

## **CORE-PRINCIPLES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION BENCHMARKS FOR PRACTICAL PEDAGOGY**

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### **Abstract**

*The proposed work focuses on the analysis of the core principles underlying professional practices in early education and performs a comparative analysis between these ideal benchmarks in education and training found in different educational systems. First of all, the principles that support the idea of child-centered education in the early stages are analyzed, but also other principles that underpin the educational activity, anticipating a good development and learning of children in the first years of life.*

### **Introduction**

Early childhood, the stage with the fastest phase of growth and development, is known as the stage of great acquisitions in all areas of development because now, in addition to physical transformations, the processes of forming cognitive, social and emotional skills, building the image take place of oneself, the understanding of the surrounding world, the internalization of moral landmarks.

Educators have the great responsibility to understand the unique needs of children, to understand each child's learning trajectory, each one's developmental history, to know their strengths in order to capitalize on them in practical/pedagogical/formative activities, to support learning. Teachers offer support for the holistic development of children, without prioritizing only the cognitive area, but paying due attention to physical, social, emotional, linguistic etc. development as well.

In the present material we propose to analyze a series of core principles that guide the activity of teachers in early childhood education, focusing on those that support the idea of a child-centered education, so invoked in the last period of time, with the aim of identifying the accents that are placed in the educational space in different educational systems, such as the

Romanian, British, Australian, French and to identify common educational ideas and practices, but also some extensions that can constitute real milestones of progress in educational activities.

The principles that guide the activity of teachers for early education are recorded in Romania in the *Curriculum for early education* (2019) and put the child first; they are the following:

- "The principle of child-centered education (knowing, respecting and valuing the uniqueness of the child, his needs, requirements and characteristics);
- The principle of respecting the rights of the child (the right to education, the right to free expression etc.);
- The principle of active learning (creating learning experiences in which the child actively participates and can choose and influence the way the activity is carried out);
- The principle of integrated development (through an integrated approach to activities, multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary);
- The principle of interculturality (knowledge, recognition and respect for national values and those of other ethnicities);
- The principle of equity and non-discrimination (the development of a curriculum that ensures, equally, development opportunities for all children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or socio-economic status);
- The principle of education as an interaction between educators and the child (the dependence of education results on both parties participating in the process, both on the individuality of the child and on the personality of the educator/parent)." (*Curriculum for early education*, 2019)

The first of the principles - ***The principle of child-centered education*** - expresses the idea that no child is identical to another, that every child is valuable, has needs, interests, values that differentiate him from others, have a certain way of expressing himself, of to communicate, to respond to challenges, have different rhythms and potential for learning. This principle is promoted in the Romanian education system in educational policy documents, one of them being, as I stated, the *Curriculum for early education* where the idea of "supporting children's development in a holistic way, through practical educational and care that allow children to reach their full potential, while also allowing educators to personalize their approach according to the interests, needs and potential of each child" (*idem*, p. 4).

Another document that promotes this idea is called „*Keystones in early child learning and development from birth to 6-7 years*” which states the following: „Each child is unique in

the way they grow, develop and acquire skills and skills. Children go through similar stages of development, but at different rates. We should not expect all children to reach the same standards at the same time or at the same level of performance.” The values promoted through early education are also indicated here, which also put the child first: „the uniqueness of the child/diversity, full development, well-being, health, interculturality, self-control, respect (for oneself and for peers), independence, dignity , identity, creativity, responsibility, internal order, care for the environment, solidarity with the community.” (*Keystones in early child learning and development from birth to 6-7 years*, 2010 )

The principle of child-centered education is invoked and applied in the space of practical pedagogy and stands in the attention of education professionals, focusing on a series of relevant aspects regarding development and learning: knowledge, respect, valuing the uniqueness of the child and respecting his needs, requirements and characteristics .

