

The impact of education reform in Romania between 1989-2020 on the regulation and decentralization of early childhood education

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Abstract: Romania inherited a tightly controlled and strictly regulated mass education system from socialism, which inevitably has gone through a systematic reform. However, transformation or change of any education system does not take place for its own sake, but it is intended to meet certain social and political challenges and requirements. Therefore, the present study investigates the significant changes that have taken place in early childhood education (ECE) in Romania since the collapse of the Ceausescu regime in 1989. Specifically, the impact of the reform measures on ECE provision is examined in relation to curriculum content and structure. Explanation of how to investigate education have been central to the present research. The analysis of documentary data corpus identified three main themes reflecting the changes that took place: (i) the introduction of education reforms, (ii) the emergence of educational pluralism, (iii) the various iterations of the early childhood curriculum. Findings suggest that decentralisation processes led to the spread of alternative pedagogies in ECE add the findings about curriculum content change our investigation offers a detailed picture of the educational processes of decentralization and the changes it has brought in the early childhood curriculum.

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Introduction

The dominant political and economic views of a society are reflected in the education policy of the country. Romania was no exception. The political changes of December 1989 opened the way for democracy, which resulted in confusion and anachronism in the educational system that was built on communist ideals (Papp, 1998). The communist education system operated under strong centralization until the beginning of the 1990s. Activities in support of democracy and reform measures opened the door for decentralization processes, nonetheless, the Romanian education system, including early childhood education, has retained its centralized character to this day. The main focus of the present study is not on processes in education policy and the sociology of education, but rather on how regulations, value construction, and processes related to change in the early childhood curriculum have impacted early childhood education. Although preschool education is part of public education in Romania, the literature in the field is rather scant and incomplete. On the one hand, this can be attributed to the fact that during the *period* of the *Communist regime*, kindergartens operated attached to schools; on the other hand, until 2020, the first level of institutionalized education was not mandatory and early childhood education received little attention. Therefore, in what follows, I will focus on the reform measures and decentralization processes that took place at the level of public education following the political transition.

Background to the Study

Quality of education, innovation and the use of alternative *preschool programs* play a particularly important role in Romanian preschool institutions of our time. In order to reveal the source of these, we focused our attention on the period following the regime change. In the communist era, the unified mass education introduced after industrialization can be considered the industrialization of knowledge transfer. The aim was to impart the same knowledge to all children within the framework of a centralized education system. The system was based on the principle that all children are the same and they were not deemed as

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individuals. It was easier to treat everyone equally, using a uniform curriculum, similar schools and place a priority on factual knowledge. The education system during Communism instilled discipline, obedience, and patriotism in the citizens. In order to achieve this, wearing a uniform, doing community service, and respecting teachers was mandatory (Rădulescu, 2006). This study presents the economic, demographic, legal and educational changes that characterized the post-communist period, it also discusses how emerging preschool programs shaped preschool education in space and time, and the way educational pluralism gained ground.

The Regime Change from an Education Policy Viewpoint

Under socialism, the main goal of the eastern Soviet-style system was to establish total control over the upcoming generations. This trend could be observed in education policy through the nationalization of parochial and private schools (Sáska, 2016). In the eastern part of Europe, including Romania, education was highly centralized. Pre-transition education policy in Romania was rigid, lagging behind and obsolete (Bârzea, 1993). Following the regime change, the aim of renewing and reforming education became apparent through decentralization processes. This change took place not only in Romania but also in other Central and Eastern European countries, through faster or slower decentralization processes. Nevertheless, the steps taken towards decentralisation in Romania show great diversity (Radó, 2013). In what follows, we shall focus on the contents and processes entailed by this phenomenon in the education system. One can speak of a completely decentralized education system if all functional governance subsystems, i.e. funding, content regulations, quality assessment, system of service providers, etc., are decentralized (McGinn & Welsh, 1999). Decentralization solves old problems and creates new ones (Cheng, 1997). One of the main aims of decentralization programmes is to provide more favourable conditions for the development of the system. Partial decentralization does not necessarily improve governments' ability to implement an education policy (Radó, 2013). We fully agree with these claims as the process of decentralization did not solve all educational problems in any of the Eastern European countries. Romania was no exception as decentralization processes in the country further aggravated the problems and processes of the system. Though the education policy in Romania set off on a path of decentralization, the process has not been completed. Investigating the phenomenon, we find that the initial period was not characterized by unified, straightforward efforts. Comprehensive systemic changes appeared much later, starting from the mid '90s. After the regime change, a paradigm shift could also be observed in institutionalized education. While *under the communist* rule, the demand on the education system was to form well-educated, loyal, communist individuals following the political transition, the reform processes gave rise to such expectations as the comprehensive, free and harmonious development of the individual, and the development of an independent and creative personality.

