

## LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY AGES

**Gabriela KELEMEN, Ph.D,**

**Faculty of Educational Science, Psychology and Social Sciences**

**"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Romania**

**gabrielakelemenuav@gmail.com; gabriela.kelemen@uav.ro**

**Abstract:** *development and social progress depend on the investments that are made in children through services provided by the state for the children`s development in proper social and education conditions. Along with Romania`s adherence to the European Union the state policies for childcare have undergone serious changes. They have been given the chance to grow and develop harmoniously according to their innate data and nature. Thus, educational, sanitary and social regulations have been adopted trying to offer children better development conditions. Romania tried to comply with EU regulations on early age care and development. This article is a comparison between early education curriculum in Romania and other European states.*

**Key words:** *Curriculum; child education; strategies; childcare;*

### **I. The importance of investment in early education**

*Early Childhood Education might be considered to be education which takes place before compulsory education. The term refers to education in its broadest sense, including childcare and development (<http://www.csee-etuice.org/images/attachments/ETUCEPolicyPaperonECEEN.pdf>).*

The importance of early education in society is based on thorough studies conducted in Europe but mostly in the United States of America (Perry Preschool, Ypsilanti, Michigan, 1962). Studies have highlighted the fact that if education begins in early ages, namely in preschool, teenagers fit better into the society and their anti-social behaviour is reduced at maturity (Steve Barnett, 2008). Investment in early education is extremely important and the results consist of reduced anti-social deeds, increased physical and mental strength of individuals and resistance to life changes. Therefore, the past years` national education policies placed yearly education in the centre of education. The interest for the education of children aged 0 to 7 can be found in various documents and national but also international studies. Investment in education is essential due to its role in socio-economic development, as it is obvious that “education is the foundation of economic

development” (Păun, E, 1974). Education produces direct effects by training people for a certain field (profession, activity) and indirect effects by producing economic and social advantages. Quality education implies certain costs, which will be amortized through “strictly economic profitability”. Education could produce cost savings by diminishing negative social phenomena which are generated or influenced by the lack of education or poor education of most society members” (Voiculescu, 2008). Romania has complied with the European Commission’s and European Parliament’s regulations on early education after the adherence to the European Union. European Council’s documents from the last decade mention that by 2020, 95% of preschool children with ages between 4 and school age will have been enrolled in kindergartens. Special emphasis is placed on integration of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to the European Commission all member states should give particular attention on aspects such as: „Investment in education and professional training is essential for increasing the productivity and economic growth”, and emphasis should be placed on increasing efficient investments on all education levels” (C.E., 2012). The United States have also reconsidered their educational policies on early education. They consider it highly important for their national education system and therefore allot considerable sums of money for the integration of children aged 3 and 4. Programmes financed by the national budget are allotted for disadvantaged families (Steve Barnett, 2008).

## **II. Early age education and social development**

In the last period, special attention has been given to the necessity of investment in early education. Studies conducted on this issue prove the necessity of education at childhood age given the features and characteristics of child personality, the manner of information assimilation, the child’s ability to acquire knowledge, develop skills and abilities that are required by an optimal future development. The child is not an adult in miniature; the child is a person with a personality in development, (Jean Piaget, Kolberg, Erikson, Gardner, Goleman, Bronfenbrenner). The child’s transformation into a responsible adult, capable of adding value to the society depends on the way education is made at this age. The child needs constant care and support to grow up according to his innate nature but also to socio-economic policies which promote anti-discrimination, equal chances, and rights for minorities (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2007). Early childhood development and learning have been the focus of extensive research and initiatives over the past few years and the new scientific findings put a new perspective and an increased importance on teaching and learning in the early years. The term “Early Education” is used in all documents of the European Union institutions and this term is adopted by the majorities of EU countries. The educational politics see early education as a fundamental part of life-long

learning, and the curriculum, as a pedagogical tool, follows the main orientation that contribute to harmonies develop of the child in early childhood.

