

EARLY EDUCATION ALONG THE ROMANIAN HISTORY

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Abstract: *Based on the idea of the recognized importance of early ages for the subsequent evolution of the human personality the paper is focused on an overview of the concerns of Romanian policy of education for introducing the early stages of the psychological development under the formal education. The paper starts with the summary of an official analysis of the Romanian educational policy for pre-school ages in the last decades. A short presentation of what education meant for our ancestors, the Dacians, is continued with three synthetic presentations of what pre-school education represented along the most important parts of Romania's history. The paper suggests the Romanian pioneering role as a country that had explicitly introduced the pre-school stage in the formal education earlier than many other European countries.*

Key words: *pre-school level, formal education, early education, history of Romanian policy of education*

1. Introduction

The importance of early ages for the subsequent evolution of the human personality is argued convincingly in the literature. The concerns of the educational policies for introducing early ages in the context of formal education unfortunately has left room for qualitative growth all over the world. In general it was felt that these ages remain the attention of parental education. But the evolution of human society has made that families are becoming more involved in social and professional life so was born the need for a deeper concern for a beginning of formal education at early ages. Romania is one of the countries that acted as pioneers in this concern for education beginning from early ages.

2. THE LAST DECADE AND CONCERNS FOR EARLY EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

A comparative study realized by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001) presents the situation of education in general, and of preschool level in special. The study is focused on the national policies for education in the South East part of the Europe. The preschool education is the subject of analysis as a topic among ten core topics.

Five core characteristics for this area are highlighted for the eleven scrutinized countries: (1) migration among the analyzed countries, and between them and Western Europe; (2) declining birth rate, (3) mixed ethnic composition of the population; (4) poverty; (5) *participation in education with a differentiate degree in the eleven countries*(Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001: 10, 11)

Romania and Moldavia are the only two countries among the considered ones that have nine compulsory education years. It was in 2001; in 2012 the Romanian Education Act of 2011 has introduced ten compulsory years; the preparatory year (the so called *grade 0* that enrolls children from 6 to 7 years old) was included. A great debate about to what level should belong this grade 0, to school or kindergarten, took place. A significant number of arguments had been given for the both possibilities. In my opinion, the problem is not the affiliation of this grade to one level or another, but the philosophy of the *pedagogical* approach. Nobody should forget that this is a preparatory grade ending a stage (the preschool one) and that it prepares children for an effective beginning of primary education.

In Romania the preschool and primary education should belong to the same educational institution. We have trained teachers for both levels of education and forms of continuing special training could be designed and implemented aiming to improve the quality of the educational activity and smooth the passage from childhood to the age of schooling.

The mentioned Report states that Romania and Bulgaria have a significant higher level of participation of children in preschool education among the countries of the sample. It is correct to stress that the last ten years have kept and even developed this situation. The new law of education states the idea of the necessity to extend the generalization of preschool education under the power of the local administration authorities; they are in charge of organizing and running this action.

In the same time, the Report underlines that the private system for preschool education was not enough developed or was totally inexistent in some countries (2001). Romania has in this moment (2012) a significant number of private kindergarten that offer opportunities for learning in international languages or alternative educational approaches. They are allowed to function by law.

Another study, this time explicitly focused on the *Systems of early education/care and professionalization in Europe (Seepro 2007–2009)* states as “main aims” of the project the following: (1) to access, systematize and analyze data on the professional profiles of core practitioners working in early childhood provision; (2) to contextualize these profiles and professionalization patterns within country-specific histories of early childhood education and care, demographic trends and structural features of the ECEC system, and current issues and challenges facing early childhood practitioners (Oberhuemer, P., Schreyer, I., Neuman M., 2009).

Among the 27 countries involved within this study, on the position 19 is listed Romania. As a consequence, a full Report coming from Romania can be further accessed. Eventually, the project’s results were published in a book and they give interesting answers to the thorny question about the necessary professionalization for acting properly on early education level; these answers have been based on a collection

of detailed data provided by each country report and obtained data after interviews with representatives of each country.