#### ***Knowing, respecting and valuing the uniqueness of the child - support practices***

The in-depth knowledge and understanding of the particularities of children's development in the early stages, as well as the particularities, developmental and individual paths of each individual by educators, but also the mastery of the best educational practices are essential for the achievement of early education at high standards of quality. Teachers know that each child is unique, different and should be compared only with himself.,„A real support for their achievement is represented by the tools for observing the child's behaviors, proposed by the *Curriculum for early education in Romania* (2019): Reflection sheet, Activity observation sheet, Assessment sheet of the child's individual progress before enrollment in the preschool stage.” (Catalano, 2021)

Learning environments will be diversified and adapted to the needs of pre-school children with materials and equipment, ways of working and multiple strategies to respond to a wide range of specific needs and interests of children, including those with disabilities or highly able children. Learning environments stimulate children through experiences that encourage them to „interact with other children, develop interpersonal skills, work and learn together with others.”(www.ncrel.org, *Nebraska Department of Education and Iowa Department of Education, 1994*).

An appropriate learning environment for preschoolers and preschoolers that provides opportunities to extend learning „must be:

- thought according to the abilities of each child;

- arranged in a way that is as accessible as possible to the child;
- with materials and toys appropriate to his level of maturity, to help him explore;
- with the sufficient
- to reflect the cultural specificity of the family from which it comes.” (*Guide for teachers from nursery groups, 2017*)

Children's learning in the early stage takes place at a very alert pace, acquisitions are consistent and even if children go through the same stages of development, each child has his own pace of evolution. Early childhood education teachers are aware that differences between children imply different ways of working, different working time for each, adapted teaching strategies, individualized support practices.

In this stage, children learn holistically, which means that all areas of development (physical, social, emotional, cognitive, language) are achieved together and not independently, each area influencing the others.

An image of these aspects presented above, which underlines the idea of knowing and valuing the uniqueness of the child in early education, is systematically presented in the four „guiding themes” for the practice of educators in the British educational system. According to EYFS - *Early Years Foundation Stage 2021*, (<https://foundationyears.org.uk/>), these four themes are:

1. All children are unique and competent from birth and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.
2. Children learn to be strong and independent through positive relationships with parents and/or a key person.
3. Enabling environments are those that support children's learning in multiple contexts.
4. Children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates, and all areas of learning and development are equally important and interconnected. presence of the adult to support him towards acquisition and independence.”

Therefore, emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of children, on the creation of positive relationships with family members, on the creation of favorable educational environments, on diversity and holistic learning.

### ***Respecting the child's needs, requirements and characteristics***

All educational procedures/strategies/practices used for each child to benefit from appropriate instruction are adapted to the child's needs/needs and characteristics, and involve

differentiated, individualized or personalized learning in activities organized with and for pre-school/pre-school children.

Centering on the child takes into account the diversity in the group of children, diversity that can cover multiple areas such as: race/ethnicity; religion; disability/disability: ADHD/attention deficit disorder, visual impairment, hearing impairment, learning disability, mood-anxiety disorder, e.g. physical, psychological disabilities etc.; but also abilities, learning styles, gender, socio-economic status, language, culture, personality etc.) These differences can be understood by early childhood educators/teachers as sets of characteristics that define who the children they educate are. (Jeder, 2014, 2020). In this context, differentiation, individualization and personalization of learning are imposed as essential features of a good educational practice.

The Australian system proposes five principles to underpin educators' practice, principles "that reflect contemporary theory and research evidence on children's learning in early childhood education". (Belonging, Being & Becoming the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, p.13).

