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The Institution of Kindergarten – Current Benchmarks

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Abstract

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Preschool education is a main part of the early education and has an undeniable impact on the subsequent development of the child and this is emphasized by numerous recent studies (Dahlberg, Moss, Pence, 1999; Glenn, 2011; Arthur, Peterson, 2012). Building a solid foundation in the preschool period represents a first step in the development of human personality and of the future expert. Preschool education is not a new pedagogical approach or educational system; since ancient times there have been guidelines regarding children education and their raising until they entry school. But, in the recent years the approach of the stage of existence called childhood and of the education provided during this period has changed a lot. In the present article we intend to present some general, main characteristics of the current preschool system, since the kindergarten has become a living environment for children and responds to a series of needs of the family institution.

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1. Introduction

A particularly important place is occupied in the educational system by the preschool education system. Preschool education consists in providing learning experiences for children aged between 3 and 6/7 years, so before entering school.

In the past, the term of *preschool education* was considered to be identical with the one of *early education*. The two terms have been defined separately during the World Conference at Jomtien - Thailand (1990). In the context of this event, preschool education was defined as relating strictly to the education conducted in the kindergarten, for children aged from 3 to 6/7 years, and early education was conceptualized as a wider area, more precisely it was approached as referring to the education of



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children from birth to age 8. We notice thus preschool education plays an essential role in the early education, having a great importance for the future development and education of a person. Establishments where preschool education takes place, are specialized, vary from a country to another, include both public and private sector and are named *kindergartens*. Kindergarten is an indispensable element in the educational system, with complex social functions and numerous links with the cultural system in which it exists. The institutionalization of the stage of life called *childhood* happens in kindergarten.

2. Characteristics of the current kindergarten

Kindergarten represents the public institution that provides education and training for children aged between 3 and 6/7 years, until the moment of starting the primary school (Prott, Preissing, 2007). This institution has become a living environment for children. Preschool children from many countries are raised and educated outside their home, in institutions specialized in children raising and caring. Lately it has become increasingly necessary for the preschool institution to open to the social environment, becoming thus a place, where both children and their families are trained (Ebert, 2010). The preschool environment is so the first extra familial, socializing, but organizational type environment, based on the basic principles that intensively stimulates child development preparing him for the life as a student.

Kindergarten is a place for children, where educational, instructional and mentoring activities are conducted. Kindergarten facilitates an integral development of the child, renouncing thereby to promoting an almost isolated area of child development. Thus the institution allows developing and stimulating the spiritual, motor and intellectual skills and also provides children sufficient rest pauses. Children should be given plenty of time and different possibilities in order to express themselves freely. Taking the individual differences among children into account and adjusting to these within the pedagogic activity has as result a didactic approach that is adapted to the needs of each child. If in the past, preschoolers had to submit their interest to the group interests, today, the kindergarten offers children various opportunities for social and individual learning, taking certain crisis development periods into account. The activities conducted in kindergarten represent the basis for the future academic learning. So, kindergarten represents a place for children, where, for over 30 years, educational processes are initiated, developed and build (Krenz, 2008).

Over time, there have been many discoveries in the field of psychology, specifically in the field of child development psychology and general psychology, which influenced significantly the preschool education. For example, Piaget's constructivist theory, which proposes learning through discovery and exploration; socio-cultural learning and the area of proximal development theory of Vîgotsky; theory of psychosocial development of Erikson or the multiple intelligences theory sustained by Gardner. These theories have echo in the practices encountered even today in kindergartens and should constitute an important part of teacher education as well. Furthermore, the continuous modernization of pedagogical practices, in general, had also impact on the strategies used for conducting preschool education. An example for this is representing by the transition from the strategies centred on the teacher or on the content to the ones centred on the child (Kelemen, 2014). Some political reasons,

needs and wishes of the parents influenced over time the conduct of the early childhood education, and especially of the preschool one. Thus there was a range between the social development and the independence, on one side, and preparing for school on the other. There have also been economic motivations, such as enabling parents, especially mothers, to go to work (Friedrich, 2008).

Some of the educational practices currently promoted in preschool education are: mixed-age groups, team teaching, integrated curriculum, activity-based teaching and learning, multicultural curriculum. The kindergarten meets certain functions by the environment that it makes available to children and by the interactions that it fosters: construction and development of the personality of children, supplementing the education received by children in the family, helping families maintain a balance between work and family life (Hoffmann, Rabe-Kleberg, Viernickel, Wehrmann, Zimmer, 2010). The kindergarten represents for many parents, a place to leave their children safe while performing their professional activities.

Making a profile of the preschool education system must take into consideration certain criteria: the possibility that children have access to early education services, the investment in creating the necessary conditions for conducting early education and ensuring the quality of preschool education (Bock-Famulla, 2008).

