

**Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie
Multidimensionala**

Romanian Journal for Multidimensional Education
ISSN: 2066 – 7329 (print), ISSN: 2067 – 9270

(electronic) Covered in: Index Copernicus,
Ideas RePeC,

EconPapers, Socionet, Ulrich Pro Quest, Cabell, SSRN,
Appreciative Inquiry Commons, Journalseek, Scipio,
EBSCO, CEEOL

**DEVELOPING ECEC IN ROMANIA:
BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL
REALITIES**

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Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala,
2014, Volume 6, Issue 2, December, pp. 111-118

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://revistaromaneasca.ro>

Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences

Developing ECEC in Romania: between Perceptions and Social Realities

Aniela MATEI¹

Abstract

One of the key policies that aims to enable parents to achieve a better work–life balance is to increase childcare support. But for many families childcare is no longer a simplistic choice between care provided by a family member (usually the mother) and non-family care (Janta, 2014). There are research studies showing that the majority of mothers prefer to care for their young children themselves - almost invariably up to the age of three, very often up to school age, and in some cases all the way up to school-leaving age (Hakim, 2009). In line with the EU strategies for 2020 and the need for an integrated approach to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) the article provides a diagnosis of the situation in Romania on the development of ECEC. In addition to a literature review of the Romanian situation in the EU context, the first part of the article analysed the main drivers for ECEC development in Romania. The second part of the article shows the results of quantitative and qualitative research studies developed by the author on the topic of the article as a researcher at the INCSMPS (National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection). Results show that ECEC arrangements are related to age of the child, parents' preferences, and labour market opportunities. Childcare provision cannot be developed in isolation and should be explored in the context of other systems that interact with the care of children and the family unit.

Keywords

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Children, Family, Work Life Balance, Social policies.

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The role of ECEC services

In many countries early childhood education and care (ECEC) services has become a policy priority due to the benefits they produce recognises in a growing number of research studies: better child well-being and learning outcomes, increased fertility rates, higher female labour market participation, better child well-being and learning outcomes, and reduction of poverty. The role of ECEC services is to support and complement parents, they being the first and most important carers and educators of their children. The ECEC system should be designed to ensure that parents can access early childhood care and education always when they needed as they balance the care of their children with their decisions to participate in the labour market.

European strategies (Lisbon Strategy, Barcelona Summit targets and Europe 2020), set various targets and objectives regarding childcare and labour force participation rates, thereby shaping policy development. National governments and international organizations have explicitly or implicitly formulated a kind of normative model both for mothers' behaviour and for childcare that supersedes those established until recently by policies (or the lack of them) in many countries, as well those held by many parents (Sarceno, C., 2011).

The provision of formal childcare services is an important indicator of work family balance. Due to the increased participation of women with children in paid work, demand for regulated childcare services has been increasing in all over the Europe, including in Romania. The most profound change in Romania, like in others new Member States has been the transition from communist to market economy. Formally, childcare for children from birth to school age was highly subsidized. In the process of transition to the market economy many of these services were closed down. Thereby a lack of childcare places has emerged and those that exist are often expensive for parents, especially childcare from private sector. Today the main childcare facilities in Romania for children between 0-6(7) years are nurseries (day-care centres for children between the ages of three months and three years), kindergartens, and day care centres.

Romania at a glance: Barcelona Targets

In 2002 at the Barcelona Summit, the European Council set targets for providing childcare in EU Member States, specifying that at least 90 per cent of children between 3 years old and the mandatory

school age, and at least 33 per cent of children under 3 years of age, should have access to formal childcare provision. In 2010 there large differences in childcare coverage across Member States could be found, in particular for the younger age group.

According to the European data (Eurostat, EU-SILC), in 2010 only 10 Member States (DK, SE, NL, FR, ES, PT, SI, BE, LU and UK) had achieved the Barcelona objective for children under 3. Altogether 15 Member States were below 25 %, Romania being among them.