The Romanian Report presents in details the situation of Romanian early education, including the stage from 0 – 3 and further the preschool education up to 6/7. Some aspects are important to refer at, and my presentation will select them. The core issues should be reconsidered because of two important reasons. In 2008, after the Report has been done, a new curriculum for preschool education was put in force, and in 2011 a new Education Act gave a new perspective to the entire educational system (Iucu R., Manolescu M., Ciolan L., Bucur C., 2008).

Thus, the Report submitted in January 2008 shows that “from an institutional point of view, the educational system for children up to 6-7 years contains:

- „Creșă”, *nurseries* (which can be of state or private) for children between 0 and 3 years: (a) the small group, up to the age of one year; (b) the middle group, between one and two years; (c) the big group, between 2 and 3 years.
- *Kindergartens* (which can be of state or private) for children between 3 and 6-7 years: (a) the small group 3-4 years; (b) the middle group 4-5 years; (c) the big group 5-6 years; (d) the group preparatory for school 6-7 years;
- „Centre de zi”, *day care centers* for children under 6 years in a situation of risk, coordinated by the „Directia Judeteana de Asistenta Sociala si Protectie a Copilului”;
- „Centre de zi” *day care centers or particular kindergartens* for children under the age of 6, approved by the MECT, which offer some examples of good practice in this field of activity.” (Iucu R., Manolescu M., Ciolan L., Bucur C., 2008: 6).

Generally speaking, the structure of nowadays is the same, excepting the fact that the Ministry of Education is in charge of the *entire system* from 0 to 6/7 years old. The institutions that take care about the children under three years old were coordinated by the Ministry of Health, before the Education Act of 2011 was put in force.

The same Report shows the program of these institutions:

- „*Nurseries*: (a) with a daily working program - they function in the interval between 7.00 a.m. to 19.00 p.m.; (b) with a flexible daily program according to the parents or legal representatives’ requests; (c) with a weekly working program- from Monday to Friday.

Kindergarten: (a) with a *normal* program (5 hours a day) – ensures the education and the corresponding preparation of the children for school and for the social life; (b) with an *extended* program (10 hours a day) – ensures the education and corresponding preparation of the children for school and for the social life, as well as their social protection (food, supervision and rest); (c) with a *weekly* program- ensures for the whole week the education and corresponding preparation of the children for school and for the social life, as well as the protection, food, supervision and rest for the children coming from disfavored social backgrounds and families” (Iucu R., Manolescu M., Ciolan L., Bucur C., 2008: 6,7). This specificity is generally kept today.

All the presented statistics in the mentioned Report highlight the idea that in Romania of those days the enrollment in kindergartens had an acceptable level and the trained staff for preschool education existed.

As a professor of a higher institution who was and still is involved in the process of teachers' training for preschool and primary education I can aver that this training was enough well done, except the sequence of field based training where a lot of room for improvement existed and still exists. After many years of training of this category of teachers only within high – school level, after 1990 their training on short term university programs had been introduced and since the first decade of this millennium a license program is in force. Thus, step by step, the Romanian legislation has introduced the higher education training for teachers of preschool level and an *equal status* for them with the other teachers' statuses. Unfortunately, the ambiguity of the statements about the teachers training system brought by the new Education Act of 2011, seems to keep an unequal status among them. The new law of education states the necessity of a master degree program for training teachers of these two first educational levels, as well, but the law's text is not enough clear about this request. The training of educational staff for babies and toddlers is not clear at all even today. Generally speaking, the training of teachers represents one of the very weak points of the new law.

The brief presentation of some data about the last decade of the early education in Romania as they appear in different documents shows a certain preoccupation for the area. This has deep roots in the history of this country.

3. *ANCIENT TIMES AND THE CONCERN FOR CHILDREN EDUCATION*

History tells us a lot of details about our ancestors, the Dacians. A selection of those aspects that give information about the education of Dacians' children aims to show the roots of the education in the early history of Romania. The comments are based more on an inference than on direct evidences for the educational perspective.

