

DEVELOPING OF HIGH QUALITY COURSE MATERIALS TO IMPROVE EARLY AGE PRACTITIONERS' EDUCATION

MONA VINTILA, DALIANA ISTRAT, SORIN VINTILA
WEST UNIVERSITY OF TIMISOARA, "TIBISCUS" UNIVERSITY OF TIMISOARA, Daliei Street.
Nr. 1/A Timisoara
mona.vintila@socio.uvt.ro, daliana_istrat@yahoo.com, daniel_sorin_9@yahoo.com

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Abstract:

The pre-primary age is an especially sensitive period in children's development but high quality education and care from a very early age creates a good foundation for lifelong learning. This is why performant teacher education is needed.

This paper addresses the issue of early age practitioners' education presenting an European project that aims to develop course materials that focus on the major areas in early learning and contribute to the development of research based, pedagogical approaches within three areas that are crucial in respect to get all toddlers on a successful life learning road: learning of language(s) and focus on the teacher-child communication, improved knowledge of how to foster toddlers' wellbeing, identifying crucial aspects for improved parental involvement.

Key words: *toddler, teacher education, course materials, wellbeing.*

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Confronted with the persistent education gap, most industrialised countries provide pre-primary education programmes targeted at low income and ethnic or sociolinguistic minority groups (OECD, 2001). The programmes generally aim to promote the cognitive, language, literacy and numeracy skills of pre-primary children to provide them with a fair start in primary school. They also aim to develop the social and emotional competence of children. However, the models and systems of pre-primary education programmes implemented in these countries differ vastly in coverage, intensity, quality, and probably impact, as was reported previously (Leseman, 2002).

The pre-primary age is an especially sensitive period in children's development. A range of socioeconomic factors can have a significant negative impact on children's psychological development and chances of success at school. These include: poverty; belonging to disadvantaged social classes; functional illiteracy and low levels of educational attainment of parents; and religious traditions associated with a cultural life where literacy is not highly regarded. Although low income or ethnic minority status alone may not be a decisive factor in development, it is the combination of factors that leads to serious consequences for child development.

High quality education and care from a very early age creates a good foundation for lifelong learning, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Pre-primary education can contribute importantly to combating educational disadvantages, if certain conditions are met. The most effective intervention programmes involve intensive, early starting, child-focused, centre-based education together with strong parent involvement, parent education, programmed educational home activities and measures of family support. Equity in education is not yet realized for children from poor backgrounds, migrant families or parents with low education. The aim to

strengthen the education of reflective practitioners to give toddlers (18-36 months) a fair chance for lifelong learning should be one of the aims of national education systems.

The focus on the development of provisions for toddlers and on the investigation of different approaches to promote learning in a child centred way, including parental engagement is important as research shows that the most enduring cognitive results are achieved when both cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes are pursued simultaneously.

The fact that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are in danger of school failure has led to the idea of accessing pre-primary education between one and two years of age, creating the basis for further learning, preventing school dropout, increasing equity of outcomes.

Children are constantly at risk of not learning to learn. New-borns are equipped for learning, but in an un-stimulating environment, there is the risk that children lose their intrinsic motivation to learn. For this not to happen it is best for the educational approach to be provided by a specific facility (crèche) and by adequately trained staff able to develop methods to foster toddlers' communicative and social skills as well as their desires to learn.

Two main organizational models for early childhood education and care services are dominant in Europe. The first model makes provision for young children organized in a single phase for all children of preschool age. Staff responsible for the children's education has the same qualifications and salaries regardless of the age of the children they look after. These teachers or play group leaders may work together with child minders and nurses. The second model is the most widespread in Europe and provides services according to the age of the children (normally for children between 0-3 and children between 3 and 6). (EACEEA, pp.22).

Most researchers agree that the training of staff responsible for educational activities in ECEC should be at the bachelor level of higher education and should be specialised.

For some countries, Romania and Spain in particular, continuing professional development reflects the changes taking place in the profession in line with ECEC policy changes. Therefore, in Romania, staff has to take part in courses to upgrade its qualifications or improve their knowledge regarding provision for the younger age group; significant changes have taken place in the structure and management of day nurseries as a result of new legislation. Such courses take account of new approaches to ECEC and are provided on the basis of an assessment of training needs at local level.

