

Despina Sivevska
Faculty of Educational Sciences,
Goce Delcev University, Stip, R.N.
Macedonia

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Jadranka Runcheva
Faculty of Educational Sciences, Goce
Delcev University, Stip, R.N.
Macedonia

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despina.sivevska@ugd.edu.mk

PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Abstract: *The first, initial and inseparable part of a unique education system is organized institutional preschool education. Early childhood education plays a key role in children's development and has significant positive socio-economic effects on the entire society. Numerous researches in the world and in our country show that language, cultural level, general living conditions and the specific way of upbringing and education of the child in preschool period have a great influence on the child's psychological development and the development of the abilities needed to start school. The paper first gives an overview of the importance and significance of organized institutional education of preschool children, and then we focus on some aspects of the organization of preschool education in the Republic of North Macedonia. We briefly give an overview of the growth of institutional preschool care in the last ten years, and we refer to the challenges faced by preschool education in R.N.Macedonia.*

Key words: *early childhood development, R.N.Macedonia, kindergartens*

Introduction

The education system of the Republic of North Macedonia consists of preschool, primary (6-14 or 15 years), secondary (15-17/18 years) and higher education.

The first, initial and inseparable part of a unique education system is organized institutional preschool education. As an integral part of the unique educational system, organized preschool education is regarded as basic education, since preschool organizations have their programme and staffing, performance targeted, continuous and planned educational activities for each age group, in accordance with modern social and professional-scientific knowledge. (Petrov, 1987)

Institutions for childcare and education aimed at children of preschool age are kindergartens and centres for early childhood development and can be public (state, municipal and of the city of Skopje) or private. (Zakon za zastita na decata 2021, p.4) A public kindergarten is founded by a municipal council, the Council of the City of Skopje or the Government, with a decision to establish a public kindergarten after previously obtained opinion from the ministry, i.e. on the proposal of the ministry for a public kindergarten founded by the Government. (Zakon za zastita na decata 2021, p.21). Throughout the year children are registered and enrolled in kindergarten, and if there are more registered children than the number of places, then a committee decides on the children's admission. The following programmes are implemented in kindergarten (according to the duration): full-day stay, half-day stay, shortened programmes, pilot programmes, extra-institutional forms of activities with children (Zakon za zastita na decata 2021, p.23).

Primary education lasts nine years and is compulsory and free for all students (aged 6-14 or 15). (Zakon za osnovno obrazovanie). According to the data of the State Statistical Office, at the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year, the number of students in regular primary schools was 185,099, which represents a decrease of 0.8% compared to the previous school year. (DZS, Osnovni i sredni ucilista vo R.S.M. na pocetokot na ucebnata 2022/23)

Secondary education, which is also compulsory and free, is divided into four types: grammar school, secondary vocational education, art education and education for students with special educational needs. Secondary vocational education can be of three-year or four-year duration. At the end of the three-year vocational education, students take the final exam and do not have the right to enrol at university. Students completing the four-year vocational education can choose between the final exam and the state matriculation exam, depending on whether they want to continue their education or not, while grammar school students have to take the state or school matriculation exam. (Zakon za sredno obrazovanie) The number of students in secondary schools at the beginning of the 2022-2023 academic year was 69,227, which represents a decrease of 2.5% compared to the previous academic year. (DZS, Osnovni i sredni ucilista vo R.S.M. na pocetokot na ucebnata 2022/23)

Higher education is realized at three levels: undergraduate, master and doctoral studies. Six state universities (two of them in Albanian language), one private-public university, nine private universities and two colleges of vocational studies.

Childcare and education in public kindergartens (2012-2022)

In the last ten years, there have been changes in the institutional coverage of preschool education institutions. The analysis of part of the data on childcare and education in kindergartens of the State Statistical Office says that in the last ten years we have an increase in the number of children in public kindergartens and that in 2022 there were 5,445 children more in public kindergartens compared to 2012. With the growth of the number of children enrolled in public kindergartens, there is also a noticeable growth in the number of public kindergartens which children attend: 73 kindergartens in 2022, compared to 54 kindergartens in 2012 (Drzaven zavod za statistika 2023, Drzaven zavod za statistika 2013). It is normal that with the increase in the number of children enrolled and the increase in the number of facilities, the number of employees in public kindergartens will also increase during this period. However, comparing the number of children enrolled in kindergarten and the total number of children in R.N.Macedonia at that age, it is still necessary to create conditions (facilities, personnel, as well as education of parents/guardians about the importance of institutional care of preschool children) to increase the number of children enrolled in institutions for preschool education. In the Education Development Strategy 2018-2025, one of the challenges faced by preschool education is a worryingly low enrolment of children. (Strategija za razvoj na obrazovaniето 2018-2025, p 31). It is also necessary to increase the number of staff in preschool institutions. The statistics for this period are shown in table no. 1

