

BILDING HIGH QUALITY IN EARLY EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL WELL-INTEGRATION

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Abstract: *Early education experiences today a pedagogical approach which covers the period from birth to the age of 6/7. It is the period when the child begins school and also when significant changes occur in the child's development. The concept of early education comprising the collocation "early child development" and including education, protection and health has widened. It has fallen under the age of 3 after the World Conference from Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990 when the concept of education for all expended and a new concept was introduced, namely "lifelong learning" and along with it the idea that education starts at birth. Thus, this situation led to new approaches in state policies on young children, bringing together the social, educational and sanitary (health and nutrition) environment. This new perspective on early childhood, influenced by the evolution of family and the role of women in society brought about changes in the orientation of specialists and of those who reconstruct socio-educational strategies and policies. They tried to develop new "out of family" child care and education opportunities by creating specialized services. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children states the principles of convergent approach of children, including health, education and child protection in terms of well-being and development. It tries to exclude aspects such as: social exclusion, any type of child discrimination, respect for the children's rights, provision of a good start in life for all children, surcease of child exploitation, access to education for all children, the children's and teenager's right to an opinion, participation in decision making, child protection and investment in schools. Romania, by adhering to the United Europe (M. Korintus, 2000) has aligned to these demands by implementing educational policies favourable to the development and progress of children from birth throughout their lives. Our country has implemented*

educational reforms proper to education, child care and fostering according to its nature, interests and aspirations, so that even the children stay in rural or urban location, they have the same opportunities for proper development.

Key words: *curriculum; kindergarten; children; early education; strategy; urban; rural; results*

Introduction

“Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is more than preparation for primary school. It aims at the holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing. ECCE has the possibility to nurture caring, capable and responsible future citizens.” When we refer to early education, we think of the ways in which the education of children between the ages of zero and eight can be achieved. Though a relatively new concept, early education has become of general interest, especially among theoreticians and practitioners in the field of education. We are convinced that investment in early education will bring about many benefits to the society. When you want to build a high quality education you need to consider some general principles as guidelines.

One of the principles would be to knowing the psycho-pedagogical characteristics of the child in different stages of his development: 0-3 years; 3-6 years; 6-8 years. This implies the teacher’s knowledge of psychological and personality traits of the child at different stages of his development; Another principle that will lead to a quality education requires knowledge of pedagogy, the type of knowledge we can teach the child, what are their interests at this age. Basically, it is about going through the curriculum adapted for early education.

One of the most important pedagogical principles is the principle of respecting the individual particularities of a child. It is known that each person is unique. This has been shown by research conducted on twins (identical twins). The results revealed that although they seem identical, they are completely different and education and environmental factors influence their development differently.

A good teacher will ask him/herself a few questions before applying the curriculum for early education in the classroom: What will I do ?; What will I do with it? ; When will I do it ?; Where will I do it?

The curriculum for early education uses some key concepts: skills, standards, benchmarks, results, assessment. But at an early age it is very difficult to assess children. Therefore, the question of what to teach the little ones comes up? When we want to achieve education at an early age, we must take into account the child's age and abilities. We should consider the child's ability to understand and participate consciously, actively and motivated.

In terms of knowledge and understanding, education always starts from the child's development level, life experience to build and develop knowledge gradually, not randomly but according to his interests. The amount of a child's knowledge develops by accumulating information from the near, familiar environment, gradually adding new information related to those already known, so that the understanding can be made starting from the known to the unknown and from the near to the distant. Learning starts from the child's natural desire to learn and discover. The child's curiosity is boundless and his need for information is materialized by the many questions, sometimes even confusing for adults and the permanent question: why?