Management staff, education staff, and medical staff are legally obliged to undertake 40 hours of professional development annually (EACEEA, pp.119-120).

The professional profile of staff in day nurseries is therefore various, yet their training is usually vocational (full-time or sandwich courses) and below the level of higher education.

In addition, in all countries except Belgium, Estonia, Spain (in the level 0-3 years) staffing in ECEC settings also includes unqualified or less qualified assistants who carry out tasks related to the personal care of children. Educational work is confined to qualified staff while changing nappies, feeding and other diverse tasks are given to auxiliaries. It is therefore evident that there is a multiplicity of staff alternating in the provision of care, which could result in a lack of continuity in children's learning and in building relationships – an area worthy of further study.

Staff working in settings for children under 3 is largely nurses with medical qualifications. The core of the staffing structure in settings for children aged less than 2-3 years is usually provided by adults with qualifications in education who generally deal with the full range of child related tasks. They are sometimes assisted by auxiliaries who provide personal care for children.

High quality teacher education is needed to address this issue by creating proper teaching materials, tackling mentality and cultural diversity related issues. Teachers can also call upon the services of specialists such as physiotherapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, or specialist teachers to help children who have learning difficulties or children at risk (EACEEA, pp. 114). Staff in these settings are managed either by members elected from their peers or by managers appointed by the responsible authorities. In the latter case, the managers usually undertake specific management training. All professional staff in charge of activities with children is educated to higher education level at ISCED 5A or B with the exception of those in the Czech Republic, Malta, Austria and Romania (EACEEA, pp. 115).

All European countries have introduced accredited and subsidised ECEC services, but in a few countries (the Czech Republic, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom and Liechtenstein) there is very limited or no publicly funded provision for children under the age of 3 years and the participation rate in subsidised settings is very low.

The starting age varies widely across Europe. In most countries the ECEC is available from the birth (in practice from around 3 months). In Denmark, Slovakia and Liechtenstein, the possible starting age is around 6 months. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria, Slovenia and Sweden provide early childhood services only from the age of 1. Before this age, parents are encouraged to stay at home with their babies through a system of maternity and parental benefits. The social security system, however, may sometimes act as an indirect barrier to ECEC even when provision is available. A system of lengthy parental leave and generous benefits can encourage parents to stay at home with their young children, as is the case in Estonia, Lithuania, Austria and Romania.

Countries, which have adopted the unitary model have, in some form or another, granted all children the right to a place in an educational setting from the earliest age. In other countries, where there is no guaranteed access to subsidised ECEC, places are allocated following different types of guidelines.

Criteria that often determines preferential access is residence, age or parental employment status - this is usually the main (or even the only) criterion for access to childcare for children under 2 years old, which shows the predominance of the childcare. The childcare role is still predominant in ECEC for very young children. Settings designed for these children usually follow objectives related to the well-being of the child and the parents' work-life balance. Many countries do not even have any central recommendations or guidelines regarding curricula for the youngest children. Furthermore, staff working at this level of education has a pedagogy-related training which combines practical work experience with theoretical classes intended to produce qualified teachers or general educators.

Taking into account these facts, 8 European countries (Norway, United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Denmark and Romania) developed a project (TODDLER) having as a main goal to develop high quality education of staff/teachers, to ensure competent personnel to meet the educational needs of these toddlers. Our target groups are teachers, teachers' educators, policy makers and student teachers.

This project aims to improve the initial teacher training and in-service training of staff in early education, with special attention to the educational needs of toddlers from disadvantaged backgrounds. The main project outcomes are:

- 1.) The course content for a in-service training for staff working with toddlers
- 2.) A course module (5 ECTS) to be used in initial teacher training
- 3.) Course material to be developed further in intensive programmes

These course materials are based on shared experience and examples of good practice collected from a wide range of countries, representing different educational traditions. Thus, we ensure that the material developed takes in account the realities of each participating country. Monitoring and evaluation is taken care of during the entire period of the project.

This project aims to produce course material that enables student teachers and Early Year Practitioners (EYPs) to enrich the learning environment in ECEC-settings for toddlers, particularly to increase migrant children's motivation to learn and communicate in a mainstream setting. These improved approaches for the education and care of disadvantaged toddlers will be implemented in teacher training and in-service training for EYPs using reflective sessions as a teaching strategy. A reflective session is a learning method based on students insights on subject proposed by the person who coordinates the meeting.

