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4th International Conference on Teacher Education

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## A multinational investigation of quality of day care centers

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### Abstract

Finding a quality program for care and education of their infants and toddlers is a major concern especially for parents who are employed full time. Provision of quality 0-3 programs also plays an important role in protecting children at risk when parents lack resources for child care, and in efforts to bring preventive measures to children of families living in disadvantaged communities. Quality, accessible, and affordable early care and education for very young children cultivates their cognitive, language, social, emotional, and, if a rich nutrition and education program accompanies, their physical development. With this understanding in mind, this study was aimed to investigate the quality of infant and toddler programs in countries, including Romania, Portugal, Latvia, and Turkey. Data was collected using an observation tool, Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale which focuses on the dimensions of space and furnishings personal care routines, listening and talking, activities, interaction, program structure, and parents and staff. In this paper, the ongoing data collection process was described and how it would be used to reveal national and international differences and commonalities that would shed light on upcoming stages of the project in which the researchers would focus on writing a handbook for teachers and developing a teacher training course.

**Keywords:** quality, day care centers, education, children.

### Resumo

Encontrar um programa de qualidade de educação para bebés e crianças é uma grande preocupação, especialmente para os pais que estão empregados a tempo integral. A provisão de programas de qualidade dos 0-3 desempenha também um papel importante na proteção de crianças em risco, especialmente quando os pais não dispõem de recursos para cuidar delas e um esforço na criação de medidas preventivas para as crianças de famílias que vivem em comunidades desfavorecidas. Creche e infantários, de qualidade, disponíveis e acessíveis, promovem o desenvolvimento social, emocional e da linguagem das crianças, e, quando acompanhados de bons programas de nutrição, favorecem o seu desenvolvimento físico. Considerando este enquadramento, este estudo tem como objetivo investigar a qualidade dos programas para bebés e crianças em países como a Roménia, Portugal, Letónia e Turquia. A recolha de dados foi realizada utilizando a

*Escala de Avaliação do Ambiente educativo para bebés e crianças* (ITERS) que avalia as dimensões das rotinas de cuidados pessoais de espaço e mobília, escuta e conversação, atividades, interação, estrutura do programa, pais e equipa. Neste artigo, descreve-se o processo de recolha de dados em andamento para revelar diferenças e semelhanças nacionais e internacionais que estruturam os próximos passos do projeto e que apoiaram os investigadores na conceção e desenvolvimento de um manual para educadores e na organização de um curso de formação.

**Palavras-Chave:** qualidade, cuidados na infância, educação, crianças.

## 1 Introduction

In the early years, the role that teachers play in children's lives should be guiding, supportive and nurturing to support young children's adaptation process (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Teachers should create positive classroom atmosphere, cultivate well-being of children, and encourage engagement of children with their learning environment (Murray-Harvey 2010; Roorda, Kooman, Split, & Oort, 2011). A close and warm relationship displayed by a teacher changes child's attitudes towards school positively and leads to relying on the teacher in more functionally as a source of support. This close and supportive relationship also has positive influences on classroom atmosphere (Westman & Bergmark, 2014, Pianta, 1999). It is obvious that positive interactions between child and teacher lead to a strong context for young children's learning and development (de Kruif, McWilliam, Ridley, & Wakely, 2000). There have been crucial processes that child-teacher relationships have given a vital importance, in order to improve the quality of education, functionality and harmony of young children (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Moreover, teachers should take into consideration organizing the physical arrangements necessary for the classroom and enriching learning centers with different kinds of innovative educational tools and materials (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995).

It is important that learning centers in kindergarten institutions should be well prepared, equipped and qualified in order to improve and support all developmental features and creative thinking skills of young children. Nowadays, the fact that education is given much more significance than ever has widened the scope of desired qualifications of young children education. In the literature, positive and supportive relationships between teacher and children leads to enrich learning settings. It is well known that school and classroom context offer numerous opportunities for children to build valuable relationships with their teachers and friends (Pianta, 2006). Beside establishing a close interaction with children in the educational atmosphere, it is critical to enrich learning settings with different kinds of toys and innovative materials. Most of the time teachers need to be supported about how they should organize the learning environments to facilitate the learning experiences and, also, how they should improve and design or redefine activities according to new learning environments for supporting children's learning on 21st century skills. Children need environments that will enable them to improve their abilities and to explore the world effectively in high quality care (Çelik & Kök, 2007; Hohmann & Weikart, 2000). According to researchers, in order to perform their functions, learning centers should attract all children, enable them to have active learning experiences, and toys/materials within these centers should be renewed,

qualified and at sufficient amount (Alat, 2017; Arnas, 2008; Çelik & Kök, 2007, Gestwicki, 2007; Mayesky, 2002; Özyürek & Aydoğan, 2011).

