

## LEGISLATIVE AND CURRICULAR HIGHLIGHTS FOCUSED UPON THE PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AND HEALTH AREA WITHIN THE EARLY EDUCATION FRAMEWORK, IN TERMS OF REGIONAL COORDINATES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION SPACE

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**ABSTRACT.** In recent years, early education turned into a strategy for the European countries in their wish to support children's global development starting from birth up to reaching primary education. Two major courses of action are witness to this. The first course of action covers the legislative documents worked out on the occasion of events which benchmarked the policies related to children's early development, while the second one is given by the transposition of those legislated, namely into such curriculum documents, which are specific to the agreed age range. This study aims at a brief analysis of the curriculum in five countries, i.e. in Finland, Germany, Spain, Hungary and Romania, selected on grounds of the different regions criterion from within the European Union space. According to their respective levels, we tried to grasp the main - both common and specific - coordinates upon which the implementation of the early education, as a transitory form of the ante-preschool education towards the traditional instructive-educational process set for preschool education, relies. Also, in terms of national curriculum and/or guiding documents specific to the early education sector, we provide an overview of the significance enjoyed by the physical development and health area, in each such visited country.

**Key words:** *early education, legislation, differentiated national curriculum, physical development and health*

**REZUMAT.** *Repere legislative și curriculare centrate pe domeniul dezvoltării fizice și a sănătății în cadrul educației timpurii, raportate la coordonatele regionale din spațiul Uniunii Europene.* În ultimii ani, educația timpurie a devenit o strategie a țărilor europene prin care se dorește sprijinirea dezvoltării globale a copilului, începând de la naștere până la trecerea în învățământul primar. Acest

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fapt, este reflectat prin două direcții majore de acționare. Prima direcție, cuprinde documentele legislative elaborate cu ocazia evenimentelor care au marcat politicile privind dezvoltarea timpurie a copiilor, iar cea de-a doua, este dată de transpunerea celor legiferate, în documentele curriculare specifice intervalului de vârstă convenit. Prezentul studiu, își propune o analiză succintă a curriculei din cinci țări, și anume: Finlanda, Germania, Spania, Ungaria și România, luând ca și criteriu de selecție a acestora, regiuni diferite ale spațiului Uniunii Europene. La nivelul lor, am încercat să surprindem principalele coordonate - comune și particulare - ce stau la baza implementării educației timpurii, ca formă tranzitorie de instruire antepreșcolară, către procesul instructiv – educativ tradițional, statuat la nivelul învățământului preșcolar. De asemenea, în cadrul curriculumului național și/sau a documentelor directoare specifice sectorului de educație timpurie, pentru fiecare țară vizată, am realizat o analiză a semnificației acordate domeniului dezvoltării fizice și sănătății.

**Cuvinte cheie:** educație timpurie, legislație, curriculum națională diferențiată, dezvoltare fizică și sănătate

## Early education, concept definitions

Early education has a novel and more extended significance as compared to how it was regarded until the last two decades of the last century. Throughout the said period of time, the concept referred to education intended for children prior to schooling (i.e. within 3 - 6/7 years of age) and carried out as a systemised activity in specialized institutions such as kindergarten.

Preoccupations concerning this type of education have been mirrored by events which benchmarked the policies related to children's early development. On the occasion thereof, several legislative documents have been worked out to define the early education context.<sup>3</sup> By virtue of these documents, the extended meaning of early education is aimed at: covering the entire period of development for each and every child within 0 and 6/7 years of age; making the most and under an optimum context of any child's potential; shifting the focus of attention towards the expediency of taking care of small children „out of family”, i.e. within the framework of specialized educational services.

According to (El, 2010, p. 10), the most frequently used syntagmas referring to the early childhood definition are as follows: *early childhood care and education* (ECCE) used by UNESCO; *early childhood education and care* (ECEC) used by the

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<sup>3</sup> MECT, (2008a, pp. 2-4).

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); *early child/childhood development* (ECD) used by the World Bank and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF); *early childhood education* (ECE).

