

# INCTE 2019

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4th International Conference on Teacher Education

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## A multinational investigation of quality in preschools

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### Abstract

Long-term benefits of early childhood education and care on children's cognitive and social-emotional development, adjustment to school and academic achievements, future careers, and adjustment in adult life, especially for those from disadvantaged communities, have been well documented by research. However, desired outcomes of early education would only come into effect provided that educational programs meet the criteria of quality. Although there are many dimensions of quality education and care, three appear to be overarching: quality of physical environments and educational activities, affordability, and accessibility. The aim of this multinational research is to explore the quality of preschool and kindergarten programs. For this purpose, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised, which looks into seven dimensions including space and furnishings, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interactions, program structure, and parents and staff, was used to collect data in pre-k programs of Romania, Latvia, Portugal, and Turkey. Analysis of the data is made in a way to make both national and international comparisons. Based on the findings, the teacher training stage of the project will be structured.

**Keywords:** early childhood education, quality, classroom, educational material.

### Resumo

Os benefícios a longo prazo da educação de infância no desenvolvimento cognitivo e socio-emocional das crianças, o contributo para o sucesso escolar e académico, para as carreiras profissionais futuras e para a vida adulta, especialmente para as pessoas de comunidades vulneráveis, estão bem documentados pela investigação. No entanto, os resultados desejados na educação de infância só têm expressão quando os programas educacionais são de qualidade. Embora existam muitas dimensões de educação e cuidados de qualidade, três parecem ser abrangentes: qualidade dos ambientes físicos e atividades educacionais, disponibilidade e acessibilidade. Neste trabalho são apresentadas e discutidas as condições iniciais de um estudo multinacional que explora a qualidade do ambiente educativo da educação pré-escolar. Foi usada a *Escala de Avaliação do Ambiente em Educação de Infância – Edição Revista*, que examina sete dimensões, incluindo espaço e mobília, rotinas de cuidados pessoais, raciocínio de linguagem,

atividades, interações, estrutura do programa, pais e funcionários, foi usada para coletar dados em programas pré-escolares da Roménia, Letónia, Portugal e Turquia. A análise dos dados foi feita de forma a fazer comparações nacionais e internacionais.

**Palavras-Chave:** educação pré-escolar, qualidade, sala de atividades, material educativo.

## 1 Introduction

When it is considered that there is an unlimited flow from one environment to another during learning process, researchers underline that a well-designed educational environment should be provided to children in order to help them gain the best of the experiences that would encourage improvement of the skills they need to fulfill their potential (Crowther & Wellhousen, 2004). It is critical to enrich learning settings and also teach teachers how to improve and design or redefine educational activities according to innovative learning environments. In this context, the researchers try to support preschool environments to function in high quality to improve the academic and socio-emotional outcomes of children based on empirical research findings. Unfortunately, it is still a widely shared concern that only a small percentage of young children have access to high quality care and education (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2006). Thus, the emphasis on a common notion that educational environments for young children should be in high quality providing developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for all children, might still seem a wishful thinking that has to be attained yet.

The nature of the relationship between children and adult is also a significant element that has important social, emotional and academic outcomes for children (Pianta, 1998; Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012; Morris, Denham, Bassett, & Timothy, 2013). Teachers should supply supportive feedback and provide education that is developmentally appropriate and based on children's real-life experiences and interests. It is stated that a unified classroom atmosphere formed by with a combination of these two components that complements each other would increase the outcomes in young children's literacy, language, social, emotional and cognitive development. The fact that the classroom atmospheres and learning centers should be well prepared, equipped and in high quality is of high importance too big to neglect in order to improve and support the preschool and elementary school children's all developmental fields and creative thinking skills. Therefore, teachers must be competent on appropriate developmental practices by using a learning space that is enriched by innovative materials and tools regarding five developmental dimensions of children:

- 1) Learning Abilities and Attitudes;
- 2) Development of Language, Communication and the Prerequisites of reading and writing;
- 3) Cognitive Development;
- 4) Socio-emotional Development; and
- 5) Physical Development, Personal Health and Hygiene.

