EARLY EDUCATION, CONCEPTUAL DIRECTIONS

Emil LAZĂR
Ph. D. Lecturer, University of Craiova, Faculty of Letters
Department of Communication, Journalism and Education Science
lazaremile@gmail.com

Abstract

For a long time, the concept of early education meant the education delivered before the children`s schooling, also known as preschool education, which takes place between 3 years and 6/7 years old, being considered a systemized activity, developed within specialised institutions such as kindergartens. We witness an enlargement of the concept of early education: going under three years old. Primarily, the concept has been connected with other two priorities: protection and health (health and nutrition). Since Jomtien, early education has been called the child`s early development.

Key-words: early education, complementary domains, processing approach

Defining the concept of early education

The new European strategic framework Education & Training 2020 (launched in 2009) proposes to all member states to archive the creation of values by knowledge, to develop the citizens' skills by creating societies which support inclusion and to create a competitive, connected and ecological economy.

This European framework views continuous learning and continuous education as fundamental processes for Lifelong Education. "Permanent education represents the totality of all learning activities realized by each person during a lifetime, in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, in order to train and develop skills from a multiple perspective: personal, civic, social or occupational. Lifetime learning includes early education, secondary education, tertiary education, continuous occupational education and training of adults" (National Education Low, 1/2011, art. 328).

Traditionally, the pedagogical phase of a 0-6/7 years old was considered pre-school education. The current educational policy does not include (or it does not do it declaratively) a specific section concerning the Early education of the 0-3 years old child. In a practical way, the focus of the current educational policy when it comes to early education is put on the pre-school education.

For a long time, the concept of Early education referred to the education received before the beginning of schooling, known as pre-school education, which takes place between the ages of 3 and 6/7 and is considered a systematized education, taking place in kindergartens.

The new perspective regarding the early childhood defined during the

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Jomtien conference (Thailand, 1990, Education for all, signing by the present education ministers of the Declaration regarding the Education for all – Déclaration mondiale sur l'éducation pour tous et cadre d'action pour répondre aux besoins éducatifs de base) is strongly related with concept of lifelong learning and with a change in the way the moment in which education begins is seen: Education begins at birth.

We assist at the enlargement of the concept of early education: going beyond the 3 years old threshold. Horizontally, the concept was aligned with 2 other social priorities: protection and health (health and nutrition). Jomtien names early education the early development of the child.

Focusing on the early education and pre-school years is important, because this is the phase at which children develop faster, and if the development process is neglected at this stage, it will be much more difficult and expensive to compensate for these losses later. It is well-known that the choices made now and the actions taken by parents and the society in early childhood have a broader and longer influence on the progress of the individual and the nations, in a broader picture.

By giving the children proper attention, ensuring its education and growth, we create the climate for developing a well-balanced and harmonious personality.

Specialists consider that early education takes place from birth until turning 8 years old, period in which the fastest brain development takes place. The first 2 years of life are the most important, as these are the years in which the most important intellectual, emotional, psychological and social changes take place.

Therefore, early education signifies the pedagogical demarche the follows the stage of the life of the child that spans between birth and 6/7 years old, the moment when schooling, and when the child steps in another development phase.

Synoptic of the evolution of development cycles after the child`s early development cycle.

Cycles	Objectives	Description
Fundamental acquisitions cycle (kindergarten-2nd grade)	▪ Initial alphabetization	▪ Assimilation of the basic principles of the basic conversational languages; ▪ Stimulation of the creativity of the child, of the intuition and of the imagination; ▪ Building the motivation for learning, understood as a social activity.

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Development cycle (3rd grade-6th grade)	▪ Building the basic capacities required for continuing studies	▪ Development of structured thinking and of the competence of applying problem solving; ▪ Familiarizing with multidisciplinary approach of the knowledge fields; ▪ Building a system of values; ▪ Developing a responsible attitude.

Trying to define early education places the concept in an integrate and procedural approach, in which, interdependent and convergent are priority areas for the century in which we are living: social, cultural, economic.

Longitudinally, defining early education is at the intersection (interpenetration) of three complementary areas: health, education and child`s protection. Transversely, early education is convergent with another concept/tendency: the opportunity of small child care outside the family, in specialized services and, therefore, switching from private family care to the private services one called care services and education outside the family ("out of family") (Curriculum for education of children aged birth to 6/7).

Tendencies of increasing participation in education:

Children start formal education at an increasing earlier age.