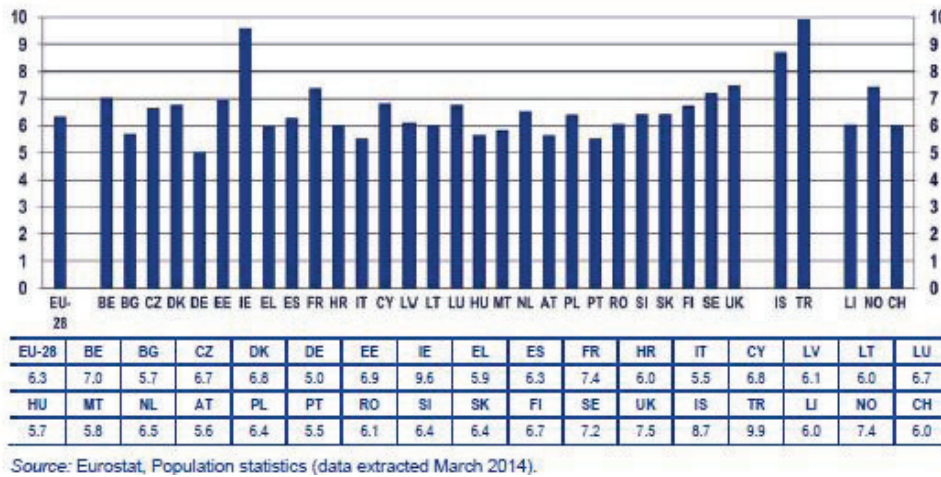
The Romanian Early Education Curriculum as Reference Framework incorporates also, as in the European Reference Framework the eight key competences:

- Communication in the mother tongue;
- Communication in foreign languages;
- Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology ;
- Digital competence
- Learning to learn
- Social and civic competences
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
- Cultural awareness and expression

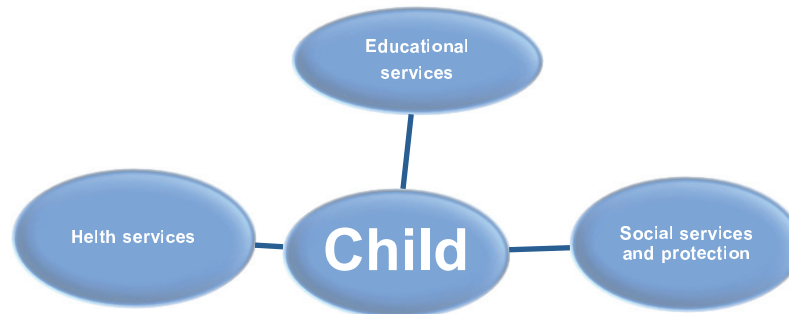
The curriculum for early education in Romania aims to form the child not just as a spectator or witness, but an active participant in his own training. Thus, children are actively involved in different learning activities. Another goal of early education programmes is the approach of topics such as: exploitation of child's work, inappropriate work which affects the child's development, the connection between the young child's education and future profession, the proper age for taking up work and its connection to different cultural models, gender relation in taking up work; the children's response to adversity, measures taken to the child's safety, the connection between economic development and family education (E. Vraşmaş, 2008). High quality education promotes pro-social values which develop a creative individual capable of lifelong self-education and willing to be actively and innovatively involved in social life.

The educational curriculum for early education promotes quality programmes for early childhood education and stresses out the importance of child development based on its innate nature and pace. It also promotes the idea of authentic education. The quality of education depends on the investment made in educational policies. They should lead to a progressive child development performed in a safe socio-affective environment. The coordinates of preschool education approaches are oriented and centred on children. The aim is to stimulate the child's development on all its personality dimensions. The curriculum for early education focuses on three directions of early education set at European level. The first one aims a perspective focused on the child, on its development needs. It involves day-care centres which organize mainly educational programmes and use strategies for training professionals as human resource needed to offer various services to young children. Services provided by the society involve

resources used in day-care centres, which put forth preschool learning programmes based on pedagogic curriculum. They involve professionals trained in early education but also programmes for parents, families and the communities. The second direction consists of miscellaneous services, mainly homecare services and child centred educational programmes which normally don't require professionals. The third direction is oriented towards a variety of services focused on parents and families. They offer support services for families and provide plentiful services and activities for various needs (EACEA P9 Eurydice, 2009). Currently, according to EUROSTAT there are 6.3 % children under the age of 6 in Europe.



Concerns in Europe and USA are focused on child care provided by health services and social protection services for children aged 0 to 2-2,5 and educational services for children aged 2,5/3 and 6/ 7.