Nowadays, preschool education in kindergartens is conducted both in public and private institutions, in mixed groups and in groups divided according to the age of the children. The program can be shorter (4 hours daily) or longer (8 hours daily), or even weekly. The kindergartens are supported by local communities and function with the aid of staff trained in this area. Most activities conducted in kindergarten have a playful character, but also predetermined and precise objectives, often mentioned in official documents such as the curriculum or teaching plan for the preschool education. The daily program from kindergarten has great formative contributions, because by its regularity, stability and predictability ensures the learning of quality abilities and habits (e.g. washing hands, dressing, eating etc.), offers emotional safety to children, helping them to get used to an ordered program, to accomplish certain duties, to conduct an action or activity until its end, elements on which the future life as a student is based.

Even if the kindergarten provides the first step of training and information within the education system, there are also some negative aspects, some difficulties registered in this context. These are: the politicization of the preschool system in some communities, employment of unskilled staff and the delay in providing the material basis needed. All these reduce the quality of the services offered in kindergarten and lead, in some cases, to the need for reform. When the preschool education is the foundation of the education system, then the conditions under which it is conducted must be improved. Measures should be taken to fulfil the administrative and political standards in order to ensure a quality education that promotes qualification and training of teaching staff, and the political system should take into account that education is a central resource of each country. The child and his well-being, his right to education, since the beginning of life are measures and orientations of the political action.

In the last 20 years preschool education has begun to be increasingly discussed, with shifting the emphasis on the quality of the results obtained in the course of such a process with young children and the discovery of the importance of this type of education for the personal and educational path of each

person. Another main issue, often discussed in the last years, refers to the need to create an optimal basis for the educational biography of every child, because studies show that people who received early education services have a more efficient, long lasting and richer educational path and academic life (Bock-Famulla, 2008).

Educational activities are organized in kindergarten by preschool teacher by using a specific methodology, an adequate curriculum and by collaboration with the family and other institutions that support and promote education and development of children. The approach in every kindergarten is not to decrease the importance of learning and development, which takes place - formal or informal - in the family or in other contexts outside the kindergarten (Friedrich, 2008). Preschool teachers have, in most cases, specific training in this field and have to take into account a number of factors such as:

- structure (size of the group of preschoolers, services and available resources in the kindergarten, kindergarten management etc.),
- process (quality of the preschooler - educator interactions, quality of the material facilities of the kindergarten, namely of the preschoolers room),
- aliniere (standards, curriculum, assesement).

These elements must be related to the uniqueness of each child, with the environment where he comes from and with the targeted outcomes. In this context it is necessary that the following skills, abilities and behaviours are put into practice by each preschool teacher:

- skills of communication and interaction with preschoolers, formed based on the solid knowledge of the fundamental landmarks of the preschool child development and the possession of a rich toolkit of practices and activities that can be used to stimulate children's development,
- increased tolerance for change, discontinuity and diversity and its expression through paying attention to the differences between children, knowledge of learning abilities and styles preferred by them,
- readiness to experiment, to learn together with preschoolers,
- free, independent thinking, abandoning unproductive beliefs,
- the permanent search of ways to improve the teaching performance, assessing the own teaching and reconsidering it according to the feed-back received from preschoolers,
- understanding and accepting the current visions regarding the child, his global development and the need to educate interdisciplinary, according to the individual need of each preschooler, by formulating a set of multiple goals in order to support children development and conducting some simultaneous steps for their accomplishment,
- self-assessing skills, specific for a thoughtful professional,
- skills of working with other educational partners; ability to work in teams, to collaborate with various specialists and to appreciate the role of the parents and the knowledge of methods of collaboration with parents and with other members of the preschoolers families.

UNESCO defines the early education and nursing preschool services as *an integral part of basic education, representing the first essential step in achieving the goals of the education for all. The attention both on care and education shows the holistic approach and reflects the multidimensional character of learning and development of young children* (UNESCO, 2010). Social and cultural

factors – including economic priorities – influenced the nature and aims of preschool education over time in different countries. These factors influence the way in which conducting preschool education is viewed, governed, managed, financed, used, experienced and assessed. The takeover of providing early education under the jurisdiction of various ministries (eg Education, Health, Family, etc.) communicates messages concerning its priorities.

3. Conclusion

As we have mentioned above, there are nowadays many approaches that can be identified when discussing about the kindergarten: a public space, a pedagogical, social and cultural, context, a place where persons live, where learning and development take place, a complex organization, a workplace with pedagogical orientation, a community of expert pedagogues, a pedagogical system based on a professional logic. Preschool education has a great responsibility, not only to young children whom it is targeting, but to future adults, who these children will become and to the contribution they will have in the community and in the society they will live in.

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