In the period 2000-2009, the average EU-27 children's participation rates at 3 years, 4 years and 5 years in preschool or primary education increased by 15.3% and 7% and 6.3%, reaching around 77%, 90% and 94% in 2009. Participation of 3 years old children to preschool was quite widespread in Belgium, Denmark, Spain, France and Iceland in 2009, exceeding 95% (Key data on education in Europe).

International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 1997)

International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) was designed to facilitate the compilation and comparison of statistics on education both on the inside and on the outside of national borders. It combines two transversal variables (education levels and domains) with the type of education (general/ vocational/ pre-vocational) or intended destination of students (higher education or direct input on the labor market).

The current version, ISCED 97 distinguishes seven levels of education:

- ISCED 0: Pre-primary education is defined as the initial stage of organized instruction. It takes place in an educational environment or center and is designed for children that are at least 3 years old.

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- ISCED 1: Primary education is the level that begins between 5 and 7 years, is compulsory in all countries and it usually lasts between 4 to 6 years old.
- ISCED 2: Lower secondary education. Continues the basic programs of primary, although teaching is typically focused on a greater extent on the discipline of study. Usually, the end of this level coincides with the end of compulsory education.

Linked definitions of the "Early Education" concept:

- Education and early care of young children (Early Childhood Education and Care – ECEC): it refers to subsidized and accredited structures and public services that address children below mandatory school age. The terms "education" and "care/assistance" are used together in order to underline the fact that children' services are able to combine care with studying and development opportunities.
- Education and care of preschoolers (EICP): Services offered to children since birth to the beginning of primary school, which according to the national regulation, for example, have to comply with a set of rules and minimal standards and/or submitted to an accreditation process.
- Children with additional educational needs: children who are exposed to the risk of obtaining poor results over their educational development and who demand supplementary support for them to achieve their maximum potential. More often than not, these children originate from disadvantaged environments such as immigrant groups, ethnical minorities or with a reduced social and economic status.
- Additional needs are perceived as educational needs of children which derive, first of all, from social, economic, cultural and/ or linguistic factors.
- Children at risk: There is no official national definition for children found in risky situations, although the concept is often used in certain preventing measures with the purpose to support children in difficult situations or belonging to more vulnerable groups. The concepts cover a wide range of circumstances, and the risk itself is interpreted in terms of "categories" rather than "individuals" with criteria linked to parental circumstances.

Examples of care and pre-primary education:

There are three important models for providing early education services:

- The first and most important model, one that represents the great majority of pre-primary educational structures, adopts the institutionalized model, aimed at the child and a professional strategy of delivering services. This type of structure includes institutionalized child care in a traditional specialized center in which there are being developed pre-primary studying programs and general primary education (these are usually public pre-primary schools, kindergartens or training classes for primary schools);

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- The second model consists of different care services and educational programs for children focused on the child himself while some can even take place at home. In this case, service delivery agents, non-professionals workers or with relative training for them to practice in this domain – for example, parents and other semi-professional categories of workers;
- The third model consists in a wide range of support programs focused on either parents or families. Usually, systems and family assistance programs offer a diversity of services and activities adapted to multiple family needs (Primary school and child protection in Europe).

The educational approach of curricular content:

Early education has the following functions: social, educational and children' care. Pestalozzi, Frobel, Dewey and Montessori have developed their own approach in the matters that concern the practices of education and care of children in educational structures like the "asylum" type and in primary schools of their era.

Pestalozzi, Frobel and Dewey have seen pre-primary schools that addressed early education as an extension of and ideal family environment and they have underlined the importance of emotional safety and an affectionate attitude which the teacher ought to have in his relationship with students. This meant that "the teacher should not resort to a strict discipline inside the classroom, but that he should guide the students in activities that allow them to discover the world, instead of focusing only on teaching their subject. Nowadays, this approach might be called developing".

Montessori has extended this approach to a much more individualized curriculum, having considered the differences in the development rhythm and intrinsic motivation that each child has in the period of accumulating information through studying. Currently, this picture is represented through the notion of education "centered on the child", with the importance of child initiative being underlined, along with the development of his choosing capacity and self-determination.

Another characteristic of these primary approaches regarding education and early care was the insertion of real activities (Frobel) and project work (Dewey), which was the equivalent of stimulating the participation of children in activities similar to those of the adults from the community to which they belonged. At present, the approach through the means of implementing cultural practices from the adults' world in the curriculum that addresses young children could be qualified as "authentic".