For a true child development at an early age, a good teacher will consider the development of the children's skills. It is known that each child is different from the other, they have different preferences, different skills: verbal, social, physical, artistic, etc. Therefore, teachers must find ways to develop these innate inclinations. There is a distance between the existence of an aptitude and the child's willingness to develop it. The teacher has the duty to develop these skills by stimulating and motivating the children to amplify them, but this approach involves some amendments. Although the skill exists, the child may not be willing to develop it. What do we do to develop these skills, because if not practiced they are lost. The point is that the educational intervention should not be invasive, activated too early, or be too pressing for the child.

One of the competencies covered by the curriculum and which has an important role in the development of the child's personality is social competence. Entering the community, the child will gradually learn his instinctive impulses, will adjust the behaviour according to the colleagues, out of a desire to belong to and be accepted by the group. The teacher will ensure that each child develops these socio-emotional skills. *Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children, and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously "at risk".* (Hartup, 1992) By entering the community, the child has many opportunities to interact with the elderly, when playing in pairs or small groups.

In the pre-operational period, when children do not need object-based learning, it is strictly necessary to respect the principle of intuition. By operating with objects, children learn their characteristics, use, value, etc. By

playing with different objects, children accumulate knowledge from different fields. Communicating with other children develops their language, which is more expressive, more nuanced, develops their thinking and some operations: analysis, synthesis, comparison, generalization, it also develops memory, imagination, attention, creativity. In order for a child to develop his intellectual skills, the child must be stimulated daily through a teaching program. Children should participate in learning activities that develop their intellectual skills, according to their age.

But the question is what kind of learning activities will we implement in their daily timetable so that the child develops the general and specific skills without feeling pressured and restricted to do something that may not please him. What is the specific activity of childhood? Game, of course. Therefore, the curriculum for early education is built so that the learning activities are based on games, but not any kind of games, didactic games. The child learns by playing. It learns about lots of objects by grouping toys according to certain characteristics: shape, colour, size, etc. It learns about pets by playing with the animal farm. It learns to practice oral language by reading pictures or books with pictures from fairy tales, learns to speak phonetically, lexically, grammatically correct by playing different didactic games, in which children have to identify objects that start with a certain sound, divide the word into syllables, construct a sentence with that word, etc. The child develops his practical skills by manipulating different toys, building different objects with the help of construction games, or materials from nature.

An analysis of data provided by the EURYDICE study entitled *Preschool education and child care in Europe: tackling social and cultural inequalities* (2009) makes us notice that all European countries have early education and care programmes that address to children 0-6 years of age, and the mission to educate is crystal clear inside institutions that provide such services. Moreover, the goal of these programmes is to stimulate the child's cognitive, social and cultural development and to train them with learning, writing, reading and calculating activities. In Romania, the Curriculum for Early Education ([www.curriculum.pentruinvatamantprescolar](http://www.curriculum.pentruinvatamantprescolar.ro)) has a unitary and coherent vision and is structured on the age levels (0 – 3 years of age and 3 – 6/7 years of age) and two sections for each level.

- The Curriculum for Early Education for children with ages from birth to 3 years of age, ante-preschool)
- The Curriculum for Early Education of children aged 3 and 6/7 (preschool)

The aim of this Curriculum is to train children as well as possible for school and for life. In early childhood it is extremely important to give special attention to the development of children under all possible aspects. The Curriculum for Early Education is structured on development areas, which are essential pedagogic tools for delimiting education and learning. They offer the possibility to identify each child's

abilities and difficulties. The goal of early childhood education is the child's overall development and provide a good start in life with priorities such as:

- Free, complete and harmonious development of the child's personality according to its own pace and needs and by supporting its autonomous and creative development.
- The development of the ability to interact with other children, adults or the environment in order to acquire knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours. Exploration, exercises, attempts and experimentation are encouraged in form of autonomous learning experiences;
- Each child should discover its own identity and autonomy and should develop a positive self-image;
- Supporting the child in acquiring knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes required in school and throughout its life.

Children are the most valuable treasure of a nation, entities that evolve throughout their educational paths according to inborn giftedness but also to the educational offer of their socio-educational environment. The Curriculum for Early Education is the child's first step on the pathway of learning and knowledge bounded to the time and society it belongs to.

