

Educational Policies and Curricular Perspectives in Early Education

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Abstract: This paper is intended as an attempt to equally surprise both the notions of the conceptual apparatus and the historicity of early education from the Romanian perspective. This conceptual approach, respects and relates itself, to the European and worldwide pedagogical concepts, the way they are understood and promoted in the light of educational policies.

The historical perspective aimed at the pedagogical and educational approach, from the Romanian point of view, is synchronous and diachronic, continuing the implicit testings' of „the new education”, an attempt to radiography this field/domain.

Apparently, the authenticity and the innovation are synonyms, and conceptual, they are consonant. But the Romanian reality in the field of early education, may be and it is, authentic and innovating: authentic, based on the specific of educational policies, innovating, by the development and emergence of this segment of educational responsibility in Romania. Therefore, Romania offers and constitutes an example of good practice.

Keywords: *Early education; conceptual approach; the formal structure of the education system; curriculum areas;*

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Early education - conceptual delimitation

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. *"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 Law, 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 child. In a practical way, the focus of the current educational policy when it comes to early education is on preschool education.

For a long time, the concept of early education referred to the education received before the beginning of schooling, known as preschool 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 Jomtien conference (Thailand, 1990, Education for all, signed by the education ministers present during 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 to concept of lifelong learning and with a change of how is seen the moment in which education begins: Education begins at birth. We assist at the enlargement of the concept of early education: going beyond the 3 years threshold

Focusing on early education and preschool years is important, because this is the phase during 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. Therefore, early

education signifies the pedagogical demarche the follows the stages of child's life that spans between birth and 6/7 years. (school beginning, and when the child steps in another development phase)

Trying to define early education places the concept in an integrate and procedural approach, within which, interdependent and convergent are the 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 family care to private services, called care services and education outside the family ("out of family") (Curriculum for children education aged birth to 6/7).

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 outside national borders. It combines two transversal variables (education levels and domains) with the type of education (general/vocational/pre-vocational) or intentional destination of students (higher education or direct input on the labour market). The current version 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 centre and is designed for children of at least 3 years of age.
- 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.
- ISCED 2: Lower secondary education. Continues the basic programs of primary education, although teaching is typically focused at a greater extent on the discipline of study. Usually, the end of this level coincides with the end of compulsory education.

Examples of care and pre-primary education:

There are three important models of 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 centre 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) 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. This is the case with 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 variety of services and activities adapted to multiple family needs (Primary school and child protection in Europe).

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 pre-schoolers. Each institution has one managerial team that deals with children of all ages, and the staffs responsible for the education of children generally has the same qualification and the same salary regardless of the age of children they're looking after. With the second model, the ECEC services are structured according to the child's age (usually aimed at children from 0 to 3 years and from 3 to 6 years). Each type of institution/educational centre 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 years and the preschool offer (above 2-3 years old) are under the jurisdiction of different public authorities. The permanent staffs that takes care of smaller children (below the age of 2years) 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 staffs 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.

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's rights and protection, 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 centres for children below the age of 6 found in risk situations, coordinated by Direction of Social Assistance and Child Protection; daily care centres 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 age group as the ones from daily care centres; 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 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).

A historical approach of the concept and the domain of early education

The first data referring to the concept and the domain of early education are descriptive and belong to pedagogy, (the *Didactica magna* treaty, 1627-1640, published in 1657, written by Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670): *pansofia*, education will comply both with the child's intimate nature and with the surrounding nature's laws (Comenius, 2010).

"The metaphysical harmony", defined by G. G. Antonescu (1943, pp. 9-10) the forming of the individual being (he advises the teacher to follow the gardener's example, who takes care of plants according to their needs and possibilities), scholar, maternal or education done in the family (from birth to 16), within which the first steps and speech are learnt, the hygiene rules are internalized, an introduction into moral education is done, practicing with senses and the developing of intelligence appear.

Starting with the example of gardening, Comenius (1592-1670) considers that education should start in "the spring of life", as soon as possible in the life of the child, "the school from the mother's knees", then "the popular school", the child having to understand first the things and then to remember them.

Through his study, "Some thoughts concerning Education" (1693), which helped the development of pedagogy between 18th and 19th century, John Locke (1632-1704) predicted the education into the family. He saw "The possible knowledge only through experience" ("An Essay on Human Understanding", 2015). "All the ideas come through feelings or sensations", this statement revealing the sensory area and mental processes, realities which should be taken into consideration by educators.