Methodology

The study has adopted a qualitative interpretive theoretical stance, where the researcher made sense of the documentary texts to develop an understanding and give meaning to the content of educational documentary materials through a close reading in a systematic way (Punch & Oancea, 2014). It is to be acknowledged here that the researcher is not separate from this process, rather, the meanings constructed are socially and culturally conditioned and they inevitably influence the researcher's interpretations of the documentary content (Krippendorff, 2019; O'Donoghue, 2007). The main sources of data were educational laws and regulations from 1987 to 2019 providing official sources of data on educational matters in Romania in the post-soviet era. Subsequently, Romanian early childhood curricula were also examined in a chronological order, in which the variables were highlighted that enabled the reform of preschool education to be tracked. Altogether, twelve documents were selected for analysis: three documents of educational law, five regulatory documents and four iterations of the early childhood curricula between 2000 and 2019. The diachronic approach of the document analysis made it possible to examine the phenomena in the history of education in a chronological order. Through the internal analysis and subjective study of the documents, the researcher highlighted the changes in legislation and education laws. During the external analysis, the social context of the documents and the changes in the reformed

curriculum in early childhood education were examined. The study employed qualitative descriptive content analysis, through which the researcher interacted with the selected documentary materials (Krippendorff, 2019; Kurkatz, 2012). Through the multi-phase analysis, during which the 'messages' extracted from the documents were analyzed, thematic patterns were identified in the examined texts according to the combined deductive (a priori coding frame) and inductive logic. The aim was to identify relationships between the variables. The analysis resulted in three main themes, which reflected the changes that took place and also their chronologies: (i) the introduction of education reforms, (ii) the emergence of educational pluralism, (iii) the various iterations of the early childhood curriculum.

Presentation and Discussion of the Findings

This section presents the educational reform processes that took place after the regime change. These were investigated in a systematic order, considering three different aspects: the introduction of the first reforms after the regime change, the emergence of educational pluralism, and changes in preschool curricula.

There are a number of national and international approaches to educational reform, yet we can speak of a unified approach in terms of change, shift and restructuring. From a different point of view the democratization, modernization and development of the education system (Kondakov, 1987). Modern approaches take into account various factors² quantitative education reforms are replaced by qualitative ones. Preparing an education reform entails the clarification of the following basic problems (Murvai, 1998):

- how much time is objectively devoted to developing and applying comprehensive ideas;
- what assumptions and belief system serve as the foundation for the transformation and redesign of the education system;
- is there a need for a complete reform or only certain components of the system need to be changed. Any of the above basic questions can only be fully clarified if we also consider the dimension of time.

A Multi-Perspective Analysis of Post-Regime-Change Reform Processes

The three decades after the regime change, dedicated to the democratic reform of the Romanian education system, can be examined and divided into different periods by using various indicators. Under this aspect discusses three well-defined and structured periods (Papp, 1998):