The role of the teacher is not limited to creating conditions for optimal, self-propelled development. The teacher should likewise initiate the children deliberately in different cultural domains, like the ones taught at school (or academicals), language courses, Literature, Arithmetic, Mathematics and Science and he should interact with children in order to build a "scaffolding" of the further development of the children in these domains.

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Access to education and early care:

There is an established form of subsidized and accredited education and early care services for preschool children. The difference consists in the way of organizing qualified authorities and the age at which children have access at these services.

We can distinguish two main models of ECEC institutions in Europe:

- When it comes to the first model, the schooling of young children is accomplished in unitary structures and it is organized in one stage for all preschoolers. Each institution has one managerial team that deals with children of all ages, and the staff responsible for the education of children generally has the same qualification and the same salary regardless of the age of the children they're looking after.
- With the second model, the ECEC services are structured according to the child's age (addressing, as usual, children from age 0 to 3 years and 3 to 6 years). Each type of institution/educational center can be found in the subordination of different ministries. This mode is the most prevalent one in Europe. In some countries both models coexist.

Education and professional training of the staff represents a fundamental aspect for the quality of ECEC services:

In most countries, the offer for children below the age of 2 and the preschool offer (above 2-3 years old) is under the jurisdiction of different public authorities.

The permanent staff that takes care of smaller children (below the age of 2) is, generally, trained at

- ISCED level 3 or 4: In Romania, where in the past few years there has been adopted a more educational approach, the personnel from nurseries is still trained from a paramedical point of view and this is a priority when it comes to professional training.

Furthermore, in all countries, except Belgium, Estonia and Spain (age 0-3) and Romania, the staff from ECEC structures includes qualified assistants or less qualified ones that conduct activities regarding children care. The educational work is assigned to a qualified staff, while changing diapers, nurturing and other tasks like that are left in the auxiliary staff's care.

Therefore, it is obvious that there are many members of the staff with alternative roles, involved in the process of taking care of children, which could ultimately lead to a lack of continuity in the education of children and building relationships.

Key-data regarding the education and care of preschoolers in Romania (years 2012/2013, according to the Eurydice and Eurostat rapport, 2014 edition):

- organization

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Up until the age of 3 years old, children benefit of care in institutional structures called nurseries. From the age of 3 (sometimes even 2) until 6 years, children can frequent kindergartens. The Ministry of Education is responsible for furnishing early childhood education and children above the age of 3 are the ones who benefit from it in kindergartens.

In the case of children below the age of 3, this responsibility is split between the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Work, Family, Social Protection and the Elderly. Primary school starts at the age of 6. Before the approval of the National Law of Education (no 1/2011), parents were able to choose where to enlist their children. Consequently, at the age of 6, a child could either go to kindergarten or to school, as a first grader.

- taxes

In public institutions of education and care of preschoolers there are no perceived taxes; however, parents do pay for the child's meal. Children who come from families with low income have the possibility of free meals.

Legal stipulations concerning early education of a child with the age between 0 to 3 years:

In this area there are a number of laws and regulations for the protection of child rights below 3 years old. However, they all refer to the nursing of the child, health, nutrition and social protection. Many government decisions are especially linked to child protection and child rights, but there is no specific law for early education in general.

A characteristic of the current early educational system in Romania is the following: due to the lack of legislation regarding the education of children from 0 to 3 years, a number of nurseries and kindergartens have developed without any consistent structure or without clear educational standards. **There is a diversity of institutions for early education, some of which are listed below**:

- Daily care centers for children below the age of 6 found in situations of risk, coordinated by Direction of Social Assistance and Child Protection;
- Daily care centers or private kindergartens for children below the age of 6, approved by the Ministry of Education, which offer good examples of practice in the domain;
- Kindergartens with nurseries for children from the same group age as the ones from daily care centers;
- Kindergartens for children from age 3 to 6/7 years old. These are funded by local councils and they are coordinated by the Ministry of Education;
- Nurseries for children from 4 months to 3 years old who can also accommodate children over 3 years in order to maintain the hired staff. These are funded and coordinated by local councils, without a direct and professional supervision and without any kind of educational standards.

Services for children with the age between 0 and 3 years old are funded through

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nursery systems that offer some types of medical care without any component of early education. In the past, nurseries were the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. However, in 2002, the Ministry of Health absolved itself of this responsibility and the nurseries were left without any kind of formal identity or governmental support. At present, nurseries are funded by local authorities while kindergartens are funded by the Ministry of Education (The strategy regarding early education).

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