Methods

In our study we will show that when the Curriculum is applied consistently and responsibly, there are no differences between rural and urban area children in terms of preparation for school and life. In order to validate our hypothesis, we carried out a study on 200 full-time educators with studies in the field, 100 from urban areas and 100 from rural areas located in Arad, Timiș and Caraș-Severin counties. They conducted an initial assessment of their groups at the beginning of the school year, in September 2021, and an evaluation after eight months, in April 2022, on a number of 2,000 pre-schoolers.

Design of the study

At the beginning of the school year, they applied initial tests, covering different areas of development, aiming to identify the children's level of development.

I. COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORLD

- Ability to understand the relationships between objects, phenomena, events and people, the ability to think logically and solve problems.

Dimensions of development and targeted behaviours:

1. Logical relationships, operations and deductions in the immediate environment.

a. Identifies characteristic elements of some phenomena/relationships from the proximate environment.

b. Compares experiences, actions, events, phenomena/relationships in the proximate environment.

- c. Builds new experiences, building on past experiences. Possible answers/solutions to questions, problem-situations.
 - d. Identifies possible answers/solutions to questions, problem-situations and challenges in one's personal life or in the life of the group.
 - e. Carries out guided, simple environmental investigation activities, using specific tools and methods.
2. Basic mathematical knowledge and skills for problem-solving and knowledge of the proximate environment.
- a. Identify and name the shapes of objects in the environment.
 - b. Shows closeness to objects with information about size, shape, weight, height.
 - c. Performs operations of sorting, grouping, classifying, measuring objects.
 - d. Solves problem situations, starting from sorting and representing some data.
3. Structural and functional characteristics of the surrounding world.
- a. Highlights the characteristics of objects located in the surrounding space.
 - b. Identifies and capitalizes on some features of the living world, Earth and Space.
 - c. Demonstrates knowledge of the position of man in the universe, as part of the living world and as a social being

II. LEARNING ABILITIES AND ATTITUDES

Objectives: Ability to engage in a learning activity, approaching learning tasks and contexts.

Dimensions of development and targeted behaviours:

- 1. Curiosity, interest and initiative in learning.
 - a. Tries, initiates new actions and starts taking risks.
 - b. Shows curiosity and interest in experimenting and learning in new situations.
 - c. Initiates learning activities and interactions with children or adults in the immediate environment.
- 2. Completion of tasks and actions (persistence in activities).
 - a. Completes simple projects
 - b. Performs work tasks consistently.
 - c. Integrates the help received for the accomplishment of the work tasks for which it encounters difficulties.
- 3. Activation and manifestation of creative potential.
 - a. Shows creativity in various activities.
 - b. Demonstrates the presence of rhythmic, harmonic musical sense through song, play with text and song, dance, etc.
 - c. Demonstrates creativity through artistic-plastic, musical and practical activities, in conversations and creative stories.

III. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

Objectives: Language development (in terms of vocabulary and understanding of meaning) and communication (including oral, nonverbal and verbal listening skills)

Dimensions of development and targeted behaviours:

1. Oral messages in familiar communication contexts.
 - a. Practice, with support, the active listening of a message in order to understand and receive it (receptive communication).
 - b. Demonstrates understanding of an oral message, as a result of capitalizing on ideas, emotions, meanings (expressive communication)
2. Oral messages in various communication situations.
 - a. Demonstrates the ability to clearly communicate one's own ideas, needs, curiosities, actions, emotions.
 - b. Respects the rules of correct expression, in different communication contexts.
 - c. Demonstrates the progressive expansion of vocabulary.
3. Premises of reading and writing, in familiar communication contexts.
 - a. Participates in work experiences with the book, for the knowledge and appreciation of the book.
 - b. Phonetically discriminates / differentiates words, syllables, sounds and associates sounds with letters.
 - c. Identifies the presence of the written message, appreciates and capitalizes on the written message in current activities.
 - d. Assimilates some elements of writing and uses different ways of graphic and oral communication to convey a message.