Educational settings should cover sufficiently the needs of today's children, by providing confident relations full of love and educational atmospheres with various educational materials and toys that will ensure them to improve their skills and to discover their potential. 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:

- (i) Learning Abilities and Attitudes;
- (ii) Development of Language, Communication and the Prerequisites of reading and writing;
- (iii) Cognitive Development;
- (iv) Socio-emotional Development; and
- (v) Physical Development, Personal Health and Hygiene.

It is recommended that classes and learning centers should be designed in a way that children can move freely, independently, and curiously for learning that supports their creative thinking skills (Karabay, 2019). Researchers state that arrangement of learning centers in institutions must respond to children's willingness to learn, that creates a significant change in children's development (Brown, 2001; Hohmann & Weikart, 2000). Therefore, is it critical to pay attention to some elements in the structuring of the learning centers in day care centers. Since the purpose of each center is different from each other, it is necessary to pay attention some critical points and to act consciously in structuring, equipping and positioning the centers to reach for high quality care (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2008).

The researchers express that studying the quality in all its dimensions is a basic requirement (Bassok & Galdo, 2016). The evaluation, comparison and reflection of the different kinds of practices carried out by the researchers in day care centers 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 physical, instructional and socio-emotional atmosphere in day care centers among different countries (LV, RO, PT and TR). 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 of different countries. According to the researchers, studying classroom atmospheres with researches, evaluating several factors related to quality will be supportive in finding ways and solutions and determining decisive factors for quality in the day care centers.

We expected that the findings from that project related to the general classroom environment and centers provide a comparison of different countries and also a discussion that leads to new ideas in the field by sharing with experts and educators on how to design a classroom in the future. In this study, it was aimed to analyze, compare and emphasize the importance of quality based on relationships and physical environments, quality and quantity of the materials used in terms of children's needs

and interests in the day care classrooms. For this reason, it may be supportive to conduct necessary arrangements based on these findings while organizing classroom settings and learning centers in day care classrooms. It is among the recommendations that classes, and learning centers should be designed and enriched in such a way that children can move freely, be independent, and that addresses all areas of children's development and support their creative thinking skills. In the following sections, brief information about the early education and care in participating countries is introduced.

### **1.1 Education and care of children aged 0 – 3 in Romania**

As a former socialist state, Romania evolved from almost universal childcare provision to a drastic drop in enrollments following closure of programs available. Because of accessibility and affordability issues, majority of parents keep their young children at home even though a large percentage of mothers are employed. Fortunately, the age to start school is 6, but with the recent changes in educational policies, a year in kindergarten before school became mandatory in 2012. Recent progressive measures have led to an increase in enrollment rates reaching to 80% for preschool children. Child-teacher ratio averages to 16.3.

Still following the tradition of socialist times, programs for the very young are more caregiving oriented than provision of education. Nurseries used to employ nurses as the caregivers with no educator in the staff. Fortunately, recent legislative measures taken have addressed this issue bringing forth the educational element. Now the programs follow a national curriculum that focuses on the whole child with services for parents and children with developmental delays.

Education system in Romania is highly centralized. The Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research (MNESR) is in charge of all education levels from preschool to higher education developing the strategic plans and national policies. Highly respected the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) is responsible for conducting educational research analyzing the workings of the system, and coordination of the development of a national curriculum.

All teachers in Romania are required to have a bachelor's degree followed by a year in pedagogical training. In order to secure a permanent position, novice teachers are also required to successfully pass their probation year.

Allocations for the nurseries and preschools from the national budget is low making basic maintenance and hygiene, educational materials and furniture difficult to provide. With nowhere to turn to, school administrators ask parents to contribute to school budget.

The education requirements for ECEC staff are regulated by legal provision. Qualification in the preschool education range from graduates of pedagogical high schools (with specializations in early childhood education) to staff with university degrees in pedagogical studies and specializations in primary or preschool education. Teacher salaries are very low and below OECD average.

### **1.2 Education and care of children Aged 0 – 3 in Portugal**

The education of children aged 0-3 is under the supervision of the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security. The offer can be from private institutions or institutions of social

solidarity (non-profit institutions – IPSS). According to the National Council of Education (CNE – Conselho Nacional de Educação), the supply of institutions and vacancies is still in deficit in Portugal. However, in the last years there has been an increase in the number of offered places.