Table. 1 Number of children and employees in public kindergartens

	Public institutions for childcare and education - kindergartens	Number of children in public kindergartens	Population at the same age, 31.12. (2012,2013...)	Employees in public kindergartens		
				Total	Nursing staff	Pedagogical staff
2022	73	34 356		5 229	2 024	1 336
2021	70	29 947		5 216	2 021	1 319
2020	68	25 736	150 202	5 014	1 952	1 285
2019	68	36 687	154 218	4 969	1 955	1 293
2018	68	36 313	157 829	4 786	1 904	1 235
2017	64	34 112	159 178	4 436	1 797	1 101
2016	64	33 238	161 692	4 399	1 769	1 079
2015	60	31 874	162 359	4 295	1 683	1 056
2014	57	29 582	162 208	4 272	1 666	1 036
2013	55	28 911	161 271	4 052	1 599	1 025
2012	54	26 802	160 657	3 909	1 522	1 007

Source: Drzaven zavod za statistika, 2023; Drzaven zavod za statistika, 2021; Drzaven zavod za statistika, 2019; Drzaven zavod za statistika, 2017; Drzaven zavod za statistika, 2015; Drzaven zavod za statistika, 2013; DZS, Baza na podatoci MakStat

Role and importance of preschool education

Interest and need for preschool education have always existed, and they are growing especially in recent years with the increase in awareness of the importance of the first years of life for the development of children's brains and how this is reflected in their further overall psychophysical development.

The reasons for the increase in interest are numerous, and we will focus on the sociopolitical and pedagogical-psychological ones as the most important. From the sociopolitical point of view, changes in the family, which occurred as a result of changes in society, are primarily highlighted: industrialization, the progress of science and technology, migration of the population, urbanization of communities and employment of both parents, by their very nature raised the question of changes in upbringing and education of children of preschool age. In such living conditions, the modern family could not fully satisfy the needs and demands of children, which required opening special institutions for care and education of children of preschool age. On the other hand, the right of children to have equal conditions for development and education, as well as to prepare and successfully start and adapt at primary school, is increasingly emphasized. With all this, an effort is made to help children who, due to various conditions and circumstances, did not have equal opportunities for development and education (Petrov, 1987). There are numerous studies that show that children who attended kindergarten before starting school have a lot of prior knowledge, quickly socialize and adapt in first grade, have communication skills, a rich vocabulary, etc. (Samardziska Paneva, 2019)

New professional-scientific research pointed to the crucial importance of development and education of preschool children. As a result of these findings, the pedagogical-psychological reasons also arise, especially the new scientific knowledge about the developmental characteristics and possibilities of early and preschool age. According to the old beliefs, which are gradually being abandoned, the basis of education in early childhood should be socialization, i.e. the emotional and social adjustment of the child and acquiring habits (Petrov, 1987). Today, it is being rejected and the new knowledge based on the research and results of Piaget, Vygotsky, etc. is more and more accepted.

Early childhood education plays a key role in children's development and has significant positive socio-economic effects on the entire society. Empirical studies dedicated to this topic confirm these findings, together with studies of investment in early childhood development conducted by James Heckman, and a recent study of the correlation between kindergarten attendance and PISA test results, conducted in 34 OECD countries (UNICEF). James Heckman, a famous Nobel laureate and university professor from Chicago, said that investing in early childhood development, from birth to the age of five, is the solution to better education, better health and greater economic prosperity. (Samardziska-Panova, 2019).

Early childhood education not only supports educational success, but also builds other skills in children that are essential for learning and brain development. The development of 'non-cognitive skills' - such as intellectual curiosity, persistence,

social skills and emotional stability - during childhood and adolescence are equally important for children's success in lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and, later, employment (UNICEF, 2016).

The humanistic-existential concept of personality development insists on taking into account individual differences and the right to an individual rhythm of development of each child. More specifically, development is encouraged by following each specific child through their own developmental path, and in accordance with that, an educational strategy should be developed so that it starts from that particular child as a real person, and not just from an ideal image of a child of that age.

Numerous researches in the world and in our country show that language, cultural level, general living conditions and the specific way of education of the child in preschool period have a great influence on the child's psychological development and the development of the abilities needed to start school.

New approaches to the organization of preschool education arise from such conception of the child's development. Preschool education is understood as the creation and structuring of an educational environment in which the child will find all the necessary incentives for the development of mental processes and for the development of other personality traits. Starting from these findings, preschool education changes its programme bases, contents, forms and methods of work, and from health and social institutions with a nurturing character, they develop into educational institutions where organized educational activities are implemented under the leadership of professionally qualified staff. For those reasons, organized preschool education is given a special role and importance, because it provides conditions for further normal, unhindered and full development, for ensuring approximately equal start in further education and in life. Following that direction, early learning and development of children today in all countries of the world has been raised to the level of national priority, and the latest scientific achievements and practical observations in pedagogy confirm that, "preschool education receives equal treatment and importance with other subsystems".

Early childhood development in the Republic of North Macedonia

The overall political and social environment for the promotion of early childhood development in R. N. Macedonia is based on the international framework contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the existing national legal and political framework.