They also focus on the needs of all children and assisting them to make progress against early childhood education learning outcomes: 1. Creating safe, respectful and reciprocal relationships with children; 2. Creating partnerships with children's families; 3. Setting high expectations; 4. Respect for diversity; 5. Emphasis on continuous learning and reflective practice. We present these principles schematically below.

| <b>Principles</b>                                      | <b>Description</b>   |
|--|--|
| Creating safe, respectful and reciprocal relationships | Positive relationships between adults/early childhood teachers and children support the development of a strong sense of well-being.<br>Positive interactions with the young child have an impact on the learning process and provide children with consistent emotional support.<br>„Through an extended network of secure relationships, children develop confidence and feel respected and valued” (idem)<br>Children develop a sense of responsibility towards others, value connection with other children, value collaboration and teamwork. |
| Creating partnerships                                  | „Learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when educators work in partnership with families.” (idem)  |

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|   | These teacher-parent partnerships are also leveraged in curricular decision-making, with teachers ensuring that the learning experiences offered to children are meaningful and support authentic learning.  |
| High expectations and equity                | „Children progress well when they, parents and educators have high expectations of their learning achievements.”<br>Teachers strive to „find fair and effective ways to ensure that all children have opportunities to achieve the learning outcomes” set as a benchmark.  |
| Their respect for diversity                 | Because „there are many ways of being and knowing”, teachers respect diversity in educational actions.<br>„Respecting diversity means in the curriculum appreciating and reflecting the practices, values and beliefs of families. Educators honor families' histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child-rearing practices, and lifestyle choices. They appreciate the different capacities and abilities of children and respect the differences in family life; (...) make curricular decisions that support the rights of all children to have their cultures, identities, abilities and strengths recognized and valued; and respond to the complexity of children's and families' lives.” |
| Continuous learning and reflective practice | Continuous training and development as well as the creation of learning communities are concerns of teachers.<br>The teacher's interest also focuses on reflective practices which are forms of „ongoing learning that involve the formulation of philosophical, ethical and practical questions with the intention of gathering information and gaining insights that support, inform and enrich decision-making about children's learning." (idem)   |

So, the values on which the curriculum is built are: positive relationships with adults, fruitful partnerships with children's families, high expectations and equity, diversity in education, continuous learning and reflective practices that support the quality of early education.

The French early education model proposes a fundamental guiding principle for teachers, that „all children are capable of learning and progressing”.

The curriculum emphasizes confidence in the child's abilities, and child development is based on a good partnership with the children's families, on adaptation to the children's needs, needs

and peculiarities, on respecting their uniqueness. (*Programme d'enseignement de l'école maternelle/Le bouletin officiel de l'éducation nationale*-Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports [www.education.gouv.fr](http://www.education.gouv.fr))

## Conclusion

Although pedagogical practices differ from one country to another, given the flexible ways of implementing known pedagogical theories, there are still common elements in terms of the core principles that guide early childhood education.

In all the educational systems for early childhood education analyzed, a child-centered education is promoted, which proposes and supports the creation of learning opportunities and places through the plan:

1. the unique needs and wants of the child involving differentiated, individualized / personalized teaching/learning
2. confidence in children's development and learning capacities
3. high expectations about their learning achievements
4. equity and diversity in education
5. consistent and valuable partnerships with children's families
6. holistic learning, focused on all areas of development
7. positive learning and development environments that support children's motivation, curiosity, involvement;
8. learning practices are adapted to the particularities of children in the early stage of development and learning
9. play – fundamental activity in early education, which offers joy and learning;
10. the well-being of children

The knowledge and practical application of these principles support the high quality of the pedagogical process, a good training of children in the early stage; they will support the formation over time of necessary skills/compatible with the demands of the century in which we live. For this, great responsibility is needed in the educational act: „the responsibility involves or should involve lucidity and honesty; lucidity is essential to the awareness of actions, the correct choice, the search of alternatives, fair decisionmaking and acting, and sincerity is

obtained when the ego merges with value (...)" (Jeder, 2014) The responsibility of teachers must be strengthened on the latest results of early childhood education research.

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\*\*\* *Belonging, Being & Becoming - The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*  
<https://www.dese.gov.au/child-care-package/resources/belonging-being-becoming-early-years-learning-framework-australia>

\*\*\* EYFS - Early Years Foundation Stage 2021, <https://foundationyears.org.uk/>

\*\*\* [www.ncrel.org](http://www.ncrel.org) Nebraska Department of Education and