Use of childcare facilities increases with children's age. In 2010 for the category of children between 3 and the compulsory school age, 11 Member States (BE, ES, FR, SE, DE, EE, NL, SI, IE, DK and UK) achieved the objective of 90 % irrespective of the number of hours of attendance. Romania was under the Barcelona target also for this indicator. Even if the EU-SILC data using for Romania have been compiled from small sample and can be statistically unreliable, national data recorded by the Romanian National Institute of Statistics confirms Romania's position regarding the two indicators: in 2010 the gross enrolment rate of children in nurseries was 2.7 (well below the target of 33%) and the gross enrolment rate for children in kindergartens was 81.8% (for this indicator Romania ranks better).

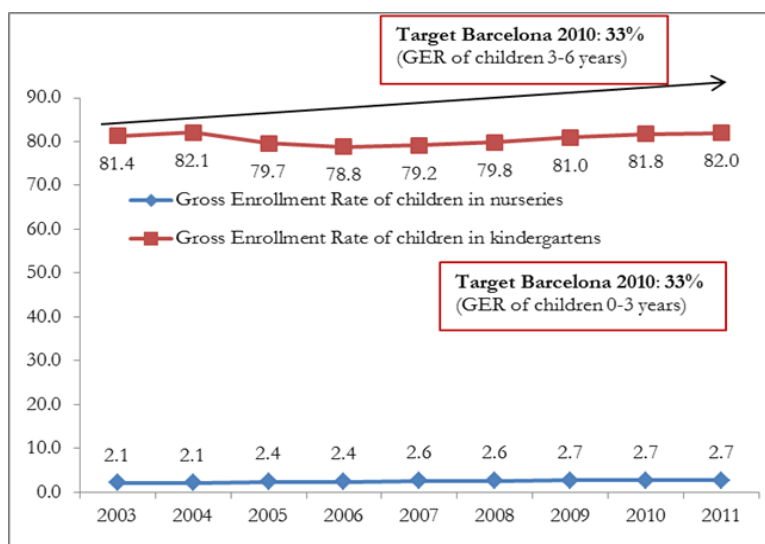


Fig. 1 – Gross Enrolment Rates of children in nurseries and kindergartens, Romania, 2003-2011

Insufficient access to childcare (specifically for children under 3 years) is the result of various factors: the cost of childcare, the quality, accessibility and availability of childcare, and the tax-benefit system. Improving the use of childcare at national level requires a better understanding of the combination of the various factors.

But for many families childcare is no longer a simplistic choice between care provided by a family member (usually the mother) and non-family care (Janta, 2014). There are research studies showing that the majority of mothers prefer to care for their young children themselves - almost invariably up to the age of three, very often up to school age, and in some cases all the way up to school-leaving age (Hakim, 2009). All these factors must be considered when it is envisaged the development of ECEC services.

Drivers for ECEC development in Romania

Good childcare provision for children of all ages can help parents to manage the complex demands of work and parenthood. Statistics show that there is a direct link between childcare provision and access for parents to paid employment. Across the European Union, more than six million women aged between 25 and 49 years say they are forced into not working, or can only work part time, because of their family responsibilities (Eurostat, Labour Force Survey 2006). For more than a quarter of them, lack of childcare facilities – or their cost – is the main problem

Childcare provision cannot be developed in isolation and should be explored in the context of other systems that interact with the care of children and the family unit. This will ensure that childcare policy developments support the protection of women's rights and help stimulate active participation in the labour market. A broader range of employment issues have impact on the demands for childcare services: parental leave, care services for other dependants, flexible work patterns, job sharing, part-time work.

The responsibility for developing ECEC policies is shared in Romania many between central government and local authorities. But decentralisation can also engender certain risks. The delegation of powers and responsibilities can accentuate differences in access and quality between regions. Undoubtedly the positive consequences of decentralisation have appeared: the integration of ECEC services at local level improved consideration of local needs. But a more integrated

approach to ECEC services at local, regional and national level involving all the relevant stakeholders is required. The collaboration between, different policy sectors (education, social affairs, employment, health and justice) is also necessary.

Empirical evidences: needs of parents regarding ECEC services in order to reconcile family life with professional life

To highlight the needs of parents regarding ECEC services we will use empirical data from quantitative and qualitative research developed by the author as a researcher at the INCSMPS (National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection). The researches (surveys and focus groups) were performed between 2007-2008 in Bucharest (survey and focus groups on childcare quality in 2007) and in the county capital cities of Romania (survey on reconciling work with professional life).

