
Development and learning standards in early childhood in Preschool education in Albania, challenges and expectations

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1. INTRODUCTION

Two primary factors that influence the formation of the personality of a child under 5 years old are family environment and the pre-school education environment. Since the first one cannot be chosen, the second involves individuals who care for these children, and who are expected to have appropriate professional training to understand the development of pre-school children, to invest in all aspects of their development. Records also show that practical personal knowledge of a teacher, determines his decision in the classroom, rather than learning and child development theories. (Spodek, 1987)

1.1 A Historical and Anthropological Background of the Early Childhood Education in Albania

The history of the education development in early childhood in Albania is closely related to the historical and cultural background of the Albanian population that has always lived in its territory. It is also related to culture, traditions and social changes during its history. In the beginning, education in the early childhood originated within family, mainly with the mother and the other members since, traditionally speaking,

caring for the children growth and their education in the Albanian culture has always been the responsibility of the family, especially the mother.

Family has always been a very powerful socializing institution. It has had a great impact on the personality of the children and their future lives for a more considerable period of time than any other group type. According to the scholar Doja, the individuals' history, their development and education cannot be separated at all from their families' history. The quality of the affective relationships within family, together with values and attitudes which are encouraged or inhibited from parents or other family members, changes depending on the family type and its social status defined historically.

According to different studies and the population registration (census) at the beginning of the XX century, families in rural areas have dominated in most of the territory of the Albanian population. Up to the middle of the XX century in Albania and Kosovo the majority of the families consisted of several married couples together with their children. This is different from the rural family type in South-East Europe, Greece and Rumania, where the married couple lived with their unmarried children. In the Albanian family type, the parental and family cooperation is almost concentrated (self-centered) and closed in itself. In this environment, children admit behaviors they have never experienced themselves by being treated as "young adults" in whom no one seems to be interested in order to protect their innocence and dignity. As a result, it can be stated that the children education in Albanian society is mainly realized through family as an institution. New generations are shaped among values and cultural forms norms, which are transmitted from one generation to another by being nurtured with decent virtues, with a marked feeling of protecting the relatives and moral purity on behalf of the generation, and with the best customs and traditions of the ancestral with attributes as faith and honor.

Pre-school education in Albania is developed relatively late in the XX century, when the first primary education schools were opened with some early childhood classes attached to them. According to archive documents, the program in these classes has mainly been based on the Montessori and Frabel kindergarten model. In these classes, a special attention was paid to the moral shaping of the children, games, special skills and health care as well. During 1928-1938, according to documents of the time, there were no specific institutions for the education in early childhood, but there did exist some pre-school classes included within the primary education schools.

In “10 vjet Mbretini 1928-1938” edition, it is mentioned the fact that primary education is free and compulsory for all the children, male and female, of Albanian citizens, starting from the age of 4 and finishing at the age of 13. Infant schools contain children under the age of 6 and primary schools contain children at the age of 6 and up. In September 1934 the Law on Education was approved, in which a special chapter was dedicated to pre-school education. The law defined, at the very beginning, the purpose of pre-school education, “to facilitate the physical and mental development of the child”. The program of these classes included:

- a) Exercises in order to know and apply the initial moral customs
- b) Intuition about all the objects near the children via appropriate conversations
- c) Stories, short poems, songs, gymnastic games and moves conveyed by music
- d) Easy exercises on different handicraft suitable by age, free drawing, school walks.

The National Education Reform of the August 1946 brought enormous changes. During 1945-1990 pre-school education was designed prior to the demands and political developments of the time. Education was based on the political communist ideology

and struggled to serve the aim of creating the new individual, following the principles of the communist morality.

After the 1990s, when the communist regime declined, the education system, in general, and the pre-school education, in particular, lacked the proper attention and had a very difficult period. This can be shown by the fact that during these years, from 1990 up to 2004, there were no well-defined standards in the pre-school education and education in the early childhood was simply considered as a preparatory phase to school.

