

## QUALITY OF NURSERY SERVICES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PERSONNEL AND PARENTS

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**Rezumat.** *Articolul rezumă rezultatele evaluării cadrului de îngrijire și educație timpurie; stimularea familiei cu copii de la naștere până la 3 ani prin programe de educație parentală și oferirea de stimulente financiare; calificarea, instruirea și întreținerea personalului de îngrijire timpurie și educație.*

*Acesta evidențiază perspectiva percepută asupra serviciilor furnizate de personal și creșele părinților, nevoile / dificultățile și prioritățile identificate de conducere, personal și părinți - ca beneficiari indirecti.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *calitatea serviciilor integrate, educație timpurie, perspective ale angajaților și beneficiarilor indirecti, formare profesională a personalului creșelor.*

The continuous increase of the PTȘ rate to 18.1% in 2017 suggests that the 11.3% target assumed by Romania for 2020 will be difficult to reach, which could lead to the extension of the implementation period of the PTS strategy.

The article is based on a study conducted in the context of monitoring the measures in the Strategy on Reducing Early School Leaving in Romania (2019) and presents ”a summary of the results regarding the evaluation of the child care and early education framework; involvement of the family (with children of 0-3 years) in parental education programs and by providing financial incentives; qualification, training and maintenance of early care and education staff

The analysis addresses the needs which have been identified and the perspective on quality at the level of early education services (nurseries) by management, staff and parents as indirect beneficiaries.

Romania was 17.8 % behind the European Union (EU) average in terms of participation in education and early care. In recent years, this gap has narrowed to 7.3 percent of the EU average.

**Table 1. Indicator.**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Reference 2013</b>	<b>Current 2017</b>	<b>Target 2020</b>
Gross enrollment rate for nursery education	2,7%	3,41%	23,3%
Gross coverage rate for the 0-5 age group	43,0%	46,7%	58,5%

This research aims to provide a better understanding of the needs of nursery staff and collecting relevant data and information, especially on the implementing measures in order to stimulate pre-school education. Data and information have been collected from 20 randomly selected nurseries nationwide. The study was conducted with the support of the World Bank, the consolidated information being reflected in the annual monitoring report of the PTŞ Strategy by the Ministry of National Education.

The methodological approach was qualitative, it used interview with nursery directors, focus group with nursery education staff and care staff, focus group with parents to explore the perceptions and opinions of the subjects towards the services offered in nurseries, both as beneficiaries, as well as decision makers. Interviews (semi-structured) were conducted to collect data that faithfully reflected the views and comments of the beneficiaries.

The perceptions that the nursery managers have towards the identified needs, the legislative framework and the quality (and variety) of the services provided by the nurseries were followed;

- articulating the relations between the management team and the nursery staff;
- the training profile of the nursery staff;
- the types and quality of interactions in nurseries (staff, parents, children).

Nursery research has been chosen because the need to provide early education services has become a matter of public debate and an important topic for the scientific community in recent years.

The focus on nursery services has been determined by aspects such as: the initial training curriculum of the early education practitioner for the nursery segment must correlate with the Fundamental Landmarks in Early Learning and Development (especially with the guiding principles regarding the content and implementation of these landmarks). ) with the Quality Standards (reference) for the nursery level; curriculum for early education; with GD 1252/2012 on the organisation and operation of nurseries; models and international practices of initial training in the field of early education, etc.

It is imperative to restructure the entire field of pre-school education, based on a consistently monitored strategy, including the initial training of the child educator, one of the most vulnerable aspects of the current reform program for early education, the correlation of RFÎDT of the child with National Professional Standards for teachers in early education institutions following the model of other European countries (Republic of Moldova).

Romania is one of the five EU countries (along with Belgium, France, Great Britain-Scotland and Hungary) with a fragmented early education system on two levels (nursery and preschool) that implements measures to facilitate the transition between nursery (0-3 years), kindergarten (3-6 years) and school.