It is suggested in the literature that, generally speaking, two basic elements – social-emotional climate and instructional support- often related to classroom process are

decisive in children's outcomes (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2006). When the studies related to quality are reviewed, it seems necessary to consider the concept of quality in a multi-dimensional perspective. Meaning, not only the physical conditions but also social-emotional climate and instructional support (such as physical equipment, quality of functioning in daily training flow in education process etc.) are important elements to consider in defining quality (Bassok & Galdo, 2016; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2006; Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2007). However, the researchers express that studying the quality in all its dimensions is a basic requirement. On the other hand, they emphasize that measuring and evaluating educational experiences provided throughout the day and embedded in daily routines is harder than evaluating structural quality. In this process, practices and teachers' behavior, affirmative teacher-child interactions and instructional guidance have essential importance. In this context in which demographic structures and the quality of early learning experiences are studied, it is stated that there are hardly any studies that evaluated the quality of process (Bassok & Galdo, 2016). As seen here, in the literature, the researchers of the quality in education frequently express the lack of research on many various dimensions. In this subject, we face the basic need that these kinds of researches increase in field literature.

According to researchers, a scientific exploration of classroom atmospheres, evaluation of several factors related to quality would be supportive in finding new ways and solutions and determining critical factors that play a role in quality education and care. The researchers suggest that we would be able to find the possibilities of offering children better ways and experiences that would improve education process in case we study the quality by assessing the classes. It is essential to find out the ways that leads to better future for education. The research results would be used for developing a teacher training course and intensive program that would be oriented to development of new educational materials/ tools for children. Additionally, it is claimed that researching class structure would reveal the findings about patterns, programme improvement and advance the discussions about policies increasing quality (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2006). Moreover, it is very constructive to diagnose relationships and to explore teachers' good practices with children in the classroom, to change professional behaviors, according to problems to promote positive relationship by conducting research design that includes interaction factors. Thus, it would be possible to make an intellectual contribution pertaining to what we can do to support and contribute more to today's and tomorrow's children. It is well known that children would be more attracted, curious and motivated to actively participate in their learning process when new learning materials are created, and applied today's children are much more kinetic and need more new sources of stimulation and hard to keep their attention on the learning process.

Moreover, the research results would be used for development of a teacher training course and intensive programs for research learners in the next project stage in order to transfer or exchange teachers who needs support about how to design and create a special learning space with enriched equipment with different kinds of educational materials - indoor and outdoor environment, such as sensorial teaching materials and a didactical sensory garden in each educational institution of the involved countries. In general, there are in the literature scarcely any researches that studied classroom qualities in preschool and primary environments in a broad perspective (Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010).

The evaluation, comparison and reflection of the different kinds of practices carried out by the researchers in preschool in different countries will give more realistic ideas about the needs of children and teachers in educational system and also a chance to think about successful solutions that lead to stimulates.

The purpose of the present paper is to reveal and compare for getting general view point based on instructional and socio-emotional atmosphere preschool classrooms among different countries. The findings obtained from this study will provide a multidimensional assessment of the general situation by introducing both good examples and elements that are being implemented in the field in different countries. The general aim of this project is to gain a better understanding of what kinds of programming have been conducted to improve children's social and emotional competence by comparing different countries. The information we collect in this project will provide teachers and researchers with information they can use to better support children and improve their school readiness and mental health.

In this research, our study is based on two questions: what teaching and learning strategies, preschool teachers used in their practices from involved countries and how they organize the learning environments to facilitate the learning experiences. For the first phase, the research aims to diagnose the learning space context in preschools, and then to make a comparative analysis through involved countries to identify similarities and differences, good practices to share. In the second phase, the research aims at how to design and create a special learning space - indoor and outdoor environment - such as sensorial teaching materials and a didactical sensory garden in each educational institution of the involved countries. The research results will be used for development of a teacher training course and innovative educational materials. In the following sections, brief information about general state of early childhood education and care in each country is presented.