Thus, the work *Civilizația geto-dacilor* (Geto- Dacians' civilization) shows that the everyday life is the expression of the civilization of a people, "a civilization in actu". It expresses the manner of involving already existing values, goods, knowledge into the real everyday life of the concrete humans. This way of living is shown by the people's way of dressing and living, feeding, getting along with peers; it is involved in their manner to connect inside family life, raise their children, work, spend off time, and establish open relationship with nature, etc. Of all these, I would want to focus only on a few issues, those on *family 's educational climate*, the responsibilities of rising and educating children in relation to specific social needs of the time (type of occupation, type of family, religion, etc.)

Family in Dacians' time, as at other people of that time as well, was a patriarchal and monogamous family, with a high respect for children. Objective evidences of this statement are represented by the Trajan's Column from Rome and Trophy of Adamclisi, which present expressive and convincing images. The growth of young children was especially the mothers' duty. From a certain age, the duties were separated by gender. Thus, the building of the Dacian's houses was a subject of training for boys; these houses were built, as they are revealed on the mentioned Trajan's Column and the Trophy of Adamclisi, directly on the ground and mostly wooden and they had variable shapes: rectangles, round, oval or polygonal. The father

was in charge of training the boys for building them. The care of the life *inside* these buildings, the cooking and the making cloths activities were duties for girls and mothers were the trainers of their daughters.

A special training was necessary aiming to develop the skills involved in actions like prolonging the storage of products by drying, treating with smoke, using salt, freezing, etc. and keeping them in pits burned and barns for all kinds of grain, or actions aiming making timber vessels, ceramic or metal for other products; other special skills were trained like those involved in working with metals and wood, or making ceramics. This training was done inside the family, a small or large family, where people better skilled in an area or another had been mentors for the younger members of the family (*Civilizația geto-dacilor*, n.d; pp. 6,7).

A tumultuous history followed; the people fought with waves of conquerors along it. The Romans conquest (106 – 271/275 AD) meant even the birth of Romanian people, a people with deep Latin roots, in language, traditions and culture. Influences of other nations have left deep traces in the culture of the new Romanian people. Greeks settled on the Eastern lands of Dobrudja; the Tatars who have left descendants in the same area, the Slavs, the Bulgarians, the Turks who dominated for a while the history of this part of the world, all had their influences. Newly formed Romanians knew how to take important aspects from the culture and civilization of people who came on their land or from their neighbors, and to adapt and assimilate these adaptations (H. Daicoviciu apud Cârlan, Gh.V. 2001:13). Formal education was brought by some of these people. The first schools were in Latin, Greek, and Slavonic.

The first school in Romanian language is considered to be the School of Șcheii Brașovului (Transylvania), founded in 1495 or 1583, according to different researchers. This school was able to help the Transylvanian population to withstand the pressure from the surrounding people with a level of education already consolidated. The school of Șcheii developed opportunities for local people to be educated in their own language. It gave them the tools to preserve their traditions and culture. Historical documents reveal that the Romanians of Brașov kept intense and permanent connections with Moldova and Wallachia. Nicholas Sulica considers this school as the oldest school in Romania whose existence and development may follow since the year 1400 (Oltean, V., 2004). A later important moment will be those of G. Lazăr's first Romanian High School.

History speaks about *a modern* education in this part of the world since around 1700. In late eighteenth century the so called *royal schools* are mentioned. They were organized in almost all provinces (*Istoria învățământului din România compendiu*, 1970: 17).

4. THE EARLY EDUCATION IN THE HISTORY OF ROMANIAN EDUCATION

Closer to our century, one can find written works that explicitly show how the formal education in general, and, particularly, early education of Romanian children were considered. A brief presentation of several evidences is intended.

Thus, in the middle of eighteenth century, a new charter is given by the Metropolitan *Nicephorus* in Moldova (on July 6, 1749) which provides, under the

influence of European Enlightenment, the idea of a compulsory school (Urechea, V., 1892: 20, apud Stanciu Stoian, 1957: 23).

Children coming from modest families were supposed to learn: *from three* to twelve years old and above; they were the subject of a census in order to be educated as Christians. More than this, the children of priests were demanded to keep learning until twenty years old and above. Even if a dose of utopia exists in these documents, the concern for education and an obvious awareness of its role should be highlighted. The philosophy of that time, had been influenced by Elements of Enlightenment Age, but scholastic and feudal features are still obvious (Stanciu Stoian, 1957: 20- 24). The age of three that had been stated as starting age of the formal education is an important evidence of the awareness of the importance of this preschool age for the future development of a child.