By H.G. no. 1252/2012 it was said that:

1. The units in which nursery education services are provided, hereinafter referred to as units, are nurseries or, as the case may be, the kindergarten or day center, in the situation where nursery education groups are set up in these units.
2. The nursery is a service of local interest, public or private, which has the mission to provide, during the day, integrated services of care, supervision and early education to nursery children.

3. For the establishment, the nurseries need the approval of the County School Inspectorate and are methodologically coordinated by preschool education units with legal personality designated by the County School Inspectorate.
4. The organization of the space and the microclimate in the nurseries must be carried out in accordance with the norms established by the Ministry of Health by Order no. 1.955 of 18 October 1995 (\* updated \*) for the approval of the Hygiene Norms.
5. The educational content of the early education activity is based on a national curriculum
6. The activity of the units where nursery education services are offered is organized based on the provisions of this methodology and the internal regulations, approved by their board of directors, in the case of nursery groups in kindergartens, or by the local public administration authority under which it operates: in the case of groups from nurseries or day centers.

Currently, the most important advances made in the reorganization of early education are the revision of the *Methodology for the organization and functioning of nurseries and other early childhood education services* and the *Curriculum for early education (children from birth to 6 years)*.

Through the National Education Law, MEN regulates nursery education, which implies the need to adapt the system to the new requirements related to: unitary curriculum, revision of RFIDTC development standards (since 2010), development of standard cost and quality standard for preschool, registration in SIIIR (computer system) of children enrolled in the age segment 0-3 years, ensuring the initial and continuous training of teachers and care staff, as well as parental education.

Local public authorities also need funding to build, rehabilitate and provide the necessary quality infrastructure - buildings and equipment.

Some important problems related to the organization of nurseries in our country is the lack of unity from one county to another, the lack of possibility of career development of the staff with educational responsibilities in the nursery as they are all supported by outdated legislation, not adapted to the integrated model that is trying to put in practice. In some counties the nurseries are subordinated to the County School Inspectorate (but with separate accounting, with separate administration, with gaps and salary differences between the nursery staff and the kindergarten staff, although the positions / functions, studies are identical) - Sibiu, Harghita; In other counties they are organized as an independent service within the City Hall (in most counties) or within the DGASPC (starting from the social side of the nursery).

In the case of state nurseries, medical services predominate: parents (with secondary education) do call for nurseries as social service providers, as an alternative to childcare and supervision appropriate to the work schedule of parents and their financial resources.

”The promoted *medical model* is visible both in the nursery program (sorting children at entry into the unit), in staff clothing (white or blue gowns), as well as in arranging the rooms where the children sleep or eat, respectively”. [4, p. 120]

#### **NURSERY MANAGERS / DIRECTORS**

The nursery management is centralized for several nurseries or for all the nurseries in a locality provided by a doctor (therefore provided only on the care and possibly nutrition side) who coordinates the assistant nurses for each nursery. The educational side is given minimal

attention, and managerial tasks do not exist; Nurseries operate under the auspices of the Local Council or the Public Health Directorate

Also, a non-unitary management is practiced between the two pillars of early education, provided by different staff as professional training and managerial orientation, the emphasis being placed in each of the two pillars of early education on different managerial levers;

Among the objectives that are found in the strategy of most nursery managers, we highlight in descending order of the percentages: Insufficient number of staff (Optimal number of qualified childcare educators, assistant educator, sufficient caregivers in groups) - 31.81%; quality services (Development of the material base, Ensuring a safe environment, Involvement of parents in the activity of the nursery) - 25.50%, Staff training - 23.60% (with reference mostly also to the staff: Quality staff, Modification of the salary of the nursery staff and the development of a unitary grid for care and education staff for the two segments of early education, Ensuring an interdisciplinary team, Continuing education of teachers), the percentage is not consistent with the frequency of occurrence in nursery and kindergarten principals' answers to staffing and training because this frequency is very high. Other objectives designated by the directors of nurseries and centres for preschools include the one on Qualitative Communication with parents - 19.09% (Involvement of parents in the activity of the nursery, Increasing the participation of parents in the activities of the nursery); the Involvement of civil society, whose target is of 39.72%; the Cooperation between institutions involved in the education of young children up to 6 years if we can not yet talk about the integration of services for early education.