### **1.1 Preschool education in Romania**

Preschool education in Romania covers the ages of 3 to 6/7 with a year in kindergarten being mandatory. Public preschools are free of charge and fall in the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research and the School Inspectorates which supervise the activities of private institutions. Local governments are responsible for care and education of younger children. Within the public education system there are also variety of programs with different pedagogical approaches available including Step by Step Program, Montessori Program, Waldorf Program, Jena Plan, Freinet Program. Preschool education is addressed in the Law of Education with no mention of care and education of younger children. While in general Romanian is the medium of instruction in some school's education is provided in local languages. Children are placed in groups according to their ages and each group on average is comprised of 15 children. Programs are play based. And a national curriculum is in effect.

### **1.2 Preschool education in Portugal**

The Framework Law of Preschool Education (Lei n.º 5/97, of 10th of February) defines preschool education as the first stage of the Portuguese basic education system in a lifelong learning process, and as a complement of parents' role in their children's education. As such, the school should establish a close relationship with families,

favoring child development, in order to assure their full integration in society as an autonomous, free and supportive human beings.

Preschool education is optional, recognizing that family plays the most important part in raising children, while making preschool education universal for children from the age of 4 (Lei n.º 65/2015, 3rd July). This educational provision is expected to be extended to children from the age of 3 by the end of this legislature (2019).

Defined as the first stage of basic education in the lifelong learning process, preschool education covers children from 3 years up to the age of compulsory schooling. Preschool education for children is still optional. It is provided by kindergartens, which are run by a variety of State organizations, charitable institutions, private schools and cooperatives, unions and other organizations.

The public and the private network of preschool education institutions are complementary. The public network is made up of education institutions under the ME and the MTSSS. The private network is composed of for-profit and not-for-profit education institutions. The former are private and cooperative education institutions, while the latter are private institutions of social solidarity (IPSS – Instituições Particulares de Solidariedade Social).

In 2017, 5900 preschool centers were registered in Mainland Portugal, 61,25% of which were owned by public institutions, and 38,74% by private institutions most of them from the solidarity network.

According to the CNE, in 2016, 92.5% of children between 4 years old and the beginning of basic education attended preschool education. Data shows a decrease of 2 percentage points since 2012. The data reveal, specifically, that the percentage of five-year-old attending preschool education is higher than the percentage of four-year-old children, showing a difference of 2.7 percentage points. However, there are no significant gender differences.

### **1.3 Preschool education in Latvia**

Pre-school education for Latvian children is available from the age of 1.5 years, but children may enter from 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 years of age. It is mandatory to participate in pre-primary education programs for five and six-year-old children who do not attend pre-school education institutions. The objective of the pre-school education curriculum is to ensure multi-faceted development of a child's personality, to promote health and readiness to enter the primary stage of basic education. Pre-school education is considered a comprehensive first stage of general education and all children have to complete it by the time they are 7 years old. This deadline may be extended for a year due to specific health or psychological problems by parental request or doctors' request or recommendations.

Pre-school education can be delivered at various pre-primary education institutions (kindergartens) or at special pre-primary classes at general education institutions. Children with special needs attend special pre-school institutions or classes for children with special needs within general education schools.

Since September 2013, home-based early childhood education and care has been available provided by childminders.

## 1.4 Preschool education in Turkey

In the history of Turkish Republic, the first serious undertaking regarding education of young children took place in 1962 when the Ministry of Education [MoE] developed its first Preschools and Kindergartens Policy. But decades had to pass before the establishment of the Department of Preschool Education within the Ministry of Education in 1992. But, in 2011, this department was merged within the Department of Basic Education that oversees preschools, kindergartens and elementary schools. Preschools serve pre-Ks (36-72 months) while kindergartens are a part of elementary schools. With drastic changes in Education Act in 2012, mandatory schooling age was lowered to 60 months forcing parents to enroll their very young children to first grade despite the protests of parents and educators. Following the natural failure of this practice, the age requirement increased. In 2019, 69 months old are required to start school. A drastic decrease in 2012-2013 occurred as 60 months old enrolled in the first grade.