The first one who recognizes the importance of psychology in education is Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), representative for the philosophical pedagogy, who, as a follower of the negative education, says that the role of the educator is to guard and protect the child from external influences of society. Into his book, "*Emile, or on education*" (1762), with a preface and 5 chapters, prefigures education in correlation with the steps in child's development: "until the age of 2, the accent is on care and the physical education, between the age of 2 and the age of 12, the accent is put on the senses education through the direct contact whit the environment,

between the age of 12 and the age of 15, intellectual education counts the most, and since the age of 15 up the accent is on moral education".

Intuitive overlapping of psychology with pedagogy is resumed this way: "Le petit d'homme n'est pas simplement un petit homme". The importance of the intervention of family in child's education is resumed this way: "the child becomes for his parents, after the education he/she receives, reward or punishment".

Starting with the 20th century, the child and his childhood are in the attention of psychologists and pedagogues: two French researchers, Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon, and, after a while Lewis Terman, researcher at Stanford University in the United States of America, joined them and together they boost the standardized measurement of children's mental capacities through the first standardized test of IQ measurement (Planchard, 1972, p.21)

Édouard Claparède (1973) believed that functional education is the one which take as a base the needs of the child, the interest in achieving goals, this one being a natural incentive of the activity he intends to awake inside the child. This perspective allows us to understand the functionality of the processes that sustain the behaviour that we want to determine as educators. From a practical point of view, it shows us the value of a process regarding the achievement of a planned goal.

Jean-Ovide Decroly (1871-1932) was a Belgian teacher and psychologist who fought for a major change in education, based on a global approach of learning to read and write. He founded an Institution for Special Education for children, where he made research about child's psychology, introducing the concept of "normal children". Decroly's pedagogy is based on the following fundamentals: globalization – the child learns on a global level, the child's superior interest – guide for education, the natural environment's importance which puts the child into a situation of discovery, the workshop-school or laboratory – classroom where the child lives and acts, education should focus on child's interests. This pedagogical interest is based on idea of fundamental necessity; every human being has some basic needs which should be studied in school. Thus, educational institutions should be organized into 4 areas: food, fight for empires, defence from danger, social work and recreation, from the social point of view; the concept of activity is fundamental; the proposed activities should request all the child's functions (sensitive, motor, intellectual and emotional).

In the same spirit of new education (the Congress took place in Callais, 1921), with Maria Montessori (1870-1952), in Italy, the first nurseries

kindergartens make appearance (1907, "casa dei bambini" for normal children) within which were applied her educational ideas, materialized into a real educational method - the Montessori Method (The discovery of the child). Maria Montessori focused her attention and educational methods on intellectual retarded children, children who were born with mental deficiencies also known as idiots.

Basic principles: self-education and unmediated application of the directly learned things, creating educational groups which cover the 3 years' differences between the children, for example: 3 to 5 years, 6 to 9 years, 7 to 10 years etc., encouraging children to make decisions which they have to respect. "Montessori Method" encourage natural development of the very little children through learning by touching and free movement; following the controlled liberty principle, the Montessori schools inspire children to work in their normal rhythm, alone or in teams. The educators encourage the self-motivated, independent, active and open to peer-education children's development. The younger children enjoy the daily stimulation, as old models say, while the elder children learn to respect themselves in a warm atmosphere of acceptance and joy. Some works such as "Discovering the Child" (Montessori, 1977, pp.85-97) in which is presented in four different periods the psychological evolution from 0 to 18 years old are important for the contributions in the literature of early education.

Arnold Lucius Gesell (1880-1961) was an American psychologist in paediatric who showed interest in physical and mental development of the really young children and normal children in order to observe and measure their behaviour using controlled ways. He used the concept of "domains" (motor abilities, adaptive behaviour and language development, personal and social abilities). These will be the experiential field base of the preschool curriculum ("Infancy and human growth", 1993). He developed techniques of observing children in natural playing situation, without disturbing them, offering therefore, behaviour opportunities free from the interference effects of researchers. Gessel (1993, pp. 42-48), admitted the gene and food importance in child's development ("nature and nurture"). In his opinion, children pass through different stages into a fixed sequence, in a certain period of time, depending on their human innate abilities. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) studied the way of knowledge development inside human being. (Piaget & Inhelder, 1971, pp. 36-39) He carefully followed his 3 children, he draws a naturalistic research schedule and made experimental studies on intelligence development. The base of his theory is the concept of knowable structure (physical or mental model of actions which highlights specific acts of intelligence and correspond to some studies of child's development).