a) The *proclaimed reform period* (Dec. 1989 -1992) was characterized on the one hand by a sense of freedom promoted by the collapse of Ceaușescu's regime and on the other hand by the lack of a comprehensive legal framework. The education system remained centralized during this period as many previous provisions remained in force. The chaos resulting from the collapse of the regime led to both ad hoc ministerial decisions and institutional initiatives. Ministerial decisions, i.e. at the national level, mostly urged the discontinuation of the most obvious features of the communist education system, such as forbidding teacher mobility, the overwhelming number of compulsory working hours, the high number of students per class, compulsory uniform, the participation of pupils and university students in agricultural work, the politicization of textbooks, the strict inspections, etc. Given the lack of legal provisions, a kind of individualization has developed at the institutional level. During this period, education was regulated by the Education Act, 1978, still in force and various government decrees. Preschool education was also based on the *Preschool Education and Training Program* published in 1987. An interesting feature of the documents is that it plans and prescribes in detail every game and activity for the preschool teacher. It lacks creativity, child-centeredness, and freedom of choice, while it contains a strict routine of daily activities, very elaborate descriptions of games, and a weekly schedule. This preschool program consists of three distinct parts. The first part is an exhaustive presentation of the educational content and its implementation in the small, middle and big groups. The second part lists the party-political education of children, and the compulsory "Șoimii Patriei" [*Homeland Hawks*] activities and requirements, while the third part contains a collection of

² <http://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/glossary/educational-planning>

socialist songs and poems. In the early 1990s, the issue of education lost ground to economic and political problems, and what is more, the urgent reform of the system was not put into practice for a very long time (Bartha et al., 2011).

b) The *populist reform period* (1992-1996). The long-awaited Education Act is published in 1995. Everyone expected this to bring about the education reform. There are at least two reasons why this has not happened: on the one hand, education reform is not limited to one or two laws but is pushed through by a more comprehensive, coherent chain of actions and decisions. On the other hand, the laws mentioned above contained many provisions that were incompatible with the objectives of the reform. While the reform is aimed at making educational structures as flexible and open as possible and making the education system adapt to challenges easily and be able to meet local needs, the Education Act confers too much power to the Ministry of Education by authorizing it to coordinate and control the national education system. Thus, characterizing the reform as being populist means that an institutional framework had already been established for it, however, implementation is rather poor, concrete changes in the system are rather scarce and as Rita Fóris-Ferenczi argued about the reform as a concern of the ministry, the school inspectorates and advisory bodies is veiled in secrecy as opposed to being public as rightly expected (Fóris-Ferenczi, 1996). It was in the interest of the authorities of the time to commit to the reform as the country could receive financial assistance from the World Bank on condition that it creates a democratic education system.

c) *Extending the reform* (from 1996). The reform of pre-university education was primarily aimed at bringing changes to the management and financing of public education. The main objective of the reform was to bring changes to the central administration, more specifically to decentralize it. The Ministry of Education would serve as a strategic decision-making body, while the inspectorates would ensure the quality of education as a tactical level of decision-making. At the same time, the autonomy of schools would increase and local authorities could be more actively involved in the financing of the schools in their area. When the government fell in 1997, Andrei Marga became the new Minister of Education in Romania. He argued that the education reform must be implemented in six areas: 1. curriculum reform; 2. reforming university entrance examination, nationalizing the baccalaureate and taking into account the result for admission; 3. rethinking specializations and promoting academic and scientific achievements; 4. rethinking the relationship between schools and economic-administrative units; 5. the financial autonomy of higher education institutions; 6. a better, fairer distribution and use of foreign scholarships (Papp, 1998). On January 21, 1998, the National Education Reform Commission was established within the Ministry of Education. This marked the beginning of an amplification of the concrete reform processes at the national level. Although the reform was based on top-down restructuring, the core curriculum shifted towards multipolar regulation, which presupposed the start of decentralization processes. Progress in professional development (in-service teacher training, the training of trainers, the accreditation of in-service training programs, the reform in vocational training, the reform in internal, school-level evaluation) was complemented by regulations promoting the infrastructural development of schools, the decentralization of education management and financing as well as creating the conditions for school autonomy. These reform efforts strengthened the belief that the opportunity for institutional autonomy and local educational management provides a flexible framework for minority education as well in order for it to adapt to specific educational situations. In a European historical perspective, ECEC attendance in Romania was high, similar to many other countries in the region. Provision was predominantly public and based on a centralised model. Reforms in the early 1990s saw much of the public infrastructure dismantled and provision declined significantly. Aware of the importance of ECEC attendance for improving learning outcomes and in particular addressing inequities, Romania is seeking to improve access to modern high-quality ECEC. While discussions about adopting a multi-sectoral strategy have been on-going for years, no such strategy is in place yet.³

