

Current Conditions and Challenges of the System of Education and Professional Development of Preschool Teachers

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Abstract:

Background: Effective systems for pre-school education and upbringing aim at raising the professional status of the staff, which is generally considered a key factor of quality. The system should aim at pedagogical workforce consisting of professionals with a full professional qualification, specialized in pre-school education at ISCED level 6.

Materials and MethodsThe new challenges faced by upbringing and education are in need of staff which is professionally capable for creative action, which will stimulate, motivate, provide various educational situations in which the child will experience its own self-realization. The profession of a preschool teacher has its own developmental path and is built on the basis of general principles and an appropriate system of scientific knowledge and practical skills. Education and professional development of preschool teachers are a challenge in the reforms and a key issue of an educational institution.

Results: The goal of this paper is to perceive and indicate the current conditions and challenges of the system of education and professional development, as well as the need of change, possible directions and solutions.

Conclusion:Therefore, we have analysed the model of education and professional development of preschool teachers in Macedonia, the reform process, with an analysis of the most important documents of the European institutions and other international organizations, and analysis and comparison of the experiences of EU countries, in order to offer an authentic model for the education of educators that will be open, dynamic and harmonized with the lifelong education of educators.

Key Word: initial education, preschool teacher, professional development

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of a strong global interest and focus on preschool education, there is a growing awareness of the importance of quality in proper growth and development of children. Europe has a lot of challenges and priorities, but also a different pedagogical vision. Yet, one of the most important themes and priorities ever since 1992 (**European Commission Network on Childcare**, 1992) has been to increase the number of children in preschool education, upbringing and care.

In 2017, the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission set out 20 principles for a more effective exercise of citizens' rights. Principle 11 refers to the fact that children have the right to quality and financially accessible preschool education, upbringing and care (Council of the European Union, 2017). It has also set a goal which is seriously ambitious and it implies that at least 95% of children between the age of three and first grade should be guaranteed a place (European Commission, 2017).

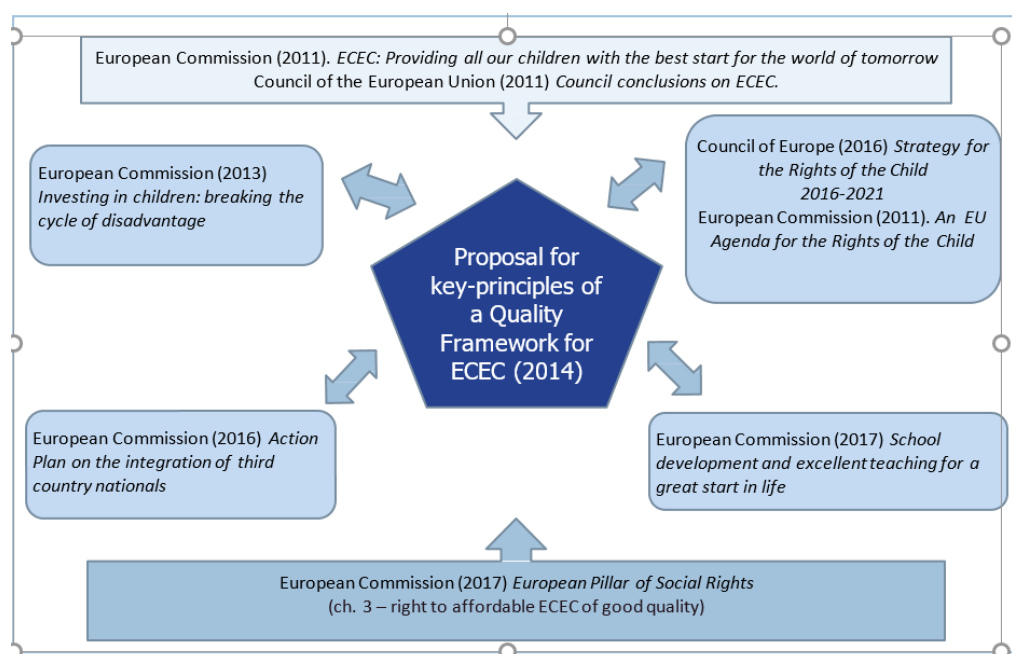
Based on experts' conclusions, work groups, through an open method of cooperation and exchange of good practices, as well as on the basis of multinational research, have put forward proposals for improving the quality of preschool education, upbringing and care in the European context. Five dimensions have been highlighted that are believed to contribute to a significant improvement of quality of preschool education through enhanced investment, support and implementation measures and activities. These five dimensions include the following: 1. Workforce (educators, carers, professional associates); 2. Curriculum; 3. Monitoring and evaluation; 4. System management; 5. Financing.