Curriculum. The first national preschool curriculum was released by the MoE in 2002 and updated in 2006 and, again, in 2013 MoE cooperated with teacher education programs with the support of UNICEF. During this fruitful cooperation, the 1994 curriculum for 0 – 36 months was also revised and synchronized with the preschool curriculum. A supplemental family involvement and parent education curriculum also developed for nurseries and pre-kindergarten programs.

The last and effective 2013 national curriculum is defined as eclectic in terms of pedagogical approaches, child centered, play based and addressing the whole child. Instead of classifying under certain subjects, core skills and concepts to target are listed under development areas, as physical, social, emotional and cognitive with a concern that otherwise the programs could become too academics oriented rather than being play-based. It is also emphasized that the curriculum is a guide giving teachers some degree of flexibility to make their education more suitable for children in their groups. Teachers are expected to make necessary adaptations for children with special needs; and employ a family involvement and education plan.

Teacher education. Only teachers with a four-year-degree from a preschool teacher education program and passed an exam are employed by the MoE to be employed in its pre-k programs. Those with a child development associate or high school degree could find employment opportunities in daycares. In the beginning and the end of each semester, a-two-week in-service training is required for all teachers. There are also training opportunities provided throughout the school year.

The aim of this research project is to explore and compare the quality of early care and education environments for preschoolers in Romania, Latvia, Portugal, and Turkey. The research question that guided the study was:

- How do preschools perform in terms of international quality standards?

## 2 Method

*Research sample.* Convenient sampling was used to recruit nursery teachers who were willing to participate in the study. A classroom from 14 different preschools was

selected for data collection in each country making a total of 56 teachers and 56 preschools.

*Instruments.* Data was collected using a Demographics Form and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R).

*Demographics Form.* This form was developed by the researchers. It included such questions as the age group served, socio-economic statuses of parents, teacher's education level, and whether the program provide free meals.

*Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R).* It is a valid and reliable instrument that relies on information collected through on site three-hour-long observation of preschool classrooms. There are 43 items covering seven subscales of the instrument including Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Reasoning, Activities, Interaction, Program Structure and Parents and Staff.

*Data collection.* Data have been collected through observations on two different days two-weeks apart in this ongoing study that is a part of a large-scale project. Raters who would administer the scales were trained until inter-rater reliability was established. Teachers volunteered to participate in the project.

Once the data collection is completed, analyses for each country and for cross-countries are to be made.

### **3 Discussion**

The role of a 21st Century teacher is no longer limited to conveying information to new generations. It is now largely accepted that teachers are now the “facilitators” who is in charge of preparing a safe, rich and stimulating environment in which “scaffolding” would occur enabling children to thrive and reach their potentials. Especially in ECEC, quality of education and care is evaluated based on international standards for physical, social-emotional, and educational environment provided to children. With this understanding in mind, this study aims to explore how learning environments for young children for young children are organized in preschools across the four countries including Romania, Latvia, Portugal, and Turkey. Direct observations in pre-k programs are oriented to reveal how those programs perform in terms of provision and maintenance of physical environments, child care, education, and staff and parent support. Even though main principals and standards of ECEC are shared by all four of participating countries and endorsed in their education and care policies, because of heterogeneity of economic, cultural, sociodemographic, and political factors, variations in practice are assumed. In efforts to initiate any educational reform, it is important to consider contextual factors and develop strategies accordingly. Therefore, in the project TELESPA, findings of this research will be used to direct the following stage of the project in which researchers develop a teacher training course involving teachers from all four countries.

The findings of this study are limited by the small sample of participants that included only a limited number of teachers from each country. A larger sample that would better represent each country's profile is needed for further research.

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