³ Improving Access to quality Early Education in Romania <http://www.oecd.ro/oecd3ro.html>

The Rise of Educational Pluralism in Romania

The second theme from the documentary content analysis addresses the concept of educational pluralism, the rise of which manifested in adopting alternative approaches to education in general and specifically in early education. What is alternative education? How could it materialize in a centralized education system that followed rigid rules? In pedagogy, the term 'alternative' is associated with instructional and educational alternatives. In what follows, we are going to discuss the emergence of the concept, the modifications it has undergone, its connotations and the meanings associated with it. The meaning of the concept offers two optional, unusual, non-standard options. This meaning, however has significantly extended and enriched over time. The term 'alternative' has become very common in today's public discourse, in fact, it has lost its original meaning derived from Latin, i.e., 'one of the two options' (Brezsnyánszky, 2004). In everyday use it can be replaced by the words 'other', 'new', 'more interesting', conveying the sense of 'better', 'more modern' and 'more efficient'. The pedagogical connotation of 'alternative' is 'optional, chosen way of action'. It is determined by two factors: *alternativity*, which offers the optional path, and *autonomy*, a subjective condition of alternativity entailing the possibility to choose (Falus, 2013). Those institutions can be considered alternative which provide an actual possibility for teachers, students and the education system to choose between pedagogically significantly different alternatives (Brezsnyánszky, 2004). What they share is the focus on the child's personality, striving to satisfy the child's interests, needs and demands. As a result, the role of sheer knowledge transfer, the usual interpretation of knowledge, the intellectual, verbal effect is diminished in these institutions and the focus shifts primarily to affective and effective goals (sociability, empathy, tolerance and autonomy) (Ballér et al., 2013).

By contrast, in *Reform Pedagogy and School Reform* Németh and Ehrenhard (1999) describe the goals and characteristics of traditional pedagogy as follows: teacher-centred, the prevalence of frontal instruction and corresponding classroom layout, homogeneous classes, same level of achievement, grade repetition, repetitive assessment, evaluation by grades, and using the carrot and stick method. In the years following the regime change, there was already a need to implicitly introduce alternative pedagogical programs from the West. Within the Ministry of Education, initiatives for alternative education had already taken place after the regime change, yet these efforts became more structured in 1996, when the Organization for the Provision of Services in Private Pre-University Education was established. A year later, this organization was divided into subunits, one of which is called the Education Alternatives and still exist today. It has to be noted that the regulations and legislation in alternative education do not distinguish between different stages of pre-university education and the same regulations apply to education at all levels. The reform process gave rise to the first Waldorf institutions; however, official regulations were introduced only several years later. Cuciureanu distinguishes three well-defined periods along the provisions introduced with reform measures:

a) *A period of anomie* between 1991 and 1995, before the Education Act was passed. In the years following the regime change, alternative educational institutions developed and operated without a regulatory framework. This period of turmoil led to the establishment of alternative kindergartens and schools not authorized by the Ministry of Education. In 1994, the first Step by Step kindergartens began to operate, and these brought forth the reformation of the norms of preschool education. They promoted child-centred education, i.e., considering the individual nature of each child and their own pace of development. Great emphasis was placed on maintaining contact with parents and involving them in everyday educational activities. It took a decade for this child-centred approach and paradigm shift to enter the public consciousness and the national curriculum.

b) *The period of temporary operations* - the Education Act, 1995 and the "Regulation of the Establishment and Operation of Private and Public Alternative Education Institutions in Romania" introduced by the Alternative Education Committee, established in 2000. The institutions that started operating after the regime change obtained their operating license from the Ministry of Education in this period. Key implementations include the procedures and expectations for alternative educational institutions. The

accreditation and inspection process of alternative educational institutions was influenced by cyclical and other long-term factors. The former includes educational institutions established in a chaotic way after the regime change, the growing number of students, and the large number of schools and kindergartens offering alternative programs without a legal framework. Long-term factors include the creation of competitive situations in education as a result of educational pluralism, the increase in financial resources and the performance-based allocation of resources to institutions, the creation of opportunities for students to study abroad and the homologation of degrees, as well as ensuring the quality of education in all schools in Romania.