There is no single definition of quality in preschool education, upbringing and care. But what is common to all is the view that quality is a complicated and complex concept and it encompasses structures, processes and outcomes. The European Quality Framework interprets quality as a combination of multiple sets of mutually dependent measures (Foundation for Educational and Cultural Initiatives Step by Step, 2019):

Structural quality – this means what the philosophy and the concept are, and how preschool education, upbringing and care are organized. It includes norms, standards and regulations related to: accreditation of conditions; number of professionally trained staff; creating a curriculum; financing of services; employees-children ratio; equal treatment of all children in general and in accordance with their individual needs; and physical conditions for healthy and safe care, education and upbringing.

Process quality – defines the quality of the process and practices through: the role of play in the curriculum; relationships between employees and families; the relationship and interaction between educators and children and among children themselves; the degree of integration; parent and community participation and everyday pedagogical practices.

Outcome quality – defines the quality of the outcome / result of the system, i.e. benefits to children, families, communities and society, in particular children's outcomes: children's emotional, moral, mental and physical development; children's social skills; preparedness for further education and for the adult world; and children's health and their preparedness for the first grade.



Graph 1: Positioning of the European Quality Framework in the context of other European policies and initiatives (European Commission (2017) relating to pre-school education, upbringing and care.

The profession – **preschool teacher** has its own developmental path, its own characteristics, and it is built on general principles and a properly defined system of knowledge and practical guidelines. The education and professional development of teachers and educators are the key issue in every country, as the quality of educational staff is one of the main factors influencing the level of educational achievement of each individual. Qualitative educational work cannot be conceived without qualitative educational staff. The issue of quality of education of the staff working with preschool children is constantly present among the pedagogical public.

The preschool teachers' **sentimental attitude** towards children, which is actually the most significant humanistic quality of an educator, is one of the most significant components of upbringing. Without love for children and strong motivation for their successful upbringing and education, the process of upbringing and education is not possible.

The European Commission (Global Report, 2003) which in defining the key competencies, starts from the newly created (modified) roles of preschool teachers/teachers, distinguishes five groups of competencies: *good didactic and methodological knowledge that enables the preschool teacher to plan and organize educational activities; capacity for teamwork and cooperation with other educators and professional associates; knowledge of child psychology, which will enable preschool teachers to get to know children, their characteristics and unique features for effective motivation; personal professional development: responsible orientation of one's own professional development in the process of lifelong learning.*

If we analyse these sets of competences, all but the first, are more or less a matter of general, transferable teacher/educator competencies, assuming that each educator/teacher has sufficient specific knowledge in each area.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Initial education of preschool teachers in the Republic of Macedonia is realized at five higher education institutions: Institute of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy, University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius”- Skopje; Faculty of Pedagogy, University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius”- Skopje; Faculty of Pedagogy, “St. KlimentOhridski” University – Bitola; Faculty of Educational Sciences, University “GoceDelcev” – Stip; Faculty of Pedagogy, State University of Tetovo - Tetovo.

It is evident that all the institutions of initial education since 2004 have been actively working on achieving the commitment of the Bologna Declaration adopted in 1999 to build a coherent and cohesive European area of higher education by 2010.

Work groups from all faculties, based on the results of their own research (using the methodology of the TUNING project (Gonzales, J., Wagenaar, R. (eds.), 2005) and the experiences obtained from the project for modernization of the Initial Teacher Training Programs in accordance with the Bologna Process - Creative Teaching and Learning, supported by USAID and the Foundation Open Society Institute - Macedonia, worked on creating a list of competencies and on the renewal of the study programmes for preschool education and upbringing.

In this context, the experiences gained from the Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Ljubljana, the conclusions presented in Europe as "new competences now expected of teachers" (Eurydice, 2003), and the recommendations for teacher education presented in the Concept for Nine-Year Primary Education – R. Macedonia (2007), are particularly significant.

It can be concluded that all study programmes are designed as integrated theoretical and practical capacities that combine knowledge, understanding, skills, abilities and values specific to professional profiles comparable and compatible with those in the European educational space.

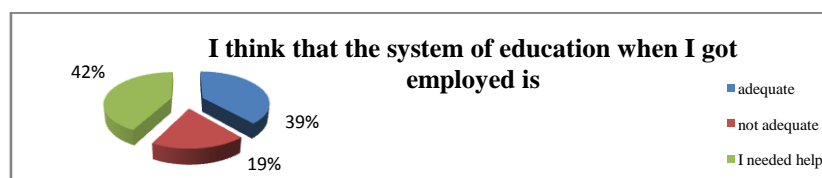
However, what is noticeable is that the study programmes have not been created according to the so-called Dublin descriptors, which means that the views and opinions of the educational staff in kindergartens and primary schools have not been taken into account. In the study programmes of institutions preparing educational staff for the sub-system of preschool education and upbringing we can notice: (1) (non) compliance of programmes, (2) inconsistency and lack of coordination between these institutions.

