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Strengthening the Services in Early Childhood Development in the Roma Communities

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Abstract

The realistic state of the education of the Roma community illustrates the need for serious investments in resources of a human and material kind. Although the recent decade proved to be a decade of educational needs of the Roma, analyses still show the necessity for sustaining the continuity in advancing the developments of everything connected to early childhood development, as a basic sub-system in education. The research that was done had the aim of exploring the needs for strengthening the competencies and the sensibilities of work in environments with social, language and cultural specificities. The research was conducted in several stages, with focus groups as well: a questionnaire for kindergarten educators was conducted; research with a focus group of kindergarten educators was conducted; research with a focus group of parents whose children attend the kindergarten was conducted; research with a focus group of NGO representatives was conducted. The methods and techniques applied are the method of analysis, the inductive, descriptive and the method of generalization, as well as techniques of analysis of pedagogical documentation, observation, and surveying. It can be concluded that: kindergarten educators show a need towards professional development and training related to early childhood development and learning; kindergarten educators show a need towards cooperation with the community; parents showed their dissatisfaction with the difficult adaptation of children in the kindergarten; NGO representatives stated the need for infrastructural investments, as well as investments in joint project activities between the children, educators, and parents.

Keywords: early childhood development, needs, Roma community, services, development

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right. It gives children, the youth and adults the power to think critically, make choices and improve their lives. It breaks the closed circle of poverty and it is a key element of economic and social development.

"The modern educational process demonstrates even more the need for inclusion of play in the early school period. Play is actually the first activity that children come in touch with, and through which they learn many things. It affects children's development in general, as well as the development of their physical health and motor skills, their socio-emotional development, the development of learning approaches, language development, literacy and communication and cognitive development" (Child 2004: 97).

All children, regardless of sex, ethnicity, socio-economic differences, as well as various health and special needs, should be allowed entrance into the educational system.

2. What are the goals and directions of education in the children's friendly area?

* Objectives of the children's friendly area:

- To offer children opportunities to develop, learn, play and build/strengthen their endurance after an urgent situation or crisis, or during a long-lasting emergency. To identify and find ways to respond to certain threats for every child or certain groups of children, such as those with special weaknesses, in the event of an emergency/crisis, or during a tried and tested emergency. In addition, our goal was at least for a moment to take away their attention and thoughts, through games and songs, so that they would not dwell on the paths that they had been treading, and also the traumas that that endured.

- The purpose of the children's friendly space is to provide the children with:

A protected environment in which they can participate in organized activities (not organized, semi-structured or structured) to play, socialize, learn and to express themselves while they are recovering from their lives. A space where children can reduce the various disturbing effects of the crisis. However, children's friendly spaces are not a solution to the problems of all children. A place where children can continue their cognitive development and give them the opportunity to learn at different levels.

"Principles of the children's friendly space: A coordinated, inter-agency, and multi-sectoral approach; community mobilization; inclusion; security and a safe space; stimulating, participation and support of the environment" (Weinberger, Pickstone & Hannon 2005: 104).

3. Methodology of the Research

Subject of this research was focus on the research and analysis of the needs of educators, child care workers, parents and a team of mediators as direct helpers in the early childhood development in the Roma environment. The research has the character of an empirical research.

3.1. Research Hypotheses

3.1.1. General Hypothesis

There is a need to strengthen the early childhood development service in the Roma environment by organizing trainings, workshops and quality control processes for educators, child care workers and parents.

3.1.2. Separate Hypotheses

1. Educators and child care workers need professional support in their work.
2. Parents need to strengthen the early childhood development service in the Roma community.
3. The team of mediators has expressed positive experiences in their work so far.

3.2. Research Methods, Techniques and Instruments

The methods of theoretical analysis, such as the comparative and descriptive method, have been used in this research, and the following techniques have also been applied: content analysis, monitoring, surveying.

Research and analysis of the needs of the educators and child care workers in the April 8th Kindergarten was done in several phases:

- In the first phase, a questionnaire was conducted for educators and child care workers from the kindergarten.
- In the second phase, a focus group was formed with educators and child care workers from the kindergarten.
- In the third phase, a focus group was formed with parents whose children were attending that kindergarten.
- In the fourth phase, a focus group was formed with the team of mediators.

3.4. Analysis of the Results

Analysis of data obtained from the focus group with educators and child care workers in the public municipal institution (the April 8th Kindergarten):

Within the framework of the focus groups, 7 educators and 5 child care workers attended, and they showed great interest in expressing their past experiences, good practices and the needs for improving their work.

With the educators and the child care workers we discussed the issues that were part of the semi-structured interview, but during the conversation, other issues that came directly from their needs came up as well.