**Figura nr.1.**

The implementation of a proper curricular programme is not sufficient for an efficient early education. The long term efficiency is given

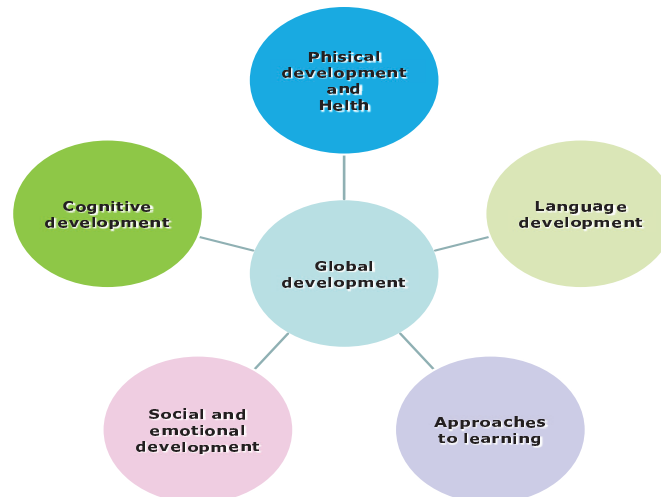
by the children's, the school's and family's involvement in education. These factors should offer educational programmes and improvement interventions that take into account family aspects and the manner of approaching education at this age.

### III. Early childhood Education in Romania

#### *III.1.A comprehensive approach to the child in the Romanian educational system*

Nowadays, as mentioned by the predecessors Frobel, Montessori and Steiner, the child is regarded as a personality in development, with its own training needs, with the right to education in a favourable environment. Each child is unique and non-recurring. Playing is specific to childhood, through games children assimilate knowledge, and develop their skills and abilities (G. Kelemen, 2014). Curriculumul pentru educație timpurie între 0-3 și 3- 6/7 ani urmărește dezvoltarea copilului pe domenii de dezvoltare: dezvoltare fizică și a sănătății, dezvoltare cognitivă, dezvoltarea limbajului și a comunicării, dezvoltare socio-emoțională și dezvoltarea capacităților și atitudinilor în învățare.

#### **A comprehensive approach of child education**



If we make a simple comparison between the Romanian, European and American Curriculum we could observed that between them they aren't significant difference , as we see in Figures 2 and 3.

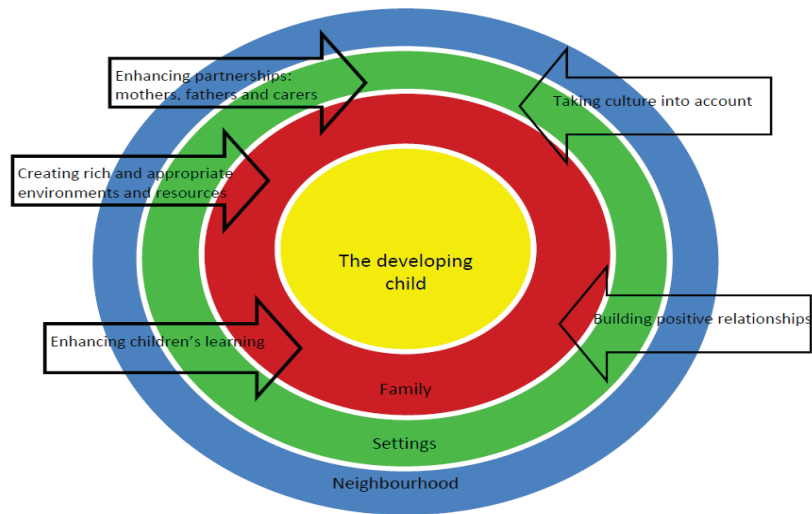


Figure 1 - The contexts of children's development

Figura nr.2.