No explicit presentations of preschool forms of education appear for the nineteenth century, even if it was a significant time for the development of the formal education in Romanian provinces, and then in Romania as a state. But it is important to highlight the strong concern for *primary education* along the late nineteenth century in Romania. Immediately after the unification of principalities, in 1859, the education in Romania had grown. This has propelled the new born country, Romania, at the forefront of Europe, in terms of the compulsory and freedom of primary education, introduced by the *Education Act* in force since 1864. It is important to emphasize that these characteristics appeared in: England in 1870, France in 1872, Switzerland in 1874, Bulgaria in 1879, Italy in 1877, and Serbia in 1882. Education was considered in Romania by law as uniform, ensuring rural and urban schools alike. Gymnasiums, high schools, theological seminaries, military, vocational, technical, medical and artistic schools, and normal schools (for teachers' training) appeared, or were improved in the countryside and in large cities (Rădulescu, D. C., 2003).

The early twentieth century, after the Great Union of 1918 brings laws that refer to the stage of early education. The early twentieth century, after the Great Union of 1918, had brought laws that specifically refer to this stage of formal education.

The author Petrică Corina gives some details about the Constantin Angelescu's laws that include references to the level of so called *garden for children* and to the special training of staff for this level of education (Petrică, C., n.d.). Thus, the laws of this period consider the primary education as the first level of the general and compulsory education; it was structured on three steps: (a) schools ("*gardens*") *for children*; (b) the core primary school and courses for adults; (c) schools and special classes for children with special needs (Law, 1924, art. 1.) It is obvious that Angelescu understood *the preschool education as a part of the primary level of the educational system and this had happened in 1924 in Romania* (Cristea, G., apud Petrică, C., cited work, chapter II, p. 13)

More than this, the law stresses the preparatory role of this stage and considers it as *compulsory and free*. Even if, because of concrete conditions, the law was not entirely implemented, it is important to underline such a modern philosophy at that time. The necessity of a special educational action aiming to help children to adapt themselves to the school life was considered.

Garden of children (later known under the name of *kindergartens*) represented the first institutional educational context aiming a necessary care for children that was supposed to have been monitored. A complex care process was focused on children's physical, moral and intellectual development and this was seen as a *complementary educational action of the family*. The educational activities were aimed to facilitate normal development of children's body and senses, and thus to prepare them for a successful debut of primary education (Petrică, C., n.d.). The institutions for preschool education were opened for both boys and girls from 4 to 7 years old, with optional attendance between 4 – 5 years old and *compulsory* from 5 to 7 “ in all the places where such an institution existed” (Legea pentru învățământul primar al statului și învățământul normal primar din 1924:241).

The school year structure was a defined one: 40-42 weeks, with 20-24 teaching hours per week (Legea pentru învățământul primar al statului și învățământul normal primar din 1924:241).

According to the stated general goal, the syllabus was designed based on detailed aims and educational milestones: "the children will be educated in the spirit of order, cleanliness, discipline, common sense of their own activity; the understanding of knowledge will be based on active intuition of all the things belonging to their immediate environment and free conversations about them" (Legea pentru învățământul primar al statului și învățământul normal primar din 1924; art. 49) ; short prayers, stories, poems, light songs, games and movements accompanied by songs were to be approached; activities as "hand activities in correspondence with their age, drawing freely and exercises aiming to develop children's senses and basic capacities, school trips""(Legea pentru învățământul primar al statului și învățământul normal primar din 1924; art. 49) were asked."The Garden of children" should have a game room, a play yard of and a small garden with trees and flowers, in addition to the classrooms" (Legea pentru învățământul primar al statului și învățământul normal primar din 1924; art. 49).