The survey was carried out on the basis of the following questions:

1. What are your experiences up to now from working in the kindergarten?
2. What specificities are you facing in the course of your work?
3. What content and what topic do you feel the need for more training and professional development?
4. What is your experience and what specificities will you highlight as being special in the process of adaptation of children to the kindergarten?
5. Do you know and respect the developmental characteristics of children in the pre-school period?
6. What is the day-to-day organization in your kindergarten?
7. What is the cooperation between educators and child care workers in your kindergarten?
8. What issues do you face?
9. How much do you know about the Roma culture, tradition and way of life?
10. What is the interest and involvement of parents in the work of your kindergarten?
11. What are your recommendations for educational work and the work of the kindergarten in general?

• Educators have paid great attention to the issue related to the planning, organization, and realization of the educational process. They think that there is a great need for support in the direction of planning and implementation of national documents in the practical realization of the educational process. Educators have detected weaknesses in relation to the realization of domains in cognitive development (in the area of knowledge acquisition) and language and communication (especially in the realization of the content of poems and songs).

• The respondents emphasized that the specificity of the groups consisting of children of mixed ages additionally complicates the planning and realization of the educational activities.

• The respondents also pointed out to the lack of didactic materials and funds in support of the realization of the educational work, but they were also thinking about the ways and possibilities for creating the necessary didactic materials.

• In that sense, they expressed the need for respecting the developmental characteristics of children and connecting them with the realistic situation in kindergartens where the calendar and developmental age of children do not always correspond. In addition, the respondents showed the need for support connected to the period of adaptation to kindergarten for the children, which they said lasted a month to two, but sometimes even up to June. For this point, we have detected that they must first strengthen their professional competencies, and also develop a plan for working with parents.

• The next question that was discussed within the focus group was the daily organization, for which I did not see any greater cooperation and integration between the activities of educators and child care workers. It is a matter of strictly divided work, without close cooperation and planning out the children's day and their stay in the kindergarten. In this section, the internal organization of the kindergarten, and perhaps the need for restructuring the team was also discussed (e.g. an educator from the Roma population and a Macedonian child care worker, or vice versa).

• The respondents mentioned the problems regarding the child's sleep pattern and the way one should think about this issue, which I believe that during the training a successful strategy and plan need to be developed in the direction of keeping the children in the institution until the end of the work day. The possibility of creating a room for sleep and a room for quiet activities was an idea.

• There are no optional activities in the kindergarten, which are usually done in the second part of the day (after sleep). It is a question that has to be thought through with the staff during the trainings.

• The cooperation with parents was discussed in terms of the need for more intensive cooperation in various forms, as well as involving the parents in the process of realization of certain activities, organization of joint workshops, and the education of the parents.

• Some of the respondents felt that the Roma culture is respected, but some of them said it was not sufficiently respected in the kindergarten's work and that this issue meant much more than songs and dancing.

• At the very end, we interviewed the respondents about children's attendance and the need to stimulate parents to bring their children to kindergarten in a timely manner and regularly.

Analysis of the data obtained from the focus group with parents whose children go to April 8th Kindergarten:

7 parents took part in the realization of the focus group, thus showing great interest in expressing their past experience, as well as the need for improving the work of their children's kindergarten.

We talked with the parents about the questions that were part of the semi-structured interview, but during the conversation, other issues emerged, arising directly from their needs.

1. What are your past experiences in the kindergarten?
2. What specificities do you face during your child's stay in the kindergarten?
3. What is your experience and what specificities will you highlight as special in the process of your child's adaptation in the kindergarten?
4. What is the day-to-day organization in your child's kindergarten?
5. Does your child spend the whole day in the kindergarten?
6. Does your child attend the kindergarten every day during the year?
7. How satisfied are you with the cooperation with the educators and child care workers in your child's kindergarten?
8. What problems do you face?
9. How well do you feel the Roma culture, traditions, and way of life are respected in the kindergarten?
10. How often do you get involved in kindergarten work and for what needs?
11. What are your recommendations for the educational work and for the kindergarten work in general?

• The parents have greatly shared their previous experiences, and I can gladly state that they are significant because several children from their family had attended that kindergarten and had had experience with most of the staff working in the kindergarten.

• There were different perceptions and attitudes regarding the work of the kindergarten, but what can be noted is that parents notice the benefits that their children receive from their stay in the kindergarten, and how they reflect the knowledge on their success (for which they voice their positive attitudes) in primary school.

• Parents noted that their children started going to kindergarten at the age of 4, and very rarely at a younger age of 2.5 years.