They also point out "a number of problems associated with the legislative framework: Expenditures for nurseries (infrastructure, salaries, etc.) are borne by the local budget, which makes it very difficult to provide early education services in rural areas.

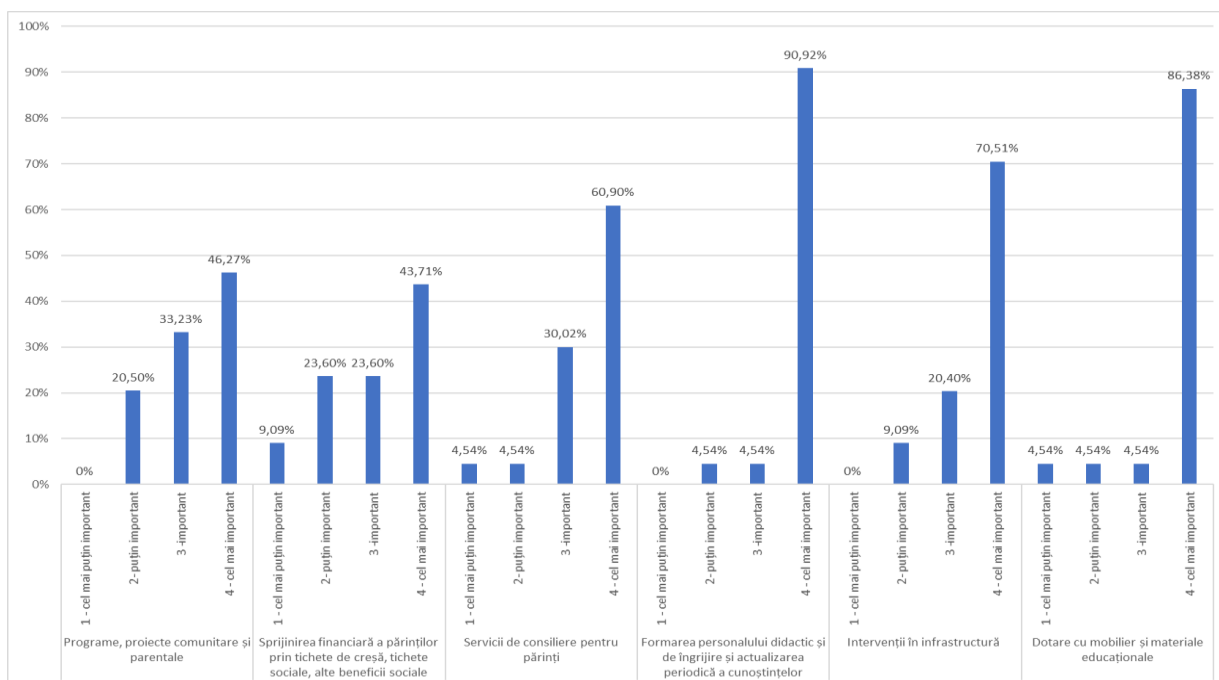
The directors of the nurseries, being mostly nurses, agree that the triple subordination of these institutions should be reconsidered (in most of the counties, because not all counties have the same subordination), but they are satisfied that the funding is provided by the local councils.

Nursery managers also refer to a number of difficulties they face: Insufficient staff (of all categories) is a problem identified by 58.18% of principals; Lack of education staff is seen as a difficulty by 56, 36%; insufficient space in relation to the demand for places in these institutions is 43.64%; The large number of applications for registration over the available places 44.00%; Lack of financial support 41.82%.