Ștefan Bărsănescu presents a comment about this article of the law that includes the gardens of children (kindergarten) as an integrative part of an national educational system at the beginning of the twentieth century; he thinks that this idea of the law is an utopia at that time, but, however the author appreciates the intrinsic value of this provision of law (Bărsănescu, Ș., Bărsănescu, F., 1978: 97). It is important to stress that this integration of children in a formal education system is not entirely solved in developed countries of the world a thousand years later (2012).

The structure of the primary education is, according to Bărsănescu, very well articulated and able to ensure a harmonious, systematically conducted development of the students of an age labeled as " spurt development" (from 5 to 16 years old); (Bărsănescu, Ș., Bărsănescu, F., 1978: 97). The meaning of *primary* concept here is not those used in nowadays Romania that refers only to the first basic years of developing the so called *instrumental* culture (reading, writing, basic of math and sciences). Primary education in early twentieth century is similar with *general education in contemporary time*. Maybe, a return to such a view could help the nowadays debates about to what level should belong the new considered grade 0.

Also, it is interesting to mention that the early twentieth century stressed the necessity of a special training for the teaching staff of preschool education level. The Angelescu's Law of Primary Education (1924) showed a special concern about the teacher's training aimed to take place within the so called *normal schools*. Thus, in 1924 this type of schools received a new regulation, an entire title of the law (Title II) being focused on organizing and functioning of the Normal Schools with a unique structure for the entire Romania (Petrică, C. ,n.d.p 17).

The purpose of these institutions was "to train the teachers of the schools for young children and the teachers of primary schools"; a consistent organization throughout the country is demanded. Depending on their specific targets the normal schools were classified into: *normal school for male and female teachers*, and *special normal school*, preparing the *teachers for kindergarten* (Law of primary education: 291, apud Petrică, C. cit., chapter II: 17)

5. THE EARLY EDUCATION ALONG THE COMMUNIST PERIOD

The interwar period with its significant improvement in education was followed by the Second World War with its wounds, and after the war by years of communism, rather numerous in Romania.

The *first period of communism*, with the specific of an almost entire imitation of the Soviet Union model still kept an eye on children education, despite of the reduction of the compulsory education from seven to four years only. In fact, according to Ștefan Bîrsănescu, the only positive aspect of this communist period was the success to enroll in several years almost all the children in a primary four year school system (92,1% of the registered children of 7-11 year old). In 1948 special schools for children with special needs were opened.

For the interest of this paper's topic, it is necessary to stress the idea that children aged 3 to 7 years old were involved in kindergartens with daily, weekly or seasonal schedule, organized as a network under the elementary school management (Bârsănescu Ș., apud D.C., Rădulescu, D. C., 2006: 3).

A new Education Act was voted by the Great National Assembly (M.A.N) in 1968. This opened *the second stage of communist education*, a more progressive and opened stage. The fundamentals of the Education Act stated to take into account the valuable traditions of the Romanian school and the most important achievements of the universal pedagogy.

Several characteristics of the new stage of education system were defined: (1) the free education (Legea invatamantului, 1968, art. 7) (2) the state trait of school and its laic feature (article 3); (3) unique and free textbooks but written by Romanian not Soviet authors from now on (Legea invatamantului, 1968, art. 63).

The educational system had well defined stages: *preschool (for children from 3 to 6)*; general education lasting 10 compulsory years (grade one to ten); grade IX and grade X were considered the first years of high school. The high schools were divided into two main types: (a) *high schools for general education* lasting 4 years with two possible trajectories: *humanistic and real* (arts and sciences); (b) *specialty high-schools* lasting 4 or 5 years with a wide number of profiles. The article 10 allowed a modern

language of a high circulation as being the teaching language in some school units. (Legea invatamantului, 1968, art. 33). It is also important to emphasize that after many years the concept of *general culture*, previously removed from the official documents, was not anymore considered as dangerous).

Seven articles of the law are *explicitly focused on preschool education* (17 – 23). They states: (a) the role of preschool education firstly to prepare children for a proper insertion within general school, and secondly to support parents in their responsibilities for children's education; (b) the optional character of preschool education (a regression comparative with the progressive vision of the early twentieth century is obvious); (c) children with special needs can be enrolled in special education institutions; (d) the educative role of kindergarten is completed with a social care role by the statement of the possibility to open institutions with a long day care, called "*cămin*" *de copii*/ home for children, with a small financial contribution of parents for meals and afternoon care; (e) types of institution that can be approved and issues connected to the management of preschool institutions (Legea invatamantului, 1968, art. 20).

