

ACADEMIC STRATEGIES OF CREATING SPECIALISTS QUALIFIED IN EARLY EDUCATION

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Abstract:

High quality education and care from a very early age creates a good foundation for lifelong learning, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Equity in education is not yet realised for children from poor backgrounds or whose parents have a low level of education. Our research proved the importance of two elements: the first would be the importance of education by qualified personnel of children from the first day they enter a crèche facility. The second important aspect is related to communication in the relationship between professionals and parents in stimulating parental engagement. We underline the contribution crèche facilities can have in improving the learning opportunities of children of this age by offering a balance between social inclusion and educational stimulation.

Key words: *early childhood education, children at risk, crèche facilities, professional educators.*

JEL classification: *I21*

High quality education and care from a very early age represents the basis for good learning outcomes, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Equality in access to educational opportunities is not yet realised for children from poor backgrounds, migrant families or with parents of low education.

A number of social and economic factors can negatively influence the physiological and psychological development of the child leading to a higher probability of school failure or school dropout. By socio-economic factors we understand poverty, belonging to disadvantaged social groups, parental illiteracy, or their low educational level, mentalities, traditions etc. Experience has shown that there is usually not a single cause-effect relationship but that it is a combination of factors that have serious consequences for the child.

Risk factors include at the level of the child: low birth weight, health problems, low intelligence (IQ) and difficult temperament. Children at risk belong to: single parent households, migrant families, families with several children. The parents and the family may have psychiatric problems (depression, substance abuse), marital conflict, a large number of children, single parenthood, low income, job stress, unemployment, and frequent changes of residence; and at the level of the neighbourhood and community: poor housing conditions, confrontations with crime and violence, and environmental pollution (Garcia Coll & Magnuson, 2000).

The economist and Nobel prize laureate Heckman (Heckman, 2006) has argued that, at least for the United States, high quality early childhood education and care provides *one of the few* effective policy means of increasing social and economic opportunities for disadvantaged (minority) communities and, therefore, for society as a whole. Based on cost-benefit analyses of preschool programmes and alternative policy

measures to increase quality, Heckman demonstrates a decreasing economic return of investments the later in the course of life that these measures are provided. Ideally, pre-primary school equips children with broad-ranging skills that support the child to learn and to profit from the whole range of educational opportunities that primary and secondary schools provide. The better equipped they are at the start, the more effective education in school will be.

In 2009 and 2010 pre-primary education was a priority of the EU which recommended approaches taking account of the psychological development of the children as well as involving solid parental support and the training of specialised high quality staff (EACEEA, p. 9). The results of research studies have showed that the best cognitive results are achieved when cognitive and social-emotional outcomes are pursued simultaneously.

Pre-primary education and care in most countries are provided in a complex mixed and segmented market, with several different types of care and education (such as centre-based care, home-based care, half-day or full-day care), different prices, different financing systems, different quality regulations, causing in many countries socially selective use that tends to reinforce existing disadvantages (OECD, 2001). The supply is provided by private, partly subsidised or fully subsidized organisations. Subsidies may be centralised (passed directly to centres) or decentralised (through vouchers and tax reduction for parents).

In order for a pre-primary education to be efficient we need: intensive programs, early starting, child centred education, parental involvement, parent education, educational home activities, family support and perseverance in each of these (EACEEA, pp.23). In order to obtain this efficient intervention programme an interdisciplinary and complex approach is both recommended and necessary. This should include an educator with a bachelor's degree in education especially trained for this age group, involvement of the paediatrician, of the child psychologist of the social worker and of the local authorities. Researchers have shown that specially conceived programmes are much more efficient than home-based education as parents rarely have the necessary skills to carry out such programmes properly. Educational programmes for children under three should work in a child centred way based on the knowledge we have about the stage of their psychological development.

The fact that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are in danger of school failure has led to the idea of accessing pre-primary education between one and two years of age, creating the basis for further learning, preventing school dropout, increasing equity of outcomes.

Children are constantly at risk of not learning to learn. Newborns are equipped for learning, but in an un-stimulating environment there is the risk that children lose their intrinsic motivation to learn. For this not to happen it is best for the educational approach to be provided by a specific facility (crèche) and by adequately trained staff able to develop methods to foster toddlers' communicative and social skills as well as their desires to learn.

Two main organisational models for early childhood education and care services are dominant in Europe. The first model makes provision for young children organised in a single phase for all children of preschool age. Staff responsible for the children's education have the same qualifications and salaries regardless of the age of the children they look after. These teachers or play group leaders may work together with childminders and nurses. The second model is the most widespread in Europe and provides services according to the age of the children (normally for children between 0-3 and children between 3-6). (EACEEA, pp.22).

For some countries, Romania and Spain in particular, continuing professional development reflects the changes taking place in the profession in line with ECEC

policy changes. Therefore, in Romania, staff have to take part in courses to upgrade their qualifications or improve their knowledge regarding provision for the younger age group; significant changes have taken place in the structure and management of day nurseries as a result of new legislation. Such courses take account of new approaches to ECEC and are provided on the basis of an assessment of training needs at local level. Management staff, education staff, and medical staff are legally obliged to undertake 40 hours of professional development annually (EACEEA, pp.119-120).

The professional profile of staff in day nurseries is therefore varied, yet their training is usually vocational (full-time or sandwich courses) and below the level of higher education.

In addition, in all countries except Belgium, Estonia, Spain (in the level 0-3 years) and Romania staffing in ECEC settings also includes unqualified or less qualified assistants who carry out tasks related to the personal care of children. Educational work is confined to qualified staff while changing nappies, feeding and other diverse tasks are given to auxiliaries. It is therefore evident that there is a multiplicity of staff alternating in the provision of care which could result in a lack of continuity in children's learning and in building relationships – an area worthy of further study.