- They are satisfied that children learn songs, colors, and numbers in kindergarten.
- They particularly emphasized the importance of the study of the Macedonian language.
- Parents have shown interest in attending more meetings and workshops in the organization of the kindergarten.
- One of the parents shared a positive example where during a workshop, they were supposed to put themselves into the place of the educators, and that experience helped them while working with their children at home. We agreed that this is a good example to be applied by other parents.
- But parents have shown great dissatisfaction with several aspects: children's difficulty in adapting, (due to the educators and child care workers not trying hard enough to keep the children in the institution). Additionally, the children's sleeping problem was emphasized because according to parents, educators and child care workers insisted on taking the children home if they do not want to sleep. Parents react to this because they have job responsibilities.
- However, the parents' sincerity prevailed, saying that they themselves are late when they bring their children to kindergarten in the mornings. After these statements, we came to the conclusion that they must bring their children to kindergarten on time in order to respect the work of the educators and child care workers, so that they can later demand respect for their time at work and the children could stay in kindergarten although they do not want to sleep.

Analysis of the data obtained from the focus group with the team of mediators

Within the framework of the focus group realization, 4 representatives from the team of mediators and 2 representatives of the Abrela team were present, showing great interest in expressing their past experience, as well as the needs for improving the kindergarten's work.

With the teams, we discussed the issues that were part of the semi-structured interview, but during the conversation, there were other issues coming directly from their needs.

1. What are your past experiences from work in the kindergarten?
2. What specificities do you face during your work?
3. What is your experience, and what specificities would you highlight as special in the children's process of adapting to the kindergarten?
4. Do you think that the developmental characteristics of children in the pre-school period are recognized and respected?
5. What is the day-to-day organization of the kindergarten?
6. What is the cooperation between kindergarten educators and child care workers?
7. What problems can you detect as a priority in the kindergarten?
8. What do you think: how much is the Roma culture, tradition and way of life respected in the work of the kindergarten?
9. What is the interest and involvement of parents in the work of your kindergarten?
10. What are your recommendations for the educational work and the work of the kindergarten in general?

The mediators focus group was attended by 4 representatives, who had a different role, but each contributed in their own way to strengthening the capacities of the kindergarten for inclusion of children, stimulating parents to regularly bring their children to the kindergarten, forming lists, forming groups of children, and other necessary aspects for the work and logistics of the kindergarten.

• A particularly important moment was that two representatives from the team of mediators live in the surrounding area, in that community, therefore, they stressed out that they know the residents very well and their children, so they know what is best for them and what their needs are.

• The team of mediators and the team of Abrela highlighted their experiences in the direction of involving as much of the children of pre-school age as possible in the April 8th Kindergarten. They pointed out that so far 180 children were involved in the work of the kindergarten, which we believe is a solid figure and there is a wide range of children in pre-school education and education.

- The kindergarten has been declared a safe place for children.
- They pointed out that so far there have been quite a lot of investments in the kindergarten (changing roofs, windows, etc.), but there are still several aspects for investing (e.g. heating, floor, etc.) in order for it to be a more comfortable place for children.
- Regarding the work of the kindergarten, both teams think that although there have been various forms of professional development for educators and child care workers, there is still much work to be done on this topic.
- They stressed the need to work on the type and timing of the work responsibilities of educators and child care workers, which we concluded were: the internal house rules, internal organization and time for work – as they were not respected in the kindergarten. This problem was also pointed out by the parents, and that's why it will need to be taken into account when designing the training content.
- The teams pointed out the need for greater sensitivity of the kindergarten staff and their approach to the process of the reception of children and at the same time their relationship with their parents. It is necessary to find a professional mechanism for the appropriate morning reception of the child, especially during the adaptation period.
- As a common conclusion, we found the need for informal training for educators and child care workers, especially in the area of soft skills development in their work, the need of team-building activities, the need to introduce a system of self-evaluation of employees, but also the whole kindergarten in general, establishing a system for measuring the quality of work and establishing a remuneration system.
- These elements will be taken into consideration as much as possible and incorporated in the final design of the training.

4. Concluding remarks

From the obtained data, we can conclude that educators and child care workers need to strengthen the early childhood development service from the professional aspect, and to incorporate this system in almost all aspects covered by the questionnaire. It points to the fact that they need training for their professional development, which will increase the quality of the services they offer in the kindergarten in which they work. These views should be taken into consideration when designing training, workshops and other activities. On the other hand, parents said they needed support from educators and child care workers in the development of their children. They feel the necessity of systemic support because of the specificity of the environment in which they are surrounded. The team of mediators pointed out the need for greater support from the government sector as well as from the non-governmental sector in supporting future activities related to this issue.

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