In Romania, like in most EU Member States formal childcare for children aged 0-3 years is much less developed than for children from three years of age to school-going age. Childcare for the 0-3 year's age-group is predominantly informal, being provided by parents, relatives and friends. In Romania 67.4% of low educated women, 89.7% of medium educated women and 83.0% of highly educated women with children under 3 years consider very important and important the necessity of nurseries in their lives (INCSMPS survey data, 2008). Childcare arrangements are an important instrument for women to enter in paid employment. The survey results show that while Romania had advanced in the incorporation of women into the labour market, most of the women have to assume total responsibility for housework and the care of the children.

The main needs related to the growth and education of preschool children are: *financial and material needs* (a stable job, a house), *the presence of both parents in the child's life, and time*. Prioritization of financial and material needs by relating them to the creation of a suitable environment for growth and care of the children has been identified as a priority for mothers with secondary education and in the case of jobless mothers:

“ *primarily* [is needed] *material and financial stability...*”

[F8, 30 years, housewife, medium education]

“*I think the most important is the financial need, unfortunately...*”

[F3, 29 years, unemployed, medium education]

The presence of both parents in the child's life leads to a favourable climate to the performance of the educational function of the family. Lack of a parent (in this case the absence of the father) is a limiting factor of socialization action carried out in the family.

“*Both parents... I think this is the most important; and after that you can do everything...*”

[F4, 30 years, housewife, medium education]

Mothers with higher education experience more severely the issue of reconciling work and family life:

“*...I put an emphasis on the everyday problems: the money, the stress, this madness. But the child's education, the fact that you have no time to give him an education, to talk to him, to tell him the positive things that are happening and that are normal, to talk about what he did in kindergarten, is very important to him ... very often he comes from kindergarten with a preconceived idea [...]. We must have time to talk to them, is very important to talk with the children, to communicate with him, communication is very important.*”

[F8, 34 years, employee, higher education]

Flexibility initiatives can be an attractive option to promote balance between work and family life for both employers and employees. A large majority of mothers interviewed, especially those highly educated, confirm the necessity of such flexible initiatives: 74.6% of women highly educated who at the time of the survey were in childcare leave agreed to return to work before the end of the childcare leave period if the employers offer them flexible working condition (INCSMPS survey data, 2008). At the time of the survey over 85% of

interviewed mothers who finished the childcare leaves and had returned to work confirm the lack of flexibility in working condition practiced by their employers. Low educated women are most affected in the relationship with the labour force market. For those women, the survey registered the low percentages in returning process to the labour market: 47.1% of these women do not return to the labour market after the end of childcare leave, comparing with 7 % registered for highly educated women.

Parents can choose an ECEC service taking into account a number of factors: the cost of the service, the distance between home and location of the service, the type of activities covered by the services, etc. Most of the interviewed respondents said they were motivated to choose kindergartens for their children firstly by the distance kindergarten-home (reduced distance), 54%, secondly by the type of kindergartens' programme (with longer working hours), 42.8% and depending on the types of services offered by the kindergarten, particularly language courses for pre-schoolers, 43.1% (INCSMPS survey data, 2007).

Conclusions

In Romania, the interest in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has increased significantly in the last decade. But for the age group 0-3 years we cannot speak about a functional system of ECEC services, a major deficit being identified regarding the number of existing units, as well as human resources within these units. Without sufficient coverage of childcare services for children from 0 and 6 (7) years there is a clear deficit of possibilities for parents to plan for their respective balance of work and family tasks. Initiatives to support a balance of work and family life it is necessary to rely on suitable arrangement of government policies and facilities granted to employees by employers (affordable needs based childcare provision, effective financial support combined with incentives to work, family friendly environment).

Formal childcare services for young children are a way for parents to enter and/or remain in the labour market only if they are financially accessible. In order to balance care and work responsibilities when ECEC services are unaffordable, of low-quality, or difficult to access, parents may opt for atypical work schedules, and possible negative consequences on the well-being of children may occur.

The development of qualitative and affordable early education and care services should be a priority in the field of social policy in Romania. The potential of the structural funds on financing ECEC services should be fully utilized. It is necessary to stimulate employers to develop family friendly practices that can allow parents to reconcile family and professional life

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