Achievement and Content Standards in Pre-school Education

In 2004, the Achievement and Content Standards in Pre-school Education were designed by the Institute of Pedagogical Studies in Tirana, according to age groups. These main fields were included:

- I. Physical Health
The Approach to Learning
- II. Social and emotional development
- III. Language development and communication
- IV. Cognitive development and overall knowledge, which is divided in 4 subfields:
 - a. Subfield: Mathematical knowledge
 - b. Subfield: Scientific thinking
 - c. Subfield: Social recognition
 - d. Subfield: Art

Even though these standards can be considered as an achievement, their application was very difficult in the institutions infrastructure and the content realization as well. According to a study, conducted by UNICEF and the organization “Partners for children”, in 2013 it resulted that the realization of the achievement standards was at very low levels,

whereas the content standards were not fully understood by the educators (teachers).

Children of all kindergartens continue to focus regularly on writing, numbers and exercises by keeping their sitting positions instead of having the possibility of choosing several activities that can be offered by teaching sites.

Parents are merely regarded as indispensable for bringing their children to kindergarten and helping them with some homework. They are not provided with any concrete written piece of information about the program and the way how this program will work with the children and parents instead of just learning letters and numbers. Parents remain ignorant about what the program is, what their children are learning, what the teaching objectives are and how they can be achieved.

The main conclusion is that most of the educators (teachers) need to be trained on the way how they are supposed to evaluate and observe special children, to design an individual plan not only for the disabled children and, afterwards, how to plan individual activities and small group activities with the children in order to develop their knowledge or skills whenever they are insufficient.

Based on these findings, the Ministry of Education and Sport established a working group that, in 2015, designed THE DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING STANDARDS OF CHILDREN 3-6 YEARS OLD.

The Development and Learning Standards of Children 3-6 Years Old treat these development fields:

- Health, physical wellbeing and motor development
- Emotional and social development
- Language development, reading and writing
- Cognitive development and general knowledge
- The Approach to learning

The standards of health and wellbeing are related to indicators of the physical development of children 3-6 years old, which have to do with children's skills to use their muscles and healthy practices of hygiene that should be treated as daily routine procedures for the children 3-6 years old, such as: feeding, self care, etc.

Emotional and social development includes behaviors and actions which mirror the emotional growth and development of the children, their skills to communicate and start a relationship with their peers, teachers and other adults. Language development, reading and writing mirror the main habits and knowledge that the child acquires while growing up in conjunction with speaking, communication with others, reading and writing.

Learning approaches focus on behaviors, actions, crucial prerequisites and basic attitudes that the child acquires during his/her growth, his/her learning experiences and in relationships with others.

2. METHODOLOGY

This new set of development and learning standards of children 3-6 years old, was approved in September 2015 and since then, these standards are in the process of piloting. Being part of the working group for designing these standards and following step by step the process of testing them in the region of Korca, in daily practice in our kindergartens, we have shown a special interest in the way the teachers, children and their parents are facing with the understanding and application of these standards, for the first time and, in a specific way, the focus of this study comprises two areas of development and learning standards in early childhood:

- 1 - The Approach to Learning
- 2 - Social, personal and emotional development

and how these two areas are a challenge for teachers and parents, in this moment of their application. This qualitative research was conducted through:

2.1. Observation, nonparticipant observer (by completing the survey protocol as modeled by Angrosino 2007), of the daily practice in 8 Korca region kindergartens, over a period of three months (Nov 2015-Jan 2016), two of them in the countryside and 6 in the city. They are selected one for each leading region of the county, based on population, taking into account that in this county, the pre-school education service lies in 12 kindergartens, consisting of the first group, the second, the third and the mixed one, in which 1326 registered children attend pre-school education for the period 2015-2016, and where work 97 educators work.

2.2. The semistructured interviews as modeled by Rubin & Rubin (2012), called the *Relevant Model Interview* with 49 teachers in service in the kindergartens selected as below, as well as 35 parents who were randomly selected from these kindergartens. The interview protocol was designed by following the model of Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009. Before the interviewing, the approval of the respondents was taken. During the interview, audio recording and completion of the interview protocol manual had been used.