Lack of investment, efficient functioning of the multidisciplinary team (doctor, nurse, nutritionist, psychologist and educator), Lack of training, sometimes difficult relationship with parents in special situations regarding children's behaviour are some other difficulties mentioned by the nursery leaders, who in most cases, unlike the kindergarten principals, do not have managerial training of any kind.

As it appears from a previous research "in most nurseries, managers have emphasized the informed choice" of the parents' cause: The nursery is not compared to the nanny or grandmother. The choice of parents depends on three factors: 1) the quality (supposedly "better of specialized, institutionally controlled services, as opposed to nanny services; 2) the financial resources that the family can allocate; 3) awareness of the fact that at this age the child's socialization is very important." [4, p. 119]

Nursery directors appreciate the importance of some types of interventions at the nursery level.



**Chart no. 1: Assessment of nursery directors regarding the types of intervention at their level.**

The needs are noted:

- Creating an integrated management system for early education that provides coherence in the management of "early education centers", ensuring the satisfaction of all needs identified in children between 0-6 years;
- Integrated initial training of managers for early education to have skills for managing both the educational component, care, nutrition and all functional areas: Institutional capacity, managerial effectiveness, quality management of integrated early childhood education services.

## STAFF

According to the legislation in force, the staff consists of medical staff in most cases: nurses, with average specialized training.

The staff is not familiar with the curriculum for early education, it is not specific to their work, they are nurses and nurses (nursery directors).

"Nurses and caregivers take over from educational practices in kindergarten, but highlight the lack of specialized training to stimulate the mental development of children, as well as the lack of skills for singing, dancing" etc. (Ulrich, 2009, p. 124).

The indicated structure of the nursery staff, as units in which nursery education services are offered, consists of:

- a) management staff: director / head of center;
- b) teaching staff: educator-childcare worker;
- c) specialized staff: nurse;
- d) non-teaching staff: administrator, cook, accountant, assistant cook, caretaker.

The remuneration of the staff serving the nursery units must be established in a uniform manner. At this time there are three major categories of nursery staff:

a) administrative staff, which, in the case of large local public services, are composed of: director, chief accountant, specialized inspectors, referents, qualified workers, storekeepers / administrators, unskilled workers, who according to the Law - framework no. 153/2017 on the remuneration of staff paid from public funds, with amendments and completions. subsequent, are paid on Annex no. VIII - The Occupational Family of Budgetary Functions "Administration" and whose salaries are established by the Local Council,

b) non-teaching staff: specialized personal coordinator, childcare educator, education instructor, psycho-pedagogue, psychologist, doctor, nurse, child caregiver, maid, laundress, who according to the Law - framework no. 153 / 2017 on the remuneration of staff paid from public funds, with subsequent amendments and completions, are paid on Annex no. II - Occupational Family of Budgetary Functions "Health and Social Assistance", and whose salary is established on the basis of the annexes from a4, b4, c4 and c3, according to the grids and coefficients established for 2022, with the scheduled annual increases.

c) the teaching staff, which consists of the child educator, according to H.G. no. 1252/2012, but which can be found on Annex no. II - Health and social assistance the entire staff of nurseries or public nursery services, is paid from the social assistance account 68.11, according to Annex no.1 of the Order M.F.P. no. 1954/2005 for the approval of the Classification of indicators on public finances, which approved, starting with 2006, the Budget Classification, which provides for nurseries in ch. 68, subchapter. 00, paragraph 11.

Regardless of the form of subordination that the nursery units in Romania have, the payment of investment, maintenance, operation and personnel expenses are supported by the local councils from the local budget, based on the state budget law (according to art. 5, paragraph (4) letter e) and Annex no.10 of Law no.5 / 2020 of the state budget for 2020) or different from one county to another.

95% of the nursery staff identify thorough training as a need, and 40% say they need regular but constant updating of training and knowledge. Training courses on education represent only 18%, and on hygiene 82%.