c) *The period of accreditations* - consolidation of alternative education, legalization of institutions. The accreditation of private and public alternative education institutions that met national requirements began in the 2000s. All alternative groups, classes, or educational institution that were authentic, efficient, and recognized were entered in a register. The turn of the millennium was a watershed for alternative educational institutions as well. The accreditation took into account the established system of criteria; thus, those institutions continued their activity which were viable and met the evaluation criteria. Unlike other Western European countries, Romania did not enable alternative education to function on its own, but integrated it into the national education system. Sections 16 and 59 of Education Act 2011/1, still in force, provide more detailed regulatory provisions on educational alternatives. Accordingly, alternative institution can be established at any stage of pre-university education, provided they are licensed by the Ministry of Education and meet the established criteria. Accreditation and continuous monitoring of institutions are carried out in accordance with the relevant laws and ensure their operational and organizational autonomy.

Since 2007, Romania has been a member state of the European Union (EU) and has been making efforts to harmonize and adapt legislations and standards to European regulations. In 2020, Romania recognized the fundamental importance of the quality of early education in the development of society and took part in the European program "First Years - First Priority" whose aim was to build a strong community of supporters in the European Union and at a national level.

Representatives of alternative institutions compile the curriculum which is then approved by the Ministry of Education. All kindergarten groups and elementary classes have to have a teacher qualified for implementing the given alternative method (Cuciureanu, 2011).

Two opposing directions were observed in the introduction of alternatives: one of them was represented by non-conventional alternative education, promoting freedom and the independence of children, the other one was the initiative of governmental organizations seeking to use traditional education and the traditional canon in alternative education. Eventually, a compromise was reached, namely educational alternatives accepted the forms of assessment and examinations used in public education, and government organizations granted organizational and functional autonomy to alternative institutions. Nonetheless, the biggest contradiction comes from the fact that in Romania any alternative trend has to be integrated into the national curriculum. Although in recent years, most county seats and small towns in Transylvania and Partium saw a rapid increase in the number of Waldorf, Montessori, and step by step kindergartens, schools, or even groups, or classes, not to mention home-education communities, these still account for a very small proportion, hardly 1 per cent of children enrolled in public education in Romania.

Changes in the Early Childhood Curriculum After the Regime Change

Following the regime change, the education system in Romania saw structural and attitudinal changes, nevertheless, it retained its advocacy as well as its performance-oriented and controlling nature through a unified, nationally imposed curriculum. In Romania, one can speak of a unified curriculum framework for early childhood education, to which all public, private or alternative institutions must adapt. In the years of socialism, the role of parents in early childhood education sank into insignificance. The development of children was left entirely to educators and professionals in the field. After the regime change, the Ministry of Education acknowledged the fact that parents, caregivers, nannies and early

childhood teachers play an equally important role in the physical and mental development of children. In order to achieve this, more and more emphasis was placed on the development of early childhood education. At the beginning of the 1990s, early childhood education was carried out based on the program left behind from socialist period. Temporary Educational Program based on Areas of Development (PETAS) the first pilot program for preschool children was launched in 1992, with the support of United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). Its novelty lay in the fact that it established a closer relationship with parents, and education was carried out in smaller groups according to areas of development. The alternative program used in PETAS shows similarities to the one used in the Step by Step Program launched in 1994. Both programs introduced the implicit involvement of parents in preschool education and both used activities and games that contribute to the child's individual development (Preda et al, 2011). The next two decades saw the emergence and implementation of four national early childhood curricula.