Data identifying the kindergartens										
Kindergarten	Age of children								TOTAL	
	3 years		4 years		5 years		6 years			
	All	Female	All	Female	All	Female	All	Female	All	Female
Bulgarec - Village	13	6	29	20	22	11	9	3	73	40
Pirg - Village	18	10	32	15	25	13	4	2	79	40
Korça - Nr 2	31	23	51	23	34	18			116	64
Korça - Nr 3	24	16	27	15	49	23	0	0	100	54
Korça - Nr 4	39	23	42	22	45	23	0	0	126	68
Korça - Nr 5	12	6	11	7	20	12	4	0	47	25
Korça - Nr 6	14	5	15	7	9	3	18	7	56	22
Korça - Nr 7	41	16	29	17	46	24	0	0	116	57
	192	105	236	126	250	127	35	12	713	370

Age of teachers												
	Under 25 years		26-34 years		35-44 years		45-54 years		55-59 years		TOTAL	
	Bulgarec - Village	0	1		2		0		0			
Pirg - Village	0	0		3		0		0				3
Korça - Nr 2		2		4		4						10
Korça - Nr 3	0	2		2		5		0				9
Korça - Nr 4		1		4		1						6
Korça - Nr 5		4		3								7
Korça - Nr 6	1	1		0								2

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Korça - Nr 7	0	2	3	3	1	9
	1	13	21	7	1	49

Experience in teaching						
	0 - 5 years	6 - 10 years	11 - 19 years	Over 20 years	TOTAL	
Bulgarec - Village	0	1	2	0	3	
Pirg - Village	0	0	3	0	3	
Korça - Nr 2		2	4	4	10	
Korça - Nr 3	0	2	2	5	9	
Korça - Nr 4		1	4	1	6	
Korça - Nr 5		4	3		7	
Korça - Nr 6	1	1	0		2	
Korça - Nr 7	0	2	3	3	9	
	1	13	21	7	49	

35 parents involved in interviewing are presented with these features: 25 of them are women and 10 are men, from 22 to 36 years old. 19 of the parents had higher education, while the rest had high education and compulsory education. 18 of the parents interviewed were people who were involved in the demographic movement in Albania, having moved from the surrounding villages to Korca, or from the most remote mountainous areas to the villages Pirg and Bulgarec, in the kindergartens of which the study was conducted .

2.3. Analysis of public documents (official, archival material).

After the spiral movement of reading, the coding process took place in the small category information (29 categories). These codes which presented; information that was expected to be found during the study, surprising information which was not expected to be found during the study, including information which was interesting, but not common to be expected from the search, were classified in topics (themes), which included codes that created an idea. Intentionally, the coding data manual was elected (in order not to be distracted from the information obtained from the subjects) being very careful to identify in-vivo possible codes, which were also present even later in the development of the matrix, which led to the discovery of seven main themes, which were dominant even during the interview transcripts management and during data analysis recorded during observations as well.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The phenomenal interpretative analysis of the data, results in the following dominant topics/fields referring to the contextual and structural description of Moustakas (1994):

3.1. *The standards of the field “The approach to learning” from the standards package of the learning development, in their entirety, are not perceived by the educators as the primary aiding basis, which develops the basic learning predisposition in children, resulting in the neglect of the necessary alertness, on the part of the educators, to notice or to stimulate the achievement of these standards by the children.*

The curiosity, as an apparent tendency in children, observed during the process, is neglected by the educators during 73% of the duration of the process, resulting in dimness of this natural tendency of the child.

3.2. *The free initiative reflected in a child, as one of the primary standards to be stimulated by the educators towards the children orientation precisely in this direction and not towards guilt (referred to the theory of the psycho-social development of E. Erikson), it is not noticed by the educators in 81% of the duration of the observed process in the kindergarten. Also by the interviews conducted with them, it is not perceived as a basic element upon which they can construct the plan for the development of the teaching process in kindergarten, aiming the development of the possible potential that each child manifests. Only when specific children present characteristics of a leader, in which initiative is part of their character, is an educator attracted by the “unavoidable” initiative from these children.*

The creativity and imagination used by children in everyday activities are not perceived by educators as clues to understand the inner world of the children or to interpret their

symbolism, but in 71% of the duration of the process observed, they are neglected or not stimulated. Meanwhile, during the interviews, these two elements are not displayed as primary elements during the development and learning process of preschool children (with the exception of 4 amid 48 cases).