National legislation (Zakon za zastita na decata) in our country defines early childhood development as preschool education that includes, in addition to childcare, measures and activities for health promotion and improvement of intellectual, emotional, physical and social development. The care and education of preschool children is carried out in kindergartens, and for children who are not included in these institutions, opportunities are provided for organization of other shortened extra-institutional forms. („Sluzben vesnik na RM“ 98/2000).

The National Development Plan 2008-2013, the Republic of Macedonia, within

the framework of better education for all, also incorporated early childhood development aimed at children of preschool age. In order to be able to monitor the development of children of preschool age, there is an intention to adopt and implement the Standards for early learning and development among this age group. The Government of R. Macedonia, within the framework of the Strategy for the Demographic Development of R. Macedonia 2008-2015, outlined taking the appropriate measures and activities, especially in the part of expanding the network of kindergartens, with the aim of equal accessibility for all children, especially for children from rural or less developed municipalities, and at the same time measures to increase the enrolment of preschool children. Institutional support for early childhood development in R.N. Macedonia is undertaken by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education and Science (Gjorgjevska Gjurov, 2020, p. 15).

The standards for early learning and development represent the expectations that preschool children should reach in various domains of development (motor development, socio-emotional development, cognitive development, etc.). These standards can be applied in all circumstances where children from 0-6 years of age are looked after, raised and educated (in the family, in kindergartens, in children's recreation centres, as well as various informal models of childcare and education). In the document, the standards are presented by development domains, but it is necessary to emphasize that the development process and learning among young children does not take place in isolation, but continuously, through all the domains. The developmental domains are interconnected, and children learn by building on previous knowledge in all of them. Based on a large number of researches, the dimension of child development and learning is divided into 5 basic domains, namely:

- Physical health and motor development;
- Socio-emotional development;
- Development of learning approach;
- Development of language, literacy and communication;
- Cognitive development and acquisition of general knowledge (Standardi za rano ucenje i razvoj kaj deca od 0 do 6 godini, 2009, 5-7).

The education strategy of R. N. Macedonia 2018-2025 specifies the following significant challenges faced by the preschool education system (MON, 2018, p.31):

1. Enrolment of children in preschool education is not satisfactory and the system has limited opportunities to include children with special educational needs. At the same time, the enrolment rate is the lowest precisely among the members of marginalized communities, among whom the tendency to drop out, difficulties in reaching the standards and low achievement in learning are the most present;

2. Learning conditions in preschool institutions are unsatisfactory; norms and standards are inconsistently implemented in preschool institutions; ICT is almost not used in preschools.

3. The existing Standards for early learning and child development should be revised; quality control does not function; integrated multicultural education of preschool children is not implemented; cooperation with other levels of education, especially higher education, is weak.

4. The system suffers from insufficient number of staff in preschool institutions, which is accompanied by lack of clarity in defining competencies and standards for directors, teachers, carers and professional services of kindergartens. In fact, there is no mechanism for professional development and career advancement of these employees, while their licensing system requires revision.

5. The leadership and management of preschool institutions is inefficient, the responsibilities of various structures that are in charge of the preschool education system overlap, i.e. MES, MLSP and the Ministry of Local Self-Government (MLS); cooperation with parents, communities and the business sector is weak. At the same time, the system of pedagogical records and documentation that is maintained for the children in the institutions needs improvement.

According to the highlighted challenges, the Strategy has determined the following priorities:

Priority I. Improving the content, learning conditions and quality in the implementation of preschool education. Within this priority, it is planned to revise the Early Learning and Development Standards for children aged 0-6 and to revise the Early Learning and Development Programme in accordance with the Early Learning and Development Standards.

Priority II. Increasing enrolment of children and improving inclusiveness in preschool education. This priority involves expanding the network of preschool institutions; adapting them for inclusive education; strengthening the competences of the staff for inclusive education and enabling access of children with developmental difficulties to quality early learning and development.

Priority III. Improving the capacities of human resources in preschool institutions. The requirements for the professional competencies and work tasks of employees in preschool institutions are clearly defined here, and it is also necessary to improve the professional competencies of teachers and other employees in preschool institutions.

Priority IV. Improving legislation, organization and management of preschool education and strengthening cooperation. Within this priority, the aim is to establish a mechanism for real involvement of the family and the community in planning and implementation of educational work and management of preschool institutions, as well as introduction of the National Programme to improve the pedagogical culture of parents through preschool education system (MON, 2018, 29, 73-87).

Conclusion

Although preschool education in the Republic of North Macedonia is not mandatory, its importance, meaning and role in the development of the child's personality is immeasurable. The national legislation (Child Protection Law) in our country defines early childhood development as preschool education which includes, in addition to childcare, measures and activities for health promotion and advancement of intellectual, emotional, physical and social development. Public kindergartens are an organized institutional form in which the largest

number of preschool children in R.N. Macedonia are looked after and educated. Statistical data show a continuous growth in the number of children enrolled in public kindergartens, and thus an increase in the number of facilities (new kindergartens), as well as an increase in the number of employees. However, the number of children enrolled in kindergartens and the number of employees, as well as the available facilities, are still not sufficient. One of the priorities, where efforts should be made to improve preschool education, is precisely in these segments.

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