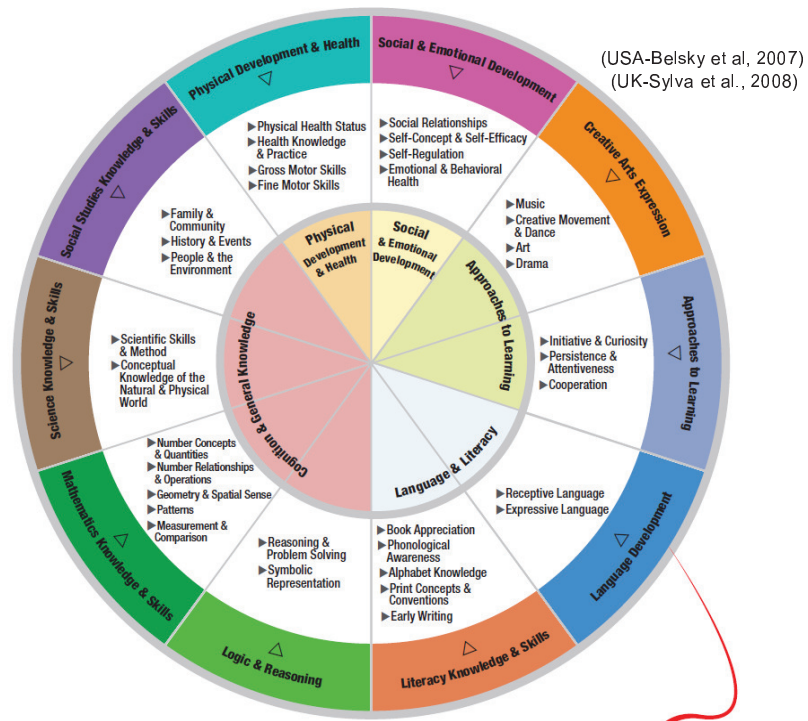


Figura nr.3.

### *III.2. Values promoted by the curriculum for early education:*

- the child's fundamental rights (the right to life and health, to family, to education, to be listened to and the freedom of speech);
- the child's global development;
- inclusion, as process of promoting diversity and tolerance;
- non-discrimination and the exclusion of social, cultural, economic and gender inequity (equal chances for all children, irrespective of their gender, ethnic belonging, religion through a balanced educational approach).

### *III.3. Subject areas covered by the curriculum*

Language and communication, **premises for reading-writing;**

- **Science** (knowledge of the environment, mathematical activities, ecological education);
- **Aesthetic education** (artistic-visual arts activities and musical education);
- **Physical education** (health education, games and movement activities);
- **Social education** (activities of self-knowledge and development with emphasis on independence, autonomy and cooperation; diversity with emphasis on inclusion, traffic safety activities, religious education activities, practical and home activities):

The subject areas covered by the curriculum are used in the following categories of activity:

- language education activities;
- mathematics activities;
- knowledge of the environment;
- social education;
- practical and home activities;
- musical education;
- visual art education;
- physical education.

The lay-out of topics for common activities is stipulated by the *curriculum for early education*, but the preschool teacher has the possibility to choose also other topics according to the syllabus objectives and the children's interests.

The chosen games and activities are very important in the curriculum for early education. The predominant activities are fun games, movement games in open air, sport games, drama, puppet theatre, movie projection, computer games, walks, visits, etc.

The percentage of activity types during a preschool day is 50% frontal activities, 25% individual activities and 25% small group activities carried out as follows:

- frontal and in small groups;
- individually and in small groups;
- frontal and individually.

Activities in small groups are predominant in freely chosen activities when

children work in stimulation areas and the groups are built based on the children's option.

The aims of early education in Romania are:

- Promoting the **concept of child's global development** (the perspective of a child's global development emphasises the importance of a **child's development areas**, especially today when preparation for school and life should not focus just on academic skills but also on abilities, attitudes and practical skills);

- Creating a real link between **experiential areas and development areas** without searching for their perfect overlap;

- **Coordinating the joint efforts of all three partners** of the teaching-learning-evaluation process, namely: **teachers, parents and children**, but also of collaborators and educational partners whose involvement is equally important;

- A new series of **learning activities**: *Activities on subject areas (which can be integrated activities or activities on specific disciplines), Games and chosen activities, and Activities of personal development*;

- Organizing the yearly study programme around six major topics (*Who am I/Who are we?, When, how and why does it happen?, How was, is and will it be here on Earth?, How do we plan/organize an activity?, By means of what and how do we express what we feel? and What and how do I want to be?*); the order of introducing them has no connection with the moment when the teacher can do other projects with the children;

- Compliance with the **daily programme** (with hourly guidelines) established by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth;

- Filling in the daily programme with **movement activities/ moments/ sequences** (movement games with text and song, physical education, refreshment activities, competitions or sport tracks, walks, etc).

The curriculum for early education provides a few annual study topics. We have to mention that they do not have to be covered in the given order but according to the children's age. Thus, with children 3-5 years of age, it is not compulsory to cover all topics within one school year (teachers can cover at least 4).

The types of activities covered by the syllabus for pre-schoolers are:

***Routines, Transitions and Learning activities.***

The number of daily activities is correlated with the number of classes from a teacher's working hours allotted to this activity.

Routines are guiding activities for the entire daily activity. They cover the child's basic needs and make a contribution to its global development. Routines actually include activities like: ***child's arrival to kindergarten, breakfast, hygiene – washing and toilette, lunch, napping/afternoon relaxation, snacks and departure*** and are different from other activities because they keep repeating every day, at settled times with almost the same contents.