IV. SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Objectives: The ability to establish and maintain interactions with adults and children, the ability to perceive and express emotions.

Dimensions of development and targeted behaviours:

1. Interactions with adults and children of similar age.
 - a. Demonstrates confidence in familiar adults by interacting with them.
 - b. Demonstrates ability to ask for and receive help in specific problem situations.
 - c. Initiates, participates in positive interactions with children of similar age.
2. Prosocial behaviours, acceptance and respect for diversity.
 - a. Expresses recognition and respect for similarities and differences between people.
 - b. Respects rules, understands their effects in terms of social relations, in familiar contexts.
 - c. Practices negotiation and decision-making skills with support.
 - d. Demonstrates acceptance and understanding of others in the surrounding environment.
3. The concept of self

a. Practices, with support, positive self-esteem in different educational situations.

b. Promotes its self-image, through manifestation as a unique person with specific characteristics.

4. Auto-rural and emotional expressiveness.

a. Recognizes and expresses basic emotions, products of musical pieces, literary texts, art objects.

b. Demonstrates emotional skills.

5. PSYCHO-MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

Objective: Motor skills and abilities, coordination, sensory development along with knowledge and skills of personal hygiene.

Dimensions of development and targeted behaviours:

1. Coarse motor skills and fine motor skills in familiar life contexts.

a. Participates in various physical activities, appropriate to their level of development.

b. Uses hands and fingers in proper handling of objects / tools.

c. Participates actively in games, dances, outdoor games.

2. Sensory-motor behaviour, to guide movement

a. Uses the senses in interaction with the immediate environment.

b. Oriented in space based on the senses.

c. Coordinates his movements according to rhythm, cadence, pause, beeps, songs.

3. Health (nutrition, care, personal hygiene) and personal safety practices

a. Practices with support, follows some basic principles specific to a healthy diet and demonstrates

self-protection skills.

b. Manifests personal hygiene skills.

c. Uses personal physical security rules.

Data collection instruments

Table 1. Comparisons of Pre-test Scores (Children from urban and rural preschool institution)

Preschools/Groups	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Cognitive development						
Urban	25	2.56	0.47	48	-1.118	0.269
Rural	25	3.04	0.56			
Attitude for learning						
Urban	25	2.89	0.44	48	-1.320	0.193
Rural	25	3.10	0.47			

Language and communication						
Urban	25	2.27	0.48	48	-1.683	.099
Rural	25	2.85	0.53			
Socio-affective development						
Urban	25	2.59	0.48	48	-1.464	0.15
Rural	25	2.90	0.55			
Psyche-motor development						
Urban	25	2.55	0.50	48	-1.679	0.10
Rural	25	2.99	0.59			

Analysis of the Data and results

Table 1 presents the relationships between the score means obtained by the urban and rural groups with regard to the sub- dimensions of the PARI scale. In the “cognitive development” sub-dimension, the mean of the urban group (urban=2.56) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=3.04). However, according to the result of the t-test made for independent samples to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means, the difference is not significant [$t(48)=- 1.118, p>.05$].

In the “attitude for learning” sub-dimension, the mean of the urban group (urban=2.89) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=3.10), but again according to the result of the t-test, the difference between the means is not significant [$t(48)=-1.320, p>.05$].

In the “language and communication” capacity sub-dimension, the mean of (urban=2.27) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=2.85), but according to the result of the t-test, , there is no significant difference between the means [$t(48)=-1.683, p>.05$].

In the “socio-affective” sub-dimension, the mean of the urban group (urban=2.59) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=2.90). The results of the t-test again showed that there is not a significant difference between the means [$t (48) =-1.464, p>.05$].