III. RESULTAND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the programmes shows the need for a revision of study programmes and their general harmonization (unification). There is a difference in the conceptual structure of the profile that is being formed, as well as a difference in the study and subject programmes that are implemented at the faculties. The need of unification stems from the need of equal quality in initial education for future educators, as one of the first steps towards achieving quality in preschool education in the Republic of Macedonia.

Table 1. and Graph 1. Opinion about the system of education before employment

I think that the system of education when I got employed is:	F	%
Adequate	50	38,5
Not adequate	25	19
I needed help	55	42,3
Other	-	-
TOTAL	130	100



When asked to rate the system of education and professional development of preschool teachers, the respondents' answers were mostly negative, that is, they were critically inclined. More than half of them (51%) were critically inclined towards the existing organization of initial education of preschool teachers and said that a much more practical experience was needed than the current approach to favouring theoretical content and realizing practice and teaching methods.

The application of theory in the context of a particular practical situation is not recognized. The next group was even more critical and said that radical changes to the educational system and professional

development of preschool teachers were needed (33%); this strong group of respondents emphasized the need of a study programme for preschool teachers to encompass the integration of all main competencies for preschool teachers (knowledge of the subject matter, practical experience, educational knowledge).

Preschool teachers were asked about the percentage of practical activities that are a key part of the study programme for preschool teachers. More than half of the respondents (52.3%) believe that the percentage ration of practical and theoretical activities should be 50-50%; the second group of respondents (25.3%) goes further and stresses that practice is the most important part of initial education and therefore think that it should be represented by 70% of the total study programme; the third group (19.2%) believes that practice should be represented by around 30%.

The legislation defines the types and qualifications of various professionals and ancillary staff comprising the ECEC workforce, with responsibilities for: management of facilities and standards of provision; educational work - teaching; care of children; specialist professional support to staff (pedagogue, psychologist, and music pedagogue); and administrative and other support (hygiene, meals, and administration).

Table 2. Staff ratio in ECEC facilities

Managers	4.6%
Teachers	25%
Caregivers	39.3%
Specialists	1.7 %
Admin./technical staff	29.4%

The low ratio of teaching staff within the overall workforce seems to confirm the general opinion that the system is geared towards care and less towards early learning and stimulation. Significant percentage of staff not directly involved in working with children might be seen as indication of relative internal inefficiency.

There is no regulated system of professional development in the Republic of Macedonia that will ensure enhancement in the quality of educational work, the comprehensive effectiveness of kindergartens, and new concepts toward which the country's education policy would move. The following data illustrates the real situation with respect to this issue. It is a part of a comprehensive study conducted in 2017 by the Institute of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje (Faculty of Philosophy, 2017).

When asked how much the licensing process provided professional development, 78.3% think that the licensing process does not provide professional development, and 21.7% think that the licensing process provides professional development.

As for the process of developing or designing study programmes, teachers were asked (multiple choice questions) - who should design study programmes for the first and the second cycle of studies?

A vast majority of teachers (73.8%) believe that the current way of designing study programmes should be changed and that it should include joint workgroups consisting of: (1) teachers from institutions of initial education, (2) professional and academic associations, (3) the Ministry of Education and the Bureau for Development of Education, 4) kindergarten educators, (5) and governing bodies of children communities. One quarter of teachers (26%) think that the current way is good, and that it should be in full autonomy of the institutions of initial education.

Table 3. Designing a study programme

Who should design study programmes?	<i>f</i>	%
Institutions of initial education	17	26,1
Joint work groups: Faculties, Ministry of Education and Science, educators, professional associations, ...	48	73,8
State	-	-
TOTAL	65	100

IV. CONCLUSION

We are undoubtedly in the common European space where both levels of education last for a total of five years (300 ECTS). The research has shown shortcomings in the current education of preschool teachers. The biggest disadvantages are in the areas requiring differentiated work of preschool teachers.

There is a need to raise the quality of education and professional development of the professional staff with particular attention to the following competences: synthetic, analytical, creative thinking and problem solving; Independence, (self) criticism, (self) assessment, (self) evaluation and quality advocacy; Initiative/ambition, appreciation of continuous personal promotion and professional development (*this is the key competence related to the professional development of a preschool teacher in his/her career*); Preparation for

research in preschool education; Special pedagogical knowledge of working with children with special needs; Knowledge and practical application of artistic disciplines - drama education and education (preparation of plays for children, children's plays, pantomime); developing children's creativity (music, art).

Effective systems tend to raise the professional status of the staff, which is generally considered a key quality factor, by raising the level of qualifications. Professional staff is the most important factor for children's well-being and their learning and development outcomes. Working conditions and professional development are considered an essential element of quality.

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