In 2017, by reference to December 31, 2631 day care centers were registered in Mainland Portugal, 75% of which were owned by non-profit institutions, namely the solidarity network.

In 2017, the total number of places in day-care centers was estimated at 118,500, approximately 62% of which are shared by the State through cooperation agreements with institutions of the solidarity network. The number of children attending day-care centers has also increased significantly, reaching almost 100,000 children in 2017 (GEP/MTSSS, 2018).

Socio-educational provision geared towards children under three is made of:

- (vi) Crèche – socio-educational provision (Ordinance n.º 262/2011, 31st August and Ordinance N.º 411/2012, 14th December), that cares for children up to the age of three while parents or the person who has custody is unable to look after them. Crèches' main aims are the following: (i) to facilitate reconciliation of the household's family and professional life; (ii) to ensure the well-being and overall development of children in a safe and loving atmosphere through an individualized care; (iii) to collaborate with families in sharing duties of care and responsibility in child development; (iv) to be involved in the early detection of any maladjustment or disability, ensuring proper referral.
- (vii) Child-minder – a social service (Decree-Law n.º 115/2015, 22nd June) provided by a duly licensed person by the Institute for Social Security (Instituto da Segurança Social, IPSS) who is paid to take care of children up to 3 years of age or until they reach preschool age at their place of residence. This can be done via direct hiring by families in writing, or within an institution, called family crèche. Each child-minder can care for up to 4 children (preferably of different ages), for up to 5 days a week, between 4 and 12 hours a day.
- (viii) Family crèche – social service/provision (Ordinance n.º 232/2015, 6th August) which consists of a group no fewer than 4 child-minders, who work within an institution (Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa or private institutions of social solidarity or legally equivalent institutions) designed to care for children aged up to three or old enough to attend a preschool establishment, during parents' or guardians' normal working hours or period that they cannot care for their children.
- (ix) Child-minders and family crèches aim to provide: (i) a safe and familiar environment for children; (ii) the right conditions for the child's whole development, in an environment that is both physically and emotionally safe; (iii) adequate care for the child's needs and well-being. (iv) State nursery schools are part of school clusters together with schools providing basic education (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycles) and upper secondary education.
- (x) School centers aim to optimize human and material resources and the equipment existing in schools of basic and upper secondary education,

allowing preschool pupils to use, for example, a school library, gym, playing fields, sciences lab and school canteen. In these school clusters a common education project is designed for all education levels (Eurydice, 2019).

### **1.3 Education and care of children Aged 0 – 3 in Latvia**

Latvia has a declining but also ageing population with a rising trend to migrate from the rural areas to the major cities. Within a highly decentralized system, a wide range of institutions including the Ministry of Education and Science, municipalities and educational institutions are in charge of different elements of educational provisions. It is the MoES that is responsible for policy development, setting the standards for quality of education, teacher education, and establishing a network of related institutions. The State Service of Education Quality ensures that quality measures are taken in educational institutions. Municipalities, with their varying size and capacity, on the other hand, cooperate with the MoES through the Education Boards of Municipalities, the institution that is in charge of financing staff costs, supplying educational materials, teacher training, and adult education. But it is the schools that make the hiring decisions.

With the start of “Vouchers for the provision of flexible child-minders service to workers with nonstandard work schedules” varying needs and demands of families whose employment conditions require alternative and diversified childcare services have begun to be taken into consideration in the country women’s labor force participation is quite high.

It is the duty of the municipal governments to provide equal access to education and, when needed, to finance, through a voucher system, childcare costs of children between the ages of 1 ½ and 7 who are not placed in municipal preschool programs. However, many families cannot benefit from the voucher system because of their lack of finances to cover the remaining costs of childcare even after the fixed amount paid by the municipality. The waiting lists of children in enrollment lists of public programs is relatively long comparing to the population of the country. This leads to unregistered establishments for childcare in the hands of unqualified individuals creating risks for health and safety of children.

There is no national curriculum in use. Schools enjoy freedom to develop their own curriculum and educational plans as long as they stay within the framework state standards which endorse the support of whole child and promotion of school readiness.

Pre-school teachers can obtain a teacher qualification in 2 years of college studies or 4 years in studies of bachelor level. Continuing professional development is compulsory in Latvia for teachers (including school heads and their deputies) at all education levels. Preschool teacher compensation relatively low comparing to those of other levels in teaching force.