In the “Psyche-motor development” sub-dimension, the mean of the urban group (urban=2.55) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=2.99). The results of the t-test again showed that there is not a significant difference between the means [$t (48)=-1.464, p>.05$].

When Table 1 was examined as a whole, no significant differences were found between the pre-test score means of the urban and rural groups in all the sub-dimensions of the PARI Attitude Scale. Accordingly, it can be stated that the urban and rural groups were at equal levels in terms of child-raising attitudes at the beginning of the study.

In Table 2 presents the relationship between the post-test score means obtained by the urban and the rural groups were examined according to the sub-

dimensions of the scale. In the “cognitive development” sub-dimension, the mean of the urban group (urban=2.99) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=3.29), but according to the result of the t-test made for independent samples to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means, there is not a significant difference between the means [$t(48)=-1.817$, $p>.05$].

In the “attitude for learning” sub-dimension, the mean of the urban group (urban=2.59) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=2.95), but results the t-test showed no significant differences [$t(48)=-0.670$, $p>.05$].

In the “language and communication” sub-dimension, the mean of the urban group (urban=2.60) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=2.96), but results the t-test showed no significant differences [$t(48)=-0.670$, $p>.05$].

In the “socio-emotional development” sub-dimension, the mean of the urban group (urban=2.29) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=2.59). The result of the t-test show the difference between the means to be significant [$t(48)=-2.309$, $p<.05$].

In the “psyche-motor development” sub-dimension, the mean of the urban group (urban=2.30) is lower than that of the rural group (rural=2.8). The result of the t-test show the difference between the means to be significant [$t(48)=-2.309$, $p<.05$].

Table 2. Comparisons of Post-test Scores (Scale Sub-Dimensions)

Preschools/Groups	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Cognitive development						
Urban	25	2.99	0.59	48	-1.817	.075
Rural	25	3.29	0.54			
Attitude for learning						
Urban	25	2.59	0.40	48	-0.67	0.506
Rural	25	3.95	0.45			
Language and communication						
Urban	25	2.60	.51	48	-2.309	.025*
Rural	25	2.96	.48			
Socio-affective						
Urban	25	2.29	0.60	48	-1.787	.080
Rural	25	2.59	0.75			
Psyche-motor skills						
Urban	25	2.30	0.50	48	-2.996	.004*
Rural	25	2.80	0.55			

When Table 2 was examined as a whole, no significant differences were found between the post-test score means of the urban kindergarten’s children and the rural groups in the “cognitive attitude”, “attitude for learning” “language and communication”, “socio-emotional development” and

“psyche-motor skills” sub-dimensions of the Scale. However, no significant differences were observed between the development of the urban children and the rural ones according sub-dimensions of the scale. Accordingly, it can be stated that participation by the children to the educational process in the kindergarten, even urban or rural, for a year, created a significant effect in these different aspects of child-raising.

Conclusions

The strategies and programmes for Children’s Early Development should address the child’s multiple needs by taking into account its health, nutrition, early education, psycho-social stimulation and at the same time the role of socio-cultural environment.

The human brain starts to develop a few weeks after conception; after birth the development pace of a child’s cognitive abilities is the fastest in the first three years of life. Therefore, it is vital to make sure that a child’s life starts in a fully affectionate environment, where it receives unconditioned love and attention but also proper stimulation by contact with other children and adults. Equally important is to benefit from proper nutrition which promotes attachment and trust. A good start in life and a protective environment are very important. One healthy, stimulated and well-integrated preschool child acquires abilities that would be helpful during its education years but also on the labour market. It has been proven that early education programmes bring benefits in various fields, such as school achievement and results, progress of educational performance, reduction of delinquency and crime, and access on the labour market (Heckman, 2010). According to the European Commission, all Union countries should take actions which aim „Investment in education and professional training is essential to boost productivity and economic growth;” “emphasis should be laid on increasing efficient investments on all educational levels "(E.C., 2012).

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