and affective processes will be developed through an adequate management of learning situations experimentation and emotional expression. Security, interaction and autonomy are particularly important in preschool age, along with elements of hygiene (body, food, sleep), and physical security.

Early preschool education aims at the general development of the child, which will ensure a good start in life. The areas of child development targeted in the specific curriculum for early preschool age are physical

development, health, personal care, socio-emotional development, cognitive development, language development and communication. The development of learning skills and attitudes are essential for achieving a personalized education, by identifying the child's potential and the difficulties/disabilities of each child. The psychology of child development between the ages of 0-3 brings to the educators' attention the need to develop mental processes through optimal educational interventions, learning and personality development (0-6 years of age). During this period there are numerous learning difficulties and developmental disorders, which can be improved through psycho-pedagogical intervention strategies, systematic observation and analysis of contexts, through ameliorating interventions as part of a joint action plan conducted by the family and the educational institution, respecting deontology and professional ethics.

Another aspect to consider is social assistance, hygiene and childcare, that is:

- food, cooking, diet;
- elements of anatomy and physiology;
- domestic economy;
- elements of pathology and pharmacology;
- notions of social and health legislation;
- elements of psychology;
- first aid and hygiene items;

That is why the training of care (and education) staff for children of only 0-3 years old is subject to the access conditions valid for any higher degree professional training. vocational training. These conditions are not cumulative; they are options for access to initial training of staff working in the field of early education.

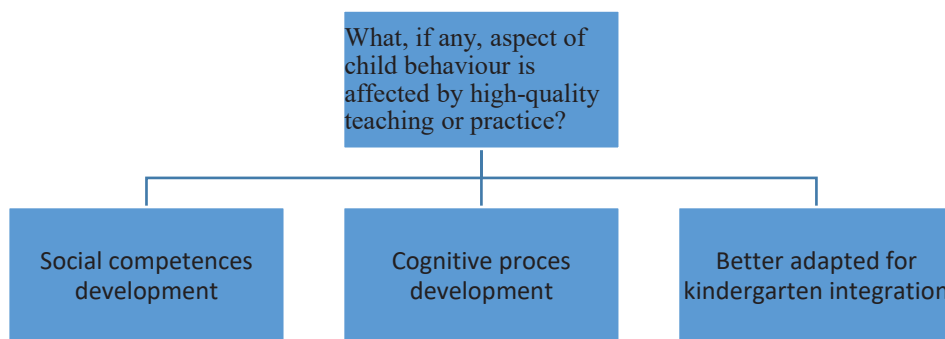


Figure 2. Research Questions -Impact of early education

Conclusions

In order to professionalize the specialist in early education, it is necessary to improve some psycho-pedagogical tools that enhance knowledge of toddlers. Based on such knowledge a specialized curriculum shall be developed which is adapted to the children's level and includes personalized and differentiated activities. Designing educational activities for the early preschool group involves exploring roles and practices for working with and for children, and also involving the family and the community in professional practice. The best practice models are offered by approaches such as the Reggio Emilia programme, the Montessori, High/Scope and Waldorf alternatives. The good practices offered by these educational alternatives adapted to Romanian culture and local conditions, as well as the psycho-pedagogical profile of learners, teachers' roles, children's opinions, inclusion and diversity are real directions of action that integrate child-centred approaches in real practice.

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