According to Piaget's theory, there are 4 stages of development: sensory-motor, pre-operations, concrete operations and formal operations: in sensory-motor stage (0–2 years old) intelligence take the form of motor actions, in pre-operations period (3–7 years old), the intelligence is intuitive, during concrete operations stage (8–11 years old), the knowable structure is logical, but it depends on concrete references, on the final stage of formal operations (12–15 years old), thinking will involve abstract notions. The main conclusions which come off from the stadiality's cognitive development theory proposed by him are: children have an active role in learning, exploring the world and experiencing. They play the role of "little scientists" starting with their first months of life. Children do not do this thing in an aleatory mode, they build their knowledge by selecting from their experiences every element that matches with their psychological organization, children's way of thinking is, in terms of quality, different from the adult's one and the nature of these differences is changing from one period to another; intellectual development is not only about offering a lot of information, always adding on their basic knowledge, intellectual development is continuous from birth; there is a basic continuity despite changes that occur as the child develops from a stage to another.

Unlike Jean Piaget, the Russian psychologist Lev Vîgotsky (1896-1934) considered that the particular environment where children are growing and their interactions with people more experienced are parts integrated in their cognitive development. This is, in essence, a social process which consists of 3 parts: cultural, interpersonal and individual.

Vîgotsky argued that the child's optimum level is achieved when he is working like a "help" with a person more experienced and the gap between what they know and what they can learn in guidance conditions has an important signification, being named "*area of proximal development*"- "*the distance between the level of current development, as it is determined through independent solving and the level of potential development as it is determined through problem solving with the adult's guidance or in team with teammates more capable*" (1978, p. 78).

The framework concept (introduced by David Wood and his colleagues) describes the guidance type and help offered by adults to children in order to solve problems adjusting both type and quantity of help to the child's performance level. The custodian's role is to fill the interval between the existent knowledge and the new task's abilities and requirement ("The pre-schooler will manage to learn only if the educator becomes his program").

A mental development major characteristic is its stadiality. The age periods when the psycho-behavioural scene is relatively similar for all of the

children were named development stages and they come one after another. Thus, concerning the child, childhood, preschool education, early education is old and undoubtedly concerned with human knowledge from the pedagogical perspective, didactic and psychological.

Both the European countries and others promote the concept of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). All of European countries have a formal system of early childhood education and care for preschool children, organized by specialized centres. However, the organization of these services is different in the European countries. The major benefits gained through Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are much more recognized at social level, beginning with the economic advantages for all the society and ending with the improvement of school performance. Through a reliable base for the successful continuous learning process, ECEC provides individual benefits for all the children, especially for those who come from social disadvantaged environment. Therefore, ECEC presents a base for more equitable and performing educational systems.

In Romania, after the bias according to which, during the first period of the child's life, this one only needs food and warmth, in 2001 took place the passing of administrative responsibilities from the sanitary sector to the local public administration. This change however did not adjust the organization and the functioning of nurseries as services of care and education for little children.

The New Law of National Education (1/2011) provides that, early education is the first stage of preparing for the formal education and it is addressed to the children from their birth until the age of six or seven years old, offering specific conditions for developing, depending on their individual evolution and their ages.

According to the global Monitoring Report of education for all (2007), early education supports survival, growth, development and learning from a child's birth till attending elementary school, including nutrition, health, hygiene and cognitive, social, physical and emotional development of children. Early years are the base of children's personality and to support their educational success it is required to be trained all of the social actors with influence on the children: family – institutions – community.

The educational ideal of the Romanian society, according to the 2nd article of the Law of National Education (2011), consists in fully and harmonious development of human individuality, in the formation of autonomous personality and in taking a value system necessary for personal fulfilment and development, for development of entrepreneurship, for active citizenship in society, for social inclusion and employment on the labour

market”, while the educational finalities by educational stages constitutes a materialization of finalities of the educational system for its various levels, describe the specifics of each level of education in terms of educational policy and represents a reference system for both curriculum development and orientation of teaching in the classroom.

At the level of pre-primary and primary education, the educational finalities seek to ensure the elementary education for all children, the formation of child personality, respecting the level and rhythm of its development, providing the child with knowledge, skills and attitudes to stimulate the creative and effective reporting to the social and natural environment allowing continuity of education.