Only 23% of staff consider the training they participate in to be useful and interesting. Nursery staff no. 3 from Piatra Neamț identifies "Greater need to update knowledge than new information", "Need for training, adaptation to new, need for childcare courses" (Creșa Traian, Vâlcea).

The nursery staff appreciates the skills acquired in the training courses having a "predominantly theoretical character", "useful", but more on the care side.

Among the areas in which staff would like to be trained: "Not asked about training needs".

"Courses in techniques of observation and knowledge of the child" (Service within the local council DAS Alexandria - Nursery "PECO"), "Related information early education, health, cognitive development, emotional development, first aid course!" (OMIDE Care Center, sector 3 Bucharest), "Need for practical courses, DGASMB deals with courses, any specialized course is welcome, because they are not done much" (Multifunctional Center "Little Magicians" - sector 4 Bucharest).

There is a lack of a structure to the system of the ongoing training of existing staff in nurseries, which is largely medical staff, 50% of whom have not participated in any continuous training program and who, at this moment, does not master the basic notions of the concept

promoted together with the National Education Law no. 1/2011, with subsequent amendments and completions, respectively: early education;

- routes of initial training of teachers in early education too diversified, without unitary principles, not correlated with existing standards at European level, and the training of nursery education staff is reduced to the high school training route;

- discontinuity and inconsistency in terms of ensuring basic funding for all primary beneficiaries of education (nursery, preschool);

- insufficient exploration and development of options for making services as flexible as possible, at community or family level, in the context of a significant number of low-income parents who cannot afford to enrol their child in an early education service, or in the context in which the distances to this service are very large and even impractical in certain conditions (rain, snow, etc.);

- low enrolment rates for children in early childhood education and care services (especially for children under 3) compared to average enrolment rates at European level;

- insufficient number of qualified teachers to work with children under 3 years of age and the reluctance of local public authorities to apply the provisions of GD 1252/2012 (especially regarding the employment of childcare educators in nurseries);

- expanding parent education initiatives / programs that have proven effective over time, as well as designing a viable monitoring, evaluation and funding mechanism to ensure the sustainability of these programs; elaboration of the general framework or standard according to which all parental education programs must be organized and carried out;

- recruitment, training, accreditation of parent educators / instructors for parents;

- knowledge and highlighting of the cultural specifics, values and differences existing at the level of each community, by promoting participation as an educational value and strategy;

- involving community members in making decisions regarding the development of early education services, focused on the well-being of the child.

- according to the legislation in force, the staff consists of medical staff in most cases: nurses, with average specialized training.

- continuous training of human resources is rather the choice of the management team, funding for training is inconsistent.

- the staff is not familiar with the curriculum for early education (although it exists), it is not specific to their work, they are nurses and nurses, mostly carers; childcare educators, few in number compared to the number of children in most nurseries included in the study have a low professional esteem and would like to work at the preschool level if the studies would allow them. The most important option is for career development, for access to teaching support.

- the quality of professional development of human resources and the frequency of participation in various training courses are determined by the concern of the director of kindergarten / nursery staff training. The courses (occasionally) taken are predominantly in the medical specialty, on hygiene, care, very few in the educational field.

We note that the complexity of the problem of early development and education and, implicitly, the need for quality training for practitioners in the field is insufficiently understood. The staff feels, as I illustrated above, the need for training as a priority.

The requirements of the training framework are clear only for nursery managers: The manager needs to know "both management, organization, administration, but it is very important

to know the specific services of the nursery, the needs of the child and even psychology" (Ibidem). The reality shows us that 94.6% of nursery directors are nurses without management studies or only with short-term training in medical management.

## **PARENTS**

**As far as** the expectations of parents are concerned, we find that they have the willingness „to discuss children. The tasks of the nursery staff include maintaining relationships with parents. The findings reflect the information on the child's health problems and the obligation to do health education. Parents mentioned that access to the classroom is prohibited. In this sense, the normativity specific to the medical model” is invoked. Parents' expectations are mostly related to the nursery staff. He states that the staff is in most cases patient, understanding, with ”love for children” (PECO Alexandria nursery); All staff, regardless of training or position, are expected to pay attention to each child, especially in order to develop skills, to be flexible, to support accommodation and to stimulate children's socialization. The percentages of the parents' expectations on the child's benefit from education (27.27%) and care (22.72%) in nursery are quite similar.