## **Early education advantages**

Due to the fast pace shown at the level of neuronal connections as well as brain development and growing, this period is deemed to be a window of opportunity for optimizing children's development by a compound impact involving education, care, health, nutrition, social protection and intellectual stimulation of children.

The most important are the first two years of life when the most significant changes take place in terms of intellectual, emotional, psychological and social aspects. Adult intervention upon any child is - within this period - fundamental.

Studies in the field of preschool early education have highlighted significant correlations between kindergarten attendance and children's behaviours as pupils (Pre-School Education in the European Union. Current Thinking and provision, 1995, in „Curriculum for Preschool Education”, MECT, 2008a, p. 41). From among these, the following can be distinguished: a significant progress at an intellectual level in children, no matter the environment they originate from; positive effects upon the future social integration and mitigation of deviant behaviours as well as school failures; discovery of own identity and autonomy by each child as well as development of a positive self-image; development of social abilities through interactions generated by the learning environment; task-centred behaviours; social-emotional development; motivation and positive attitudes towards learning.

## **Guideline documents for planning and organizing educational contents**

The „guideline documents” concept is used for covering the variety of official approaches intended for directing or leading ECEC providers in various countries. In this perspective, guideline documents include as follows: learning content, objectives and results, objectives to be attained, as well as instructions concerning pedagogical approaches, learning activities and methods of assessment.

In terms of their form, guideline documents for ECEC vary considerably, from one county to the other. Such documents can be incorporated into legislation as part of an educational programme (Estonia, Spain, France and Slovenia), yet in other countries the same are published as a reference framework of competences and practical instructions for ECEC specialists (Belgium - French Community),

care and education schedules (in various German *Länder*), educational standards (Ireland and Malta) or criteria for local school curricula development (Lithuania). (European Commission, 2014, p. 117)

In almost half of the European Union countries, the educational component within the framework of guideline documents is established for children of all age categories (from 0 to 6/7 years) while in the other half of the countries, the same is targeted only towards children who are older (i.e. 3-6/7 years of age). (European Commission, 2014, p. 118)

Absolutely all European countries, without exception, specify objectives related to the following: personal, emotional and social development, as well as linguistic and communication competences. *Physical development and health education* are also included all over, except for Croatia. The development of artistic and world comprehension competences are highlighted in the great majority of the countries both for small and for older children.

### **Analysis of curricula/guideline documents in Finland, Germany, Spain, Hungary and Romania**

In order to have the fullest possible image of the planning and organizational forms of early education contents in Europe, we proceeded to analysing five countries located in various regions of the continent, from the perspective of the official documents acting as guidelines for the early care and education services.

#### **Finland**

Compulsory education begins at 7 years of age. For children who have already reached 6 years of age, there are specific pre-primary education programmes offered at no charge to schools or daytime centres.

Each municipality is pledged to provide pre-primary education for at least 700 hours per year, distributed as follows: 4 days weekly and not in excess of 4 hours a day.

The scheduled early education content is implemented relying upon the information provided in the Guidelines for Applying the National Curriculum to Children's Early Education and Care (*National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC – 2003*).

In terms of preschool age children, the curriculum does not define educational objectives however there are requirements related to training the ability to analyse, synthesize and integrate the acquired knowledge and experience. Thus, the Finnish curriculum guidelines *do not focus upon performance requirements* but are rather confined to how contents are assimilated.

By virtue of the National Curriculum for Pre-primary Education, the basic role of the preschool education is to support the process of turning children into human individualities and responsible members of the society by building abilities to responsibly act and appreciate peers, in keeping with certain generally accepted norms. According to Lindeboom, G.-J., Buiskool, B.-J. (2013, p. 14), the educational objectives stipulated for the curriculum are as follows: promoting personal welfare; consolidating attentive / polite behaviour towards peers; gradual development of autonomy. As a peculiarity, in Finland, beyond the national curriculum, each municipality defines an own curriculum and implementation methodology and works it out relying upon principles as set forth by the ministry.

All staff members involved in early education shall approach the areas identified in the curriculum in an integrated manner, avoiding to treat the same separately (apart). These areas are as follows: language and interaction; mathematics; ethics and philosophy; studies of environment and nature; *health; physical and motor development*; art and culture.