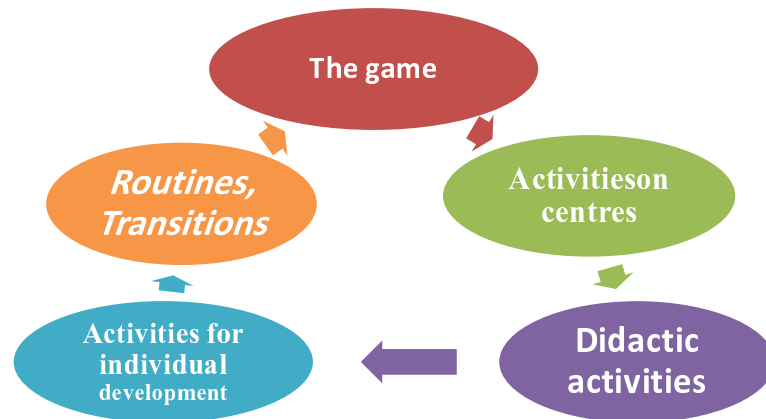


Figure 4. Daily programme

Transitions are short activities that make the transition *from routines to learning activities, from the moments of instructive-educational activity to those of hygiene* at different times of the day. The means of performing these activities vary according to the child's age, the context and the teacher's qualities. Therefore, they can be activities carried out in a fast pace given by music or by counting, tongue twisters or an activity which takes place simultaneously with the transition moment, namely a game with texts or songs or movements already familiar to the pupils.

**The game** is the child's fundamental activity that supports routines and transitions and obviously, learning activities. Games influence the behaviour and foreshadows the child's developing personality. Thus, the main means of conducting the instructive-educational process at infant and preschool level are: games (free, guided and didactic games), chosen didactic and/or learning activities.

**Learning activities** are a set of systematically, methodologically and intensively planned actions which are organized and conducted by a teacher. Their aim is to achieve the goals set out by the curriculum. Their unwinding requires joint efforts of all three partners of the teaching-learning-evaluation process, namely: teachers, parents and children. Learning activities are carried out either with the whole group or in small groups as integrated activities (knowledge with interdisciplinary character) focusing on certain subject areas: **Language and communication, Science, Aesthetic education, Social education, Physical education.**

Among the means used for these activities we mention: didactic games, storytelling, exercises with individual material, experiments, building, reading with pictures, observation, conversation, stories made up by children, memorizing, etc.

Learning activities at preschool age can be organized as educational projects. The teacher can organize not more than 7 projects with duration of 6 weeks/project in one school year. The teacher can also choose to work on smaller projects with duration of 1-3 weeks according to the importance of the topic and the children's interest for the topic. There may also be weeks when children are not involved in any project, but the teacher sets weekly topics of interest for the children. However, there may also be daily projects or trans-semester ones.

**The games and didactic activities** are chosen by the children and they help them socialize in a progressive manner and initiate in the knowledge of physical world, the social-cultural environment they belong to, mathematics, communication, written and spoken language. They are organized in small groups, in pairs or even individually. Their success depends on the stimulation offered by the educational environment as well as on the proper organization of classroom on centres such as; **Library, Corner of the house/Role play, Constructions, Science, Aesthetic education, sand and water etc.** The centres are organized according to available material resources, space, children's age. If there is enough space, the classroom can be divided into all centres or at least into two of them.

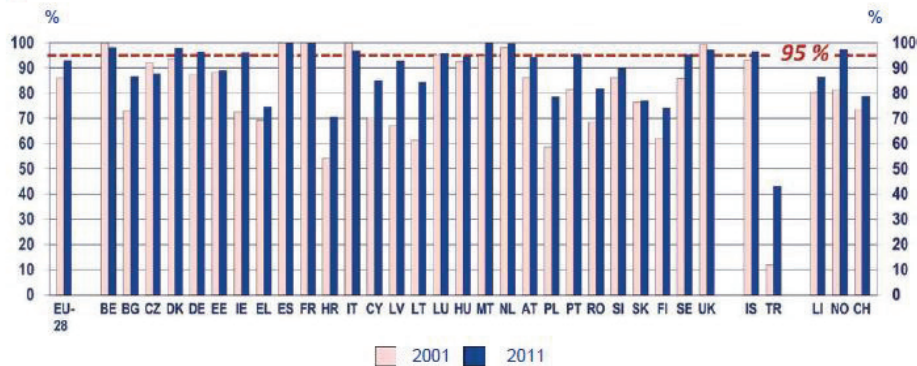
**Optional activities** are considered also learning activities and are included in the daily schedule of a kindergarten child. They are chosen by parents from the offer presented by the educational unit at the 1<sup>st</sup> of September and approved by the School Board. Optional activities can be conducted by the group's teacher or by a trained teacher that would work together with the other teachers. The timing allotted to an optional activity is equal to the other learning activities. Thus, there will be just one optional class for children of 37 – 60 months (3- 5 years of age) and two for children of 61 – 84 months (5 – 7 years of age). *For children under the age of 3 there are no optional activities planned.*