### **1.4 Education and care of children Aged 0 – 3 in Turkey**

Several state departments are involved in care and education of young children in Turkey. The Ministry of Labor (now it is the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services) under the Labor Law requires institutions that employ more than 150 women provide childcare services. Male employees are counted in this number only when they are widowed or have the custody of their children. Paid maternal leave amounts to 16

weeks including the 8-week-prenatal and the 8-week-postnatal periods. This could be followed by a 6-month-long unpaid leave upon request.

Crèches serving children under the age of three operate under the auspices of Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services. Crèche and daycares are usually privately run, and even publicly owned centers charge parents some fee. According to rules and regulations, three percent of children enrolled are to be those from disadvantaged/incarcerated families and admitted free of charge. The number of available programs, private or public, for infants/ toddlers are very limited making this age group the most neglected in terms of education and care. Unfortunately, even in daycare centers there may be no service for children under the age of two or three.

According to state regulations, teacher/ child ratio for children under three cannot be higher than 10 along with the presence of a caregiver. Physical environments are designed differently taking into account the needs of mobile and nonmobile children. Learning centers including blocks, dramatic play, reading, music, art, and science centers are expected to be set up.

Curriculum. A national curriculum for crèches and daycares serving children aged 0 – 36 months was released in 2013 and is synchronized with the preschool curriculum. A supplemental package for family involvement and parent education prepared by the Ministry of Education is also available for crèches. Teachers are expected to develop their monthly and daily education plans and follow a routine that is structured differently for children aged 0 – 24 months and aged 24 – 36 months.

Teacher education. Teachers with a four-year-university degree from a preschool teacher education or child development program as well as those with a child development associate or high school degree could find employment opportunities in daycares and crèches. Programs are required to deliver in-service training at least once a year. Teacher compensation in private sector is lower than that in public sector.

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

- How childcare and education programs serving children between the ages of 0 - 3 do perform in terms of quality standards?

## 2 Method

*Research sample.* Convenient sampling was used to recruit nursery teachers who were willing to participate in the study. An infant's/toddler's classroom from 6 different childcare and education center was selected for data collection in each country making a total of 24 teachers and nursery programs.

*Instruments.* Data was collected using a Demographics Form, ITERS-3, and Caregiver Interaction Scale.

*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.

*Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-3)*. It is a valid and reliable instrument that relies on information collected through on site three-hour-long observation of classrooms for children under 36 months. There are 33 items covering six subscales of the instrument including Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Books, Activities, Interaction, and Program Structure.

*Caregiver Interaction Scale*. CIS was developed by Arnett (1989) and was designed to measure the emotional tone, disciplinary style, and the responsiveness of the educator. This four-point Likert style measure includes 26 items and filled out by the observer.

*Data collection*. After having established the test intra-rater reliability, data collection process was started and have being collected through observations on two different days two-weeks apart in this ongoing study that is a part of large-scale project.

*Data analysis*. Once the data collection is completed, analyses within for each country and for cross-countries would be made. In order to test for criterion referenced reliability and validity, Pearson correlation coefficients between the scores of Caregiver Interaction Scale ITERS-3 will be calculated. Descriptive analyses will be conducted in order to give a rich profile of institutions and country overviews. This will be followed by cross country comparisons that will reveal similarities and differences between countries.

### **3 Discussion**

Principals of early childhood education and care are well defined and accepted across the world. First of all, programs for young children should be accessible, affordable, and in high quality. The premise that early childhood education and care would equalize the playing fields for children from different backgrounds and cultivate development of young children with long term benefits expanding to adulthood could only be realized if the programs are in high quality. Therefore, it is important to look into how programs oriented towards young children performing in terms of meeting the global standards defined by developmentally appropriate practices. It should be noted here that developmentally appropriate practices are not comprised of rigid rules, but, in fact, leave room for individual as well as cultural differences to be taken into account in everyday decisions and educational practices. With this understanding in mind, within country and cross-country comparisons in this study would also reveal how cultural, economic, and specific contextual factors come into play to shape the way services provided.

Findings of this study would be used to direct the following stage of the project TELESPA in which researchers write a handbook that targets teachers and provides theoretical as well as practical information in how to organize learning environments for young children in order to maximize the benefits of time children spent there. The research findings would also be used in the following stage in which a teacher training program involving teachers from all four countries participating in the project will be developed and started. Thus, prolonged engagement with teachers of young children as part of a project would enable both researchers and those working in the schools develop a deep understanding of issues in hand, potential resources, how to use those resources to address needs that surfaced.

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