In the case of physical and motor development, daily physical exercises are essential for the children's growth and harmonious development as well as health. Physical condition, motricity, motion control, basic motor abilities etc., are to be trained by way of exercises and playing. Fine motor skills, manual abilities and eye-hand coordination are to be developed through daily activities. Children are to be encouraged to act independently, proactively and cooperatively within the team, namely to show trust in all exercising situations. Also, they are to be informed about the importance and the beneficial effects of practicing physical exercises onto health and personal welfare. (FNBE, 2010, p. 14).

As far as educators are concerned, it is important that they are capable to use various teaching methods and provide a systematic observation in terms of the children's motricity level. Connecting motor activities with other learning activities result in increased opportunities for teaching children. Playgrounds shall be arranged so that to stir interest for learning something new and encourage children in acquiring / developing abilities of motion. (STAKES, 2003, p. 22)

## **Germany**

**Germany** is one of those few European countries which have just recently begun to consider adopting formal curricular instructions for the activity within the early education framework. This has to do with the sophistication of the federal system which includes 16 regional states, each having autonomy in the policy of education.

For each land, guidelines, rules and cost levels are established in terms of educational and ECEC issues. The role of the municipalities is to implement the plotted strategy and provide children's care and education facilities.

In the year 2004, at a federal level, a joint (non-compulsory) framework has been worked out for guiding pedagogical activity in centres specialized in early education. (Lindeboom & Buischool, 2013, p. 29) By virtue of the said document, educational objectives emphasize building out basic competences as well as developing and consolidating personal possibilities in children with a view to motivate and prepare them so that they can cope with future challenges during the learning process and life, become responsible members of the society and show openness towards learning throughout their entire lives. (Eurydice, 2013, p. 97)

Curricular guidelines are defined in a rather broad sense, i.e. each land has the possibility to detail and particularize the same.

The joint framework for early education in children's care centres covers the following educational areas (domains): language, writing, communication; personal and social development; development of values and religious education; mathematics, natural sciences, (information) technology; musical education / using various media devices; natural and cultural environments; *body, exercise, health*.

The „*body, exercise, health*” domain description reveals the fact that physical exercise plays an important role both in building out an attitude of assuming responsibilities in children for their physical welfare and health condition, and in the cognitive, emotional and social development thereof.

For each of the above mentioned domains, behaviours specific to the age range are described and examples of didactic procedures are given with a view to be used and support children's development according to the desired path, as may be applicable. These are supplemented by information concerning the methodology for organizing learning experiences (choosing methods and means, setting up conditions to enable the assimilation of the approached contents etc.).

## Spain

In **Spain**, the main direction of educational policy was established at a national level in 2006 → namely by the „*Lei Organica de Educación*” (LOE) Act. This Act covers the objectives, standards and assessment procedures set forth for all educational levels, including the ones applicable to early education for children. Moreover, several royal decrees have been implemented to offer more specific regulations at a national level.

By virtue of the Act on Education of the year 2006, the main aim of education and early care is to contribute to the *physical development*, as well as the affective, social and intellectual development in children.

According to the national and autonomous communities' legislation, the ECEC providers' training programme is developed by competent teachers. The proper balance between cognitive and non-cognitive abilities within a curriculum is subject to the educational centre, as always concerned.

## Hungary

In **Hungary**, the National Institute for Family and Social Policies has drawn up within 2004-2005 a basic programme for ante-preschool education (children within the 0 to 3 years of age range) – called „*Bölcsődei alapprogram*”.

With a view to provide a logical connection between the two levels of early education, the content and structure of the said document have been established in keeping with the national program for preschool education – called „*Óvodai nevelés országos alapprogramja*”.

The basic characteristics of the national programme for preschool education are as follows: relies upon the Hungarian preschool education values and experience (routine); takes into account children's rights; supplements education received in family; restrictions applied thereby are in favor of children; establishes certain limits in children's interest and provides for some compulsory services; ensures methodological freedom for educators; pleads for principles focusing upon the child → children's needs are always the ones which define the content of the objectives tasks and activities, ensures pluralism → for instance: implementing certain various educational principles.