Staff working in settings for under-3s are largely nurses with medical qualifications. The core of the staffing structure in settings for children under 2-3 years is usually provided by adults with qualifications in education who generally deal with the full range of child related tasks. They are sometimes assisted by auxiliaries who provide personal care for children.

High quality teacher education is needed to address this issue by creating proper teaching materials, tackling mentality and cultural diversity related issues. Teachers can also call upon the services of specialists such as physiotherapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, or specialist teachers to help children who have learning difficulties or children at risk (EACEEA, pp. 114). Staff in these settings are managed either by members elected from their peers or by managers appointed by the responsible authorities. In the latter case, the managers usually undertake specific management training. All professional staff in charge of activities with children are educated to higher education level at ISCED 5A or B with the exception of those in the Czech Republic, Malta, Austria and Romania (EACEEA, pp. 115).

Most countries use family income and number of children as criteria to adjust the levels of fees to be paid for these services (EACEEA, pp. 85). Some European countries, mostly the Nordic ones, have a universal guarantee of subsidised early childhood education and care, while the majority do not.

Through our project we try to prevent school failure and social exclusion in an untraditional way, we focus on the youngest children under three. In order to obtain this we need to have: specially trained teaching staff, adequate learning facilities (crèche), involved parents and support from the local and national authorities. We intend to stimulate parents to bring their children to the crèche. Studies have shown that usually as long as the mother is on maternity leave she will not bring the child into such a learning environment. By support from the local authorities we understand all the help parents can get in order to find a place in a crèche facility for their child and the costs for this educational involvement of the child should not be a burden for the parent. The parent should see the crèche as being beneficial for the child and for himself. For children aged 0-3, the central level is involved but it is the local level which is responsible for the majority of expenditure (infrastructure, salaries, etc.). The central level intervenes more in the sector for 3-6 year-olds through infrastructure modernisation programmes.

At the present moment in Romania, starting 01.01.2011, there is a change in the law for parental leave. While up to the beginning of this year mothers could stay home

for 24 months and get 85% of the salary, now they have the possibility to choose: either stay with the child one year and go back to work and get for the next year a monthly material stimulus, or stay at home for 24 months but with a lower allowance. Simultaneously a measure has been taken to create new crèches. After 1989 a lots of crèches disappeared completely, because their existence was associated with the communist regime, where mothers were not allowed to stay at home with their children and both parents had to go to work for 8 hours, with no possibilities for flexible working schedules. After 1990 in response to the severe decrease of natality, and in order to stimulate the population to have children, maternal leave was increased up to two years and even up to three years for parents having a handicapped child. So, at the present moment the number of crèche-type facilities is extremely low and totally insufficient and unprepared at the moment.

And now there is a new movement to change small hospitals that are not well equipped or cost efficient into crèches. The government is speaking about 150-200 such institutions.

The Romanian Government supports early education as a part of lifelong learning process through the launch crèches vouchers. Those have an educational purpose, and are funded from the state budget through the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection.

The employer has the legal obligation to provide crèche vouchers for employees who request them and who give up, in part or in full, their maternity leave. The crèche voucher is granted at the employee's request (using a legal form), both for the state system, and for the private. It is granted upon the request of a parent, or to the guardian or to whom the child's care and education has been entrusted.

This voucher has a value equal to the standard cost per toddler. Its value is determined annually by the Education, Research, Youth and Sports Ministry. The parent has the right to choose the nursery that their child will attend, in the state or private system. The coupon is received in full by the day care nursery chosen by the parent. When parents choose a crèche whose fees exceed the monthly voucher they pay the difference.

According to the new law early childhood education is organised in kindergartens, crèches or day centres.

The teaching positions in early education are - teacher-child careers - one job is standardized for each group of children in institutions with prolonged or weekly program, teachers are standardized by shifts.

The curriculum for early education is centred on children's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development and the remediation of early development deficiencies. Multidisciplinary early intervention teams are designed by County Resource and Educational Assistance Centre to evaluate all children, to monitor them, to early detect those with special educational needs or at risk and give them appropriate assistance.

ECEC settings should provide extensive opening hours that take account of the needs of working parents, including flexible arrangements (evenings, nights, and weekends).

A high number of staff members should be available, as one adult is usually responsible for 10 children under the age of three. Some countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia) set group size numbers as well as the adult/child ratio. A maximum group size of 10-15 children is recommended, with an adult/child ratio=1/ 4-6. In Romania the educational process is developed through formations of groups, classes or years of study. Regarding preschool education a group consists on average of seven children, but not fewer than five and no more than nine.

In Romania, the responsible bodies and Levels of Responsibility for *Designing* ECEC Policies are: the Ministry of Labour, Family and Equal Opportunities - responsible for social protection aspects - and the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth - responsible for the educational aspects.

Responsible Bodies and Levels of Responsibility for *Implementing* ECEC Policies: Labour and Social Protection Departments, which are responsible for social protection aspects, while County School Inspectorates are responsible for educational aspects.

We may conclude that there are several conditions which lead ECEC services to be effective:

- accessibility of services,
- training of staff working in ECEC settings,

To ensure participation over a long period and regular attendance by children, settings must be accessible to all and especially to very young children from families at risk. One of the problems associated with accessibility is the length of opening hours – they must be compatible with parents' working hours. A favourable child/adult ratio is also crucial in ensuring the quality of interactions between educators and children. It helps to create a climate of emotional security, allows teachers to be responsive to the needs of children and able to support and comfort them when they have difficulties and frustrations or are in distress, it enables teachers to be non-intrusive, to encourage verbal exchanges and to stimulate children's intellectual curiosity.

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