The project aims to improve the way in which teacher education addresses the question of toddler's educational needs and their wellbeing.

The project started from the idea that teachers and student teachers should be informed about the importance of early education in children by approaching the subject of children wellbeing and by tackling the different manners in which ECEC is carried out in the partner countries in relation to toddlers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research shows that children from migrant/poor families are under-represented in ECEC. By comparing different kinds of ECEC we'll identify features that promote the enrolment of these children. We'll show how ECEC can offer an enriched learning environment to toddlers, especially early language learning for migrant children.

The course materials that the project will produce will focus on the major areas in early learning and contribute to the development of research based, pedagogical approaches within three aspects that are crucial in respect to get all toddlers on a successful life learning road: learning of language(s) and focus on the teacher-child communication, improved knowledge of how to foster toddlers' wellbeing, identifying crucial aspects for improved parental involvement. For all these subjects the course material will propose as a training method the reflective sessions.

The language subject is important especially in countries with migrant population, where children often don't speak the language of their new country. Early language learning is an integrated part of a toddler's holistic development, but especially demanding for children from language minorities. In this project we implement specific tools for observing and promoting bilingual language learning (developed in ELIAS, children age 3-5) in order to adapt them to this age group.

To exemplify the course materials produced by the project we will present some proposals made by the Belgian and British partners.

Our British partners from Kingston University College have developed a theoretical material on toddlers wellbeing and afterwards proposed some activities designed for students and early years practitioners to explore their understanding and thinking of wellbeing. The theoretical material was elaborated by gathering information from each partner (country) regarding the following:

1. Definition of wellbeing; theoretical background to children's wellbeing, context for each country; reading materials (legislation and research); literature review of the above reading materials
2. Case studies: each partner country selected a setting demonstrating good practice in relation to wellbeing for toddlers (type of setting, description, demographics, how is wellbeing identified, measured and monitored; what strategies does the setting use to promote wellbeing)

3. Story boards focused on: transitions and settling-in of toddlers into settings; programme with or for parents to support toddler's wellbeing; an activity for exploration; an activity that supports social wellbeing.

The activities that our British partner proposed on this theoretical material are:

Definition of wellbeing:

- Examine your own country's definition of wellbeing and reflect on how it is demonstrated into practice
- Identify the similarities between each country's definition of wellbeing
- Identify each country's perspectives on wellbeing
- Create your own definition

Case studies and story boards:

- Compare and contrast how the setting addressed:
 - the demographics and how this impacts practice;
 - involves parents
 - use of environment to support wellbeing
 - transition and settling-in process;
 - programme with/for parents to support children's wellbeing
 - enabling environment, resources or organisation of the room
 - social activity
- When comparing consider cultural differences and how these could translate to own country's practice; variations of provisions for toddlers – government funded initiatives, voluntary funded and privately funded.
- Reflect on your own practice in relation to the case studies and identify good practice.

Observation:

- Carry out an observation in an early years setting and identify aspects that promote children's wellbeing.
- Reflect on the effectiveness of this practice drawing on what you have learned.
- Discuss with your peers.

The partners from Belgium, Haute Ecole Libre Mosane proposed a course material for the state of the art report. Their proposal is for a 10 hours course for the international intensive programs or in the class with own students.

- Each student has to collect 15-20 pictures illustrating good or bad examples of educational practice from own organizations – these are intended to reduce or increase social pedagogical inequality and to allow students to be “actors” in the classes
- Student present and analyse the pictures they brought - the teacher plays the role of facilitator; students introduce themselves and their pictures and answer questions
- The pictures gathered by the project partners exemplifying different setting from each country are printed and brought to students who have to classify them into pictures that reduce inequality / increase inequality; teachers initiate argumentative discussions.
- Comparative analysis of the state of the art of each country.
- SWOT analysis - students read the SWOT analysis from the state of the art report made by each country and try to identify differences and similarities between countries.
- Reflexive session - discussion lead by teacher about reducing social and pedagogical inequalities between countries regarding early education.

Conclusions

The needs of toddlers should be addressed by programmes developed to enrich their skills and to increase their wellbeing level as this period of their life is very important for their future live. The education of teachers and future teachers is one of the approaches in this domain. Teachers should be aware of their impact on children. International experience and best practice adapted to the national environment is a good way to learn new pedagogical methods appropriate for toddlers.

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