#### IV.

Early childhood education is seen as important and as equal to another level of education: "Educated side by side, untroubled from infancy by divisive prejudices, acquainted with all that is great and good in the different cultures, it will be borne in upon them as they mature that they belong together. Without ceasing to look to their own lands with love and pride, they will become in mind Europeans, schooled and ready to complete and consolidate the work of their fathers before them, to bring into being a united and thriving Europe."

Beside all the political and Curriculum reglementation important for child development is to provide early education statting with early age.

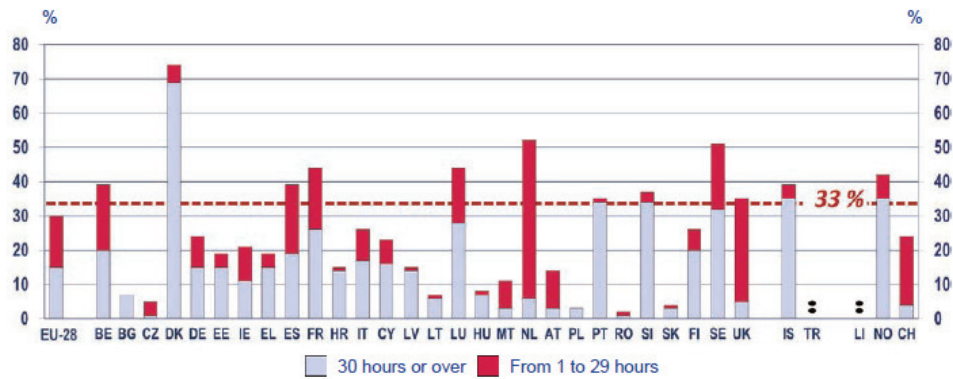
**Figure C1: Participation rates in ECEC (children between 4-years-old and the starting age of compulsory education) as a percentage of the corresponding age group, 2001, 2011**



	EU-28	BE	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	HR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU
2001	85.9	100.0	73.2	92.0	93.7	87.7	88.3	72.6	69.3	100.0	100.0	54.1	100.0	70.4	67.2	61.2	95.3
2011	92.9	98.1	86.6	87.8	97.9	96.4	89.1	96.1	74.6	100.0	100.0	70.6	96.8	85.0	92.7	84.2	95.6
	HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK	IS	TR	LI	NO	CH
2001	92.5	95.0	98.1	86.0	58.5	81.5	68.5	86.0	76.4	62.0	85.7	99.0	93.3	11.9	80.4	81.3	73.5
2011	94.5	100.0	99.6	94.3	78.4	95.4	82.0	89.8	76.9	74.0	95.3	97.0	96.5	43.1	86.3	97.2	78.7

Source: Eurostat, UOE (data extracted November 2013).

**Figure C3: Participation rates of children under the age of 3 in ECEC, by hours per week, 2011**



	EU-28	BE	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	HR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU
30 hours or over	15	20	7	1	69	15	15	11	15	19	26	14	17	16	14	6	28
From 1 to 29 hours	15	19	0	4	5	9	4	10	4	20	18	1	9	7	1	1	16
	HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK	IS	TR	LI	NO	CH
30 hours or over	7	3	6	3	3	34	1	34	3	20	32	5	35	:	:	35	4
From 1 to 29 hours	1	8	46	11	0	1	1	3	1	6	19	30	4	:	:	7	20

Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC (data extracted November 2013).

PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) as international survey conducted under the auspices of the OECD observed that those

children who attended early education measured higher performance levels at the aged 15<sup>th</sup> in reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy, than those who not attended early education. *The survey is based on representative samples of 15- year-old pupils, who may either be in lower secondary or upper secondary education, depending on the structure of the system. Besides measuring performance, PISA 2012 international survey includes questionnaires to identify variables in the school and family context which may shed light on their findings. All indicators cover both public schools and private schools, whether grant-aided or otherwise.* (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>)

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