Most of the parents are very satisfied with the conditions in the nurseries, a good part of them reproaching the large number of children enrolled in the group. I place great emphasis on parental counselling, staff collaboration, and most people agree that care takes precedence over education. The description of early education does not denote a very favorable image of it. However, starting from "good, necessity" (Căsuța Veseliei Nursery no.6, Oradea), "a step towards the future" (Cluj, Scufița Roșie Nursery) "the key to success", at ”Insufficiency, incompetence” (Nursery no. 4 Bucharest), ”we are not talking about education, but more about ”Unsatisfactory” (Târgoviște)” care (Nursery Transilvania College).

The impossibility to satisfy the number of requests was signalled in all the nurseries where the research was carried out. The main problems faced by early education are identified by parents with realism: "Lack of teaching materials and toys, lack of staff" (Nursery Căsuța Veseliei no.6, Oradea), "too few places" - problem identified at the level of all institutions , ”Outdoor playground is small and toys are damaged, organizational problems”, (Nursery no. 3, Mangalia and Nursery Transilvania College - Cluj), ”lack of staff, no educator, only care staff” (Nursery Pașcani) ; the lack of education staff appears again at the Traian nursery in Râmnicu - Vâlcea - "Lack of education staff and cribs". The parents from the nursery no. 5 from Iași, but also from other nurseries detect as an important need "To have education - it is very important - socialization, integration, to respect the rules of the group"

A very important percentage 50% of parents identify as a difficulty of organizing early education the quality of the parent-staff relationship, followed as a percentage of 23% by the lack of staff.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

At the level of early education in Romania as shown in this study, but also according to the **Internal Country Analysis Report presented to the Council of Europe in 2019, the problems and possible solutions are identified:**

- Lack of a coherent policy and legislation in the field of early education for children aged 0 to 3 years;
- The need for the organization and functioning of the early preschool education system (0-3



years), in accordance with the existing legal provisions, but adapted to the integrated approach of the services; Finalisation of the conception document regarding the revision of the Strategy on early education (2005), outlined with the technical assistance of UNICEF Romania and with the support of CEDP Step by Step and ISE;

- The need to extend the topics to: inclusive education, outdoor education, socio-emotional education, educational research, reflective teacher, etc. and, implicitly, the encouragement and stimulation of teachers in the direction of educational micro-research.
- Involvement of the economic and business environment to support access to and provision of quality services in early education;
- Proposal of a law OM (MEN, MMJS, MS, MDRAP) to take over the nurseries from the local public authorities and / or to share the responsibilities regarding the organization and functioning of the nurseries;
- Revision of GD no. 1252/2012;
- Analyzing the opportunity to repeal Law no. 263 on the establishment, organization and operation of nurseries, with subsequent amendments and completions;
- Law proposal on approving the methodology for calculating the standard cost for the preschool level;
- The need to develop unification, (level 5A / 5B for early education teachers working with children aged 0-6 years and increase the quality of the system of continuous and initial training of teachers in early education;
- Proposal to amend LEN no. 1/2011 and COR for the mention of the teacher for early education, level 6A / 6B;
- COR clarification related to the childcare educator, which is also found in the education group and in the group of professional categories in social / care and which favored the employment of childcare educators, who are not trained according to the provisions of LEN no.1 / 2011, in nurseries;
- Law proposal on the Methodology for recognizing competencies for nursery staff, who are to work as childcare educator / teacher for early education, as well as for the nomination of flexible training routes for childcare educator / teacher for early education;
- Proposing a set of compulsory subjects for the initial training of the teacher for early education, regardless of the training route.

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