3.3. *The field “The approach to learning” (seen in its entirety (gestalt) although in its essence and content of the standards, is totally different from the essence and content of standards of the field “Knowledge and cognitive development”), is perceived as similar to the field “Knowledge and cognitive development”, from 92% of the educators and in 90% of the duration of the process observed in kindergartens, thus focusing the teacher in the latter and neglecting the content and meaning of the field “The Approach to learning”.*

Educators in general perceive that the approach of the children towards learning, does not include all the sub domain of the domain “Knowledge and cognitive development”, but are focused only in the development of mathematical and scientific skills of the preschool children, skipping the sub domain of the logical development and problem solving, or the sub domain of the social awareness and the artistic development. During the observation process, it was noticed that the development of the activities belonging to the sub domain of the mathematic development occupied 1/3 of the activities that occurred during a normal day, and the ones belonging to the sub domain of the scientific development occupied ¼ of the total of the activities done. What is worth noticing is the fact that the activities of the subfields of mathematics and scientific development, were not developed based on the curiosity demonstrated by the children, through questions that stimulate the educator to explain the process, but were oriented, prepared, teacher centered. The teacher explains the main mathematics or scientific concepts, a process which renders the children as mere listeners.

Moreover, this explanation involves scientific terms and methods, which do not allow the children to fully understand them, based on the thinking limitation that Piaget proposes in the welfare of the preschool age like thinking irreversibility, inability of the number conservation, centration, difficulty in understanding the concepts of time, space and sequence, but which encourages the mechanical learning, without using a complete mental operation. Learning the mathematical and scientific concepts does not happen through games or through spontaneous activities for the children as part of their curiosity, but in an oriented manner by the educator prepared beforehand by her.

3.4. The standards of the field “Social and Emotional development”, more concretely the concept about oneself and the expression and management of the emotions in children, are perceived as secondary by educators, coming after the standards of knowledge and cognitive development, which stand in the limelight of their work.

In 76% of the duration of the observation of the process, the educators do not show alertness during the game of the children or during their group conversations (this was noticed to be the main method used by educators for games) to evidence elements of positive or non positive attitudes that children may reflect about themselves or the way he understands that he is unique and proud of his achievements. During the interviews with the educators, they did not seem to freely express any attitude related to the concept the children have about themselves. Only when the questions were oriented towards this concept, do they convey any information related to this concept, concentrated on the children’s awareness of gender, lacking the probing of the children’s attitude towards themselves let alone their attitude towards their achievements. As far as the children expression of emotions and their management is concerned, the educators are more attentive to

notice the negative emotions, mainly of those that are extreme and which impinge the activities in the kindergarten. The attitude of the educator towards the positive emotions of the child is neutral. The work they do during the process of managing the negative emotions is focused only on the restriction of the negative emotion, not in acknowledging the child with the cognitive aspect of the emotion and in presenting possible methods to manage it.

3.5. *The educators give homework in writing, which belong to the linguistic and mathematical development, perceiving them as necessary to develop the concentration of the children and to encourage his approach to school.*

Thus homework is the one element thought to approach children to learning, believing that it encourages the children's willingness to study more in the first grade of the elementary education, compared to initiative, perseverance, curiosity, imagination and creativity, which are the main elements of the real approach to learning, considering them as second rate elements. 100% of the educators interviewed, consider normal giving homework, like writing and mathematics, and report that 97% of the children that attend their kindergarten do this homework every day.

Homework includes writing capital letters, forming words with them and later on even making sentences. While in the development of mathematics field, homework includes writing the numbers up to ten, driving to simple one figure mathematical activities. Thus doing homework has turned, by the educators themselves, into a standard for the measurement of their work, considering it as a measurable and visible product, compared with the work they could do for the comprehensive psycho social development of the child (encouraging the initiative, alertness for the stimulation of the curiosity, perseverance, the development and maintenance of the relationship, understanding and managing emotions etc).