The curricular cycles are periods of schooling which bring together several years of study and which have, within each discipline, general objectives/ common specific skills. These periods of schooling overlap the formal structure of the education system in order to focus the act of learning on the major objective of each educational stage and to adjust the educational process by curricular interventions.

The introduction of curricular cycles has generated curricular changes through: changes in the educational curriculum framework, regarding the grouping of subjects, the time of placing certain subjects in educational curriculum framework, the share of disciplines in the economy of the educational framework, conceptual changes on the programs and textbooks, teaching strategy changes (conditioned by the rethinking teachers’ initial and continuing training).

The objectives of cycles give to the various stages of schooling, a series of dominants which are reflected in the structure of the curricula. Thus, the structuring of the education system in curricular cycles contributes to: creating continuity in the transition from one level of education to another (preschool - primary, primary - middle school, middle school - high school), continuity at a methodical level through the transfer of methods from one cycle to another, establishing explicit connections of curricula through the set of general objectives, building a structure of the education system better correlated with the psychological age of students.

Cycle of fundamental acquisitions. The preschool and school age

The cycle of fundamental acquisitions refers to: the assimilation of basic elements of the main conventional languages (reading, writing, arithmetic calculus), the stimulation of the child for the perception, knowledge and control of the environment, the stimulation of child's

creative potential, intuition and imagination, the training of motivation for learning, understood as a social activity.

Preschool period is characterized by a rapid development at all levels: physical, cognitive and socio-emotional. These levels are closely interconnected and can only artificially be separated, in order to be investigated and easier understood. For example, the ability to inhibit a response (cognitive function) depends greatly on the maturation of frontal brain areas (physical appearance) and has important consequences at the level of social interactions, for instance waiting in the line (socio-emotional aspect).

Child's education begins at/since birth. Early education in Romania, as worldwide, includes child's education within the age range and birth until their entry to school. Kindergarten, as a formal education service provides the environment that guarantees safety and, considering the psychological characteristics of child's development, involves both the family and the community in the process of learning.

Louis D' Hainaut (1988, p. 56) sees as "*focal point of the curriculum must be the student, not the subject and that when talking of the curriculum content we must understand that it is not about enunciating subjects to learn, but aims expressed in terms of skills, ways to act or general knowing of the student*".

The framework objectives of the curriculum for preschool education are formulated in general terms and express skills to be developed during the preschool period on the five experiential areas. The reference objectives as well as the examples of behaviour, as explicit expressions of learning outcomes (concepts, knowledge, skills and attitudes, but also of skills of the subject) are formulated for each theme and each experiential field. To express them, there have been considered the following: the possibilities, interests and needs of the preschool child, as well as the respect of his own rhythm, the correlation of each new learning experience with its precedent, encouraging initiative and participation of preschool child in goal setting, the selection of contents and evaluation methods, encouraging independent learning by providing opportunities to achieve knowledge (both inside and outside educational institution), as well as work in small groups on activity centres (areas of stimulation) and, if possible, in groups with a heterogeneous composition, stimulation of self-reflection, self-evaluation and a self-regulation learning behaviour.

The experiential fields which are operated in the curriculum for preschool education are: the individual and the social field - including man, his way of life, relationships with other people, relations with the social environment, as well as the ways in which human actions affects events.

Within social sciences field it is desired that pre-schoolers understand human beings involved in building their future. It is also important for pre-schoolers to understand that present situations are rooted in past situations, to observe similarities and differences between people or events. The domain of language and communication - covers the mastering of oral and written expression as well as the ability to understand verbal and written communication. It is intended that they speak confidently, clearly and fluently, using appropriate means of expression for different categories of audience. Science field - includes the approach of the mathematical domain through practical experience and also understanding of nature, as being modifiable by the human beings with which it interacts. Psycho-motoric field covers the coordination and control of body movements, overall mobility and stamina, motor skills and fine handling, as the elements of knowledge, especially about human anatomy and physiology. Aesthetic and creative field covers the abilities to respond emotionally and intellectually to perceptive experiences.

Conclusion

The curriculum, alongside the presented experiential fields, allows integrated interdisciplinary scrolling through the proposed content and ensures teacher's freedom in planning the daily activities with the pre-schoolers. The study level is organized in Early Education, depending on the age of the child: 3-5 years/ 5-7 years.

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