The third period of communist education meant a new political interference in education, with less favorable effects. The beginning of this period was marked by the year 1978 that gave another education law.

This law has kept the main features of the previous one, in terms of 10 years of compulsory education and stated the two steps of high – school as upper secondary education. The first step was considered compulsory and the second one was optional. Thus, this law had political different emphases and has brought a new philosophy about the ideal of the communist education, but it did not introduce structural novelties.

The preschool education was regulated by the articles 24 – 27. The general aim of preschool education was focused on children's development with important emphasizes put on their training for becoming good communists. No important changes were added, but the new designed curriculum (named at that time as "*program for preschool education*") took into account the new philosophy.

6. THE POST COMMUNISM PERIOD

The post communist period was a very tumultuous one from the point of view of education. The existence of a cascade of reforms, started and never ended, represents the core feature of this interval.

The law of 1995 gives some new directions in education and tries to introduce, together with the *curricular* philosophy, a qualitative improvement. Unfortunately, the results were far from what was expected, despite the best intentions. The main causes can be listed: (1) the lack of support of a consistent general strategy; (2) the absence of an adequate involvement of the existing human resources with high expertise; (3) the lack of a proper training of people who designed and of those who were asked to implement the reform. As a consequence, in 2012 we still speak about the necessity of a new reform.

For the preschool level I can say that the curriculum design has been done by people who were not in depth familiarized with the reality of kindergarten. It seems only theoretical knowledge of a field without feeling the spirit of activity in that area is not the most effective basis for achieving a curricular design. That is why teamwork is necessary and an effective integration of both theorists and practitioners of the reference level within this curriculum designers' team.

First of all the law of education in 1995 republished and amended in 1999 is an evidence of this continuing tendency to change without a clear aim, without a strategy of the educational system as a whole. Article 6 of the law ²⁴has shortened the compulsory education from 10 to 9 years. Another unjustified regression occurred (Education Act, 1995)

The second chapter of the law with two articles (18, 19) presents the core requests for the preschool education. Thus, this level is supposed to involve children from 3 to 7 years old, stating the start of schooling at 7 years old. The previous types of kindergartens are preserved: with normal, extended and weekly schedules. The article 19 states the preparatory grade included into the preschool stage and, in my opinion, this was a wise decision. Even if the presumed generalization of this preparatory year was to lead to consider it as a compulsory year, it should have been kept into preschool stage or, the entire preschool level could have been introduced in the primary stage like in Angelsecu's time. The preschool level could have had optional and compulsory sequences. Unfortunately, the new law of education of 2011 that has created the dispute about this preparatory year, as I have mentioned, introduces this grade 0 into the primary school, without a previous preparation of the necessary conditions.

The Education Act of 2011 and the previous new curriculum for preschool education in force from 2008 will be the subject of an in depth presentation because in the long history of this educational stage they represent an important step but, and in the same time, a very controversial one.

7. Perspectives

The new Law of Education (2011) stipulates that not only the preschool stage is encapsulated within the formal educational system but the early stages as well. Once again Romania is a pioneer within the European Context. A special concern and obvious measures must be taken into account for the special training of teachers who are supposed to work with children between 0 and 3 years old. They must be considered as professionals with a very difficult task to cope with.

Equally with pediatricians, this category of teachers experience communication difficulties with children, while their action is huge responsibility for children's subsequent evolution.

The Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education of Brasov University in partnership with University "1 Decembrie 1918" Alba Iulia, University "Aurel Vlaicu" Arad, and the Istituto di Scienza e della Formazione Psicologiche della educazione Rome, Italy are pioneers as well, through developing the first master program focused

²⁴ Education Act, 1995, Romania

on the training of the mentioned professionals within the context of an EU project with the topic : PERSPECTIVES OF A MASTER TRAINING FOR EXPERTS IN EARLY EDUCATION AND EARLY SCHOOLING at a higher quality [PERFORMER].

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