3.6. *The expectations of the interviewed parents, about the effect of the preschool education in their children, is limited to the achievements of their children in the field of knowledge and its development, more specifically in the field of writing and mathematics skills, skipping all the other areas of the standards.*

Parents with higher education display a high level of expectations in relation to the achievements of their children in the field of mathematics and writing, not perceiving correctly the natural rhythm of the development of their child in all his aspects, tending to drive their children in the above mentioned achievements.

Parents with elementary and secondary education display a medium level of expectations in relation to the achievements of their children in the field of mathematics and writing, considering the kindergarten, on the other hand, as a service that the child needs to have, not knowing in details how the preschool education can affect him. While parents involved in the process of internal migration, from the country to the city, or from the remote villages to villages closer to the city, like the ones included in the study, consider preschool education as an obligation to be fulfilled by their children to adapt to the culture of the new place where they now live.

All the interviewed parents, despite of their education, admit that they help their children verbally and physically to do their homework, with the exception of the parents who live in the country, who do not have the necessary time to do such a thing.

All parents admit that they help their children to do the creative work assigned to them at home, not encouraging thus children's initiative, but actually restraining it by seeking perfection from their children.

97% of the parents admit that they do not know the program of the kindergarten where their child is, with the exception of the parents who are part of the board of the

kindergarten (4 parents in 35), who are more updated with its activities but not with its philosophy or with a detailed program.

3.7. The majority of the parents understand that their child belongs to the family and to the kindergarten group , where they are part of as soon as they are registered. However, the philosophy of the family's education follows the tradition of the child's education in the family, detached from the philosophy of the education in kindergarten, believing that the attendance of the kindergarten is enough only for the academic achievements of the child, which is considered as primary in the development of the child by Albanian parents.

Parents project in their children perfectionism and do not attempt to fully comprehend the rhythm of the development of their child, who is unique. In this way they cannot accept who their child really is, but drive them towards perfectionism, comparing them to other children.

Parents, not having full information about the cognitive development in preschool age and not knowing the obstacles a child has in learning, expect their child, at the end of each level in kindergarten, to have satisfactory mathematical and scientific knowledge, considering them the basics of the formation and development of a child, bypassing the basics of the education of the moral values, which starts and continues in the family all their life, but which is enriched and materialized in a larger group than the family, like the group of peers in kindergarten. In this way, the family passes all the rights of the education to the education institute, like the kindergarten, and expects the child to be molded by this institution without knowing its philosophy or its program. In the absence of a partnership, the educators are confronted with the high expectations of the parents in relation to the scientific formation of their children in kindergarten, “forcing” their children to have high achievements, (which in reality are

mechanical and not based on logical assumptions), neglecting the formation of the child as a citizen, trying to turn him into a pseudo scientist.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of observation and interviews, it is seen as a national responsibility to:

- deepen and expand the vision of the Ministry of Education in relation to the preschool education, taking it under the proper consideration in the strategy of the pre university education in Albania, after a dynamic history of this stage of education of the individual in our country.

- A correct and clear vision from the Ministry of Education and Sport, manifested prominently in the strategy of pre university education, would lead to a real understanding of the needs of the educators, of their continuous professional development conform the changes that occur in Albanian preschoolers children, within this very dynamic social, economical, political and demographic development in our country recently. Professional support, offered in a specialized manner, would bring the formation of an accurate vision of the educator about their professional position and would reduce the feeling of their low professional self-esteem comparing themselves to the elementary education teachers.

- Reevaluate the program for the primary formation of the educators in all the universities of the country, adapting them with the current aspect of the development of preschool children in Albania, within the pronounced changes of family or social contexts in the dynamics of the Albanian life style this last 15 years.

- The Ministry of Education and Sports and all the governmental and nongovernmental organizations that operate in Albania, should urgently create structures to improve the education of the actual and new parents with the proper

information for the psycho- social development of the infancy and early childhood, despite the physical and health one. This would help parents to understand that every child is an individual and not a property of his family. Secondly, to use better parenting techniques for the development of an individual oriented towards free initiative and autonomy bearing in mind that children learn acting, the process of learning in childhood is very episodic and the young children learn differently from the others.

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