Among preschool education objectives, mention must be done about the following: *multilateral and harmonious development in children*; favouring personality development in children, taking into account individual and age peculiarities and, respectively, any difference in terms of development pace; *building up a healthy life style*; intellectual and emotional education; ensuring children's socialization; organizing instructive-educational activities under the form of playing.

Instructive-educational activities through which knowledge is transmitted and basic capacities are developed take various forms: playing, poetry, tale, song/ music, musical plays, drawing, handiwork, physical exercise, active awareness of the environment, work, learning. (Eurydice, 2007, p. 60)

For instructive-educational movement activities, the national programme of preschool education highlights the importance of developing coordination and conditional capacities as well as fine and gross motricity; it is stipulated that the acquired sophisticated motions shall also be integrated into other typical activities with a view to achieve a global influence of all domains for building up a positive self-image, emotional control, esteem, as well as cooperation and communication at the preschool children's level.

Through guided activities, the following shall be pursued: increasing motivation for learning, stimulating children's interest, organizing exercises with the involvement of as many analysers as possible, ensuring children's active participation in the process of acquiring experiences etc.

## **Romania**

In **Romania**, the curriculum features a unitary and coherent vision, being structured according to two (0 - 3 years of age and 3 - 6/7 years of age) ranges and, respectively, according to two intervals for each of the said levels.

The curriculum is structured according to *development domains*, the end result of the education in early childhood being children's global development to provide a proper start in the life thereof. These areas are as follows: *physical development, health and personal hygiene*; social-emotional development; development of the language, of the communication and of the premises for reading and writing; cognitive development and awareness of the world; learning capacities and attitudes. (MECT, 2008a, p. 7)

The framework and reference objectives in the said curriculum are formulated according to *experiential domains*, taking into account the benchmarks established by the development areas. These experiential areas are as follows: language domain; social-emotional domain; cognitive domain, *psychomotor domain*, which covers coordination and control of body motions, general mobility and physical strength, motor and fine handling abilities, as well as knowledge items mostly related to the human anatomy and physiology. The activities through which pre-schoolers can be made familiar with this domain are activities involving body motion, competitions among individuals or groups, focused on psychomotor abilities, as well as activities which can result in a better suppleness, force, strength or attitude. (MECT, 2008b, p. 14)

For the 3 - 6/7 years of age range, in addition to the framework and reference objectives, such *curricular areas* are suggested which, due to their content, are capable of providing support in attaining the said objectives. The curricular areas targeted by the curriculum are as follows: language and communication, sciences, arts, *physical education*, education for society.

## **Conclusions**

Further to the review of the early education curriculum in the five targeted countries, the following common issues can be revealed:

- availability of a framework curriculum which offers guidelines in terms of the contents and general objectives of domains approached at a preschool age;

- generally speaking, curricular stipulations emphasize the balanced and „comprehensive” approach to children’s development;
- curricula include principles of learning by playing and learning by discovering;
- in all countries of the European Union, national curricular documents highlight the necessity of cognitive and non-cognitive elements of children’s development, since the same are extremely important in establishing a durable base for life-long learning;
- most of the documents include behaviours to be acquired by children, objectives related to the targeted behaviours as well as suggestions for activities in support of attaining the objectives as set;
- educational entities offering early education services may work out their own educational programmes with an emphasis on various development areas however observing the stipulations as required by the framework curriculum, in the same time;
- availability of educational programmes specifically elaborated for children being 6 years of age, with view of preparing them for the next educational stage, facilitating in this way the transition between the two, namely preschool and primary levels.

*Differences* that show great variations in terms of early education curriculum in the European Union member states are related to the age at which ECEC programmes can be started, the extent to which national stipulations are compulsory or not, and, respectively, the way how the same are formulated (in detail or broad lines).

In terms of *physical development*, all curricula of the European countries targeted in our study share a unitary vision, admitting the important role played thereby in the global development of children’s personality.

Differences occur in the light of how the domain is approached. Certain countries such as Finland, Hungary and Romania adopt an analytical approach involving as follows: descriptions, actual contents, activities recommended for the physical development and motricity area, while others (for instance Spain, Germany), highlight only the general aspects thereof.

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