Early Childhood Curriculum, 2000

After the regime change, the education policy in Romania started to align with the European education policy. As a result, continuous curriculum development, adjustments and changes had to be carried out. The first early childhood curriculum was developed at the turn of the millennium, which can be considered a transitional period in the light of reform processes in Romania. When it comes to examining the early childhood curriculum in Romania, attention must be drawn to the terminological diversity found in the literature. Immediately after the regime change, the official document used by early childhood teachers as a curriculum was called '*preschool education and training program*'. In the early childhood curricula used after the turn of the millennium, the terms '*curriculum*' and '*syllabus*' were used interchangeably. The international literature provides different interpretations for the term '*curriculum*', some of them more straightforward, others more complex. According to Mialaret, the curriculum indicates the educational content (Mialaret, 2018), while according to Walker, it also includes educational goals and organization (Walker, 2021). There is no consensus in the pedagogical literature on the definition of the concept, yet some common features can be pointed out. It is the sum of the educational content of the educational activities carried out in educational institutions, which integrates teaching and learning processes and presupposes a systematic approach to educational processes (Bocoş & Jucan, 2019). The term curriculum was introduced into the Romanian pedagogical literature only after the regime change. This change can be observed not only in the terminology used but also in terms of content. As part of the decentralization processes, the national curriculum was renewed and the curriculum was constantly reformed. According to the national curriculum published by the Ministry of Education, the term '*curriculum*' is a key concept in education and it encompasses contemporary educational practices. The new approach was implemented within -'*The organization of early childhood education*' program. Preschool children learn and develop through play, the driving force behind preschool activities. The second most important actor in early childhood education policy is the early childhood teacher, their personality, style and behaviour patterns, which serve as an example for children. It is the responsibility of the early childhood teacher to create an environment for pre-schoolers that arouses their interest and by the introduction of external objects makes them feel at ease. We find several innovative changes in this curriculum. The number of activities was reduced and was divided into two levels, which are still used today. The first includes children aged between 3 and 5. At this level the focus is on creating the necessary conditions for socialization. The second level includes children aged between 5 and 7, these need to be prepared for school and social life. The number of activities was made dependent on the type of the institution and afternoon classes were introduced in institutions with a long-hours programme. Optional activities, adapted to the needs of the children, were introduced in early childhood education. New programs were developed and long-term goals were set covering the entire period of early childhood education. The new curriculum also formulated some basic principles: creating a playful learning environment, development based on spontaneous experiences, laying the foundation of reading, the introduction of integrated activities and the introduction of projects. In September, the first two weeks of the new school year focus on assessment. The new curriculum also imposed some new regulations:

interdisciplinary introduction of activities, reducing the number of worksheets, workbooks, exercises teaching writing, avoiding the excessive use of visual aids, organizing activities in smaller groups, eliminating homework, ensuring creativity through aesthetic activities and crafts and giving children the freedom to choose between optional activities. This curriculum already contained several innovations that have been part of early childhood education and the individual and free development of children to this day.

Early Childhood Curriculum, 2006

The year 2006 can be considered a milestone in the Hungarian early childhood education in Romania as this was the year when the Curriculum for Preschool Education Activities, approved in September 2000 by Decree No. 8/4481 of the Ministry of Education and Culture and revised in 2003, was published for Hungarian-medium groups. This was an important stage of the early childhood curriculum reform. In addition to the curricula for different fields of education, the Hungarian version also contained the curriculum for mother tongue teaching. The innovative part of the document is the curriculum for teaching Romanian in Hungarian early childhood education institutions. This sets out the requirements for learning a second language and details the skills a Hungarian-speaking pre-schooler needs to successfully learn a second language, in the present case the state language. Mother tongue serves as a foundation for acquiring Romanian language, taking into account the transfer and interference between the two languages. The early childhood curriculum specifies the types of activities to be carried out and lists the proposed optional activities. For each type of activity, it determines the number of weekly activities corresponding to the groups of children aged between 3 and 5 and between 5 and 7 and to the short- and long-hour programmes.

Early Childhood Curriculum, 2008

The next early childhood curriculum was published in 2008, reflecting current trends in pedagogy, the positive and negative experiences of early childhood teachers, the current level of development of preschool children as well as modern communication and information technologies. The introduction of areas of experience, learning activities and topics to be covered during the school year, as well as reducing the number of activities also counted as important innovations. The introduction of the areas of experience made it possible to take an interdisciplinary, integrated approach to the proposed content and to ensure the freedom of the early childhood teacher to plan daily activities. The revised curriculum emphasized the importance of interactive methods, play, family, and the appropriate atmosphere for early childhood education. Although this curriculum introduced several changes, it can still be classified as a performance-based curriculum. This allows for a synthesis of expectations by stages. The development requirements relate to the competencies that have to be developed during early childhood education in the following five areas of experience: language and communication, human and social sciences, aesthetics, creativity as well as psychomotor skills. These areas should be closely interlinked and grouped around integrated themes (Stark, 2020).

Learning activities are a set of planned, organized, methodical activities led by the early childhood teacher in order to meet requirements. These activities can be carried out using the frontal teaching method or in small groups or individual work. Despite the fact that teachers are given complete freedom in this respect, the majority opt for frontal instruction. The main reason for this is that teachers have to deal on their own with a group of 20-25 children.

Early Childhood Curriculum, 2019

Based on the European education policy, this new curriculum offers a pedagogical framework for early childhood education that allows children to fully develop their personalities, and gives teachers the possibility to tailor the activities to suit the personal interest and needs of each child. In this new scenario, the nursery school age group forms an integral part of the curriculum, despite the fact that at the time the Ministry of Education was not yet responsible for the administration of nursery schools. The curriculum is structured based on developmental areas, developmental dimensions and behaviour patterns, of which developmental areas serve as a starting point for teachers. When planning learning activities, teachers first

choose the dimensions of development, they adapt the behaviour patterns to the age group, and then they design the appropriate learning activities (Stark, 2020).

The introduction of the new curriculum encouraged innovations in terms of terminology and content. Previous 'preschool teaching activities' were replaced by the concepts of 'early childhood education and care' and the intertwining of these two. This was the first curriculum in which 'preschool education' was replaced by the term 'early childhood education' (Vargáné, 2017). Changes were made to the number of instruction hours per week, and the emphasis shifted from lexical knowledge and information transfer to the social and emotional development of children.

Conclusion

In the communist era, the unified mass education introduced after industrialization can be considered the industrialization of knowledge transfer. The aim was to impart the same knowledge to all children within the framework of a centralized education system. The system was based on the principle that all children were the same and they were not deemed as individuals. It was easier to treat everyone equally, using a uniform curriculum and schools placing priority on factual knowledge. After the regime change, it was a real challenge to change this attitude. Liberalization processes took place in most areas. However, in the field of education, this has not been accomplished to date. The state exerts such a high-level control that traditional, public education has very little competition and this minimizes development. The introduction of educational pluralism has led to an increasing interest in alternative curriculum approaches, nonetheless, a strong vertical structure and a high degree of bureaucracy still prevails. This trend can also be observed in the field of early childhood education. The use of alternative pedagogies in early childhood education is permitted by law on the condition that these are integrated into the national curriculum. Innovations can be observed in curriculum changes, which have been partly aligned with European standards, yet early learning is still rigid, uniform and mandatory for all children in early childhood education in Romania. However, there appear to be signs of positive development: formal learning is replaced by play, the focus has shifted from the community to the individual, free play and activities designed for personal development have also become more important in the daily programme. This, to some extent, has reduced the gap between the rhetoric and reality, theory and practice in early childhood education and care. Although the current curriculum reflects several reforms, it can still be regarded as an outcome-based curriculum. Educational institutions were not given a sufficient degree of autonomy as the Ministry of Education transferred most of the decision-making responsibilities to the school inspectorates inherited from socialism. Hence the influence of socialism lives on still today. In the past thirty years the education policy has been shaped by twenty Ministers of Education and education regulations have been amended more than sixty times, nonetheless the long-expected full reform and decentralization has not been implemented.

In conclusion, I would argue that centralized systems of early education are no longer sufficient. Preschool institutions should be given autonomy and more freedom to employ alternative approaches, so that they can create their own pedagogical program in accordance with their local circumstances, environment and needs. The study contributes to broadening our knowledge and understanding of the reform processes in education in Romania. It also offers a systematic analysis of the processes that have been taking place in the past twenty years. The fact that the Romanian public education system still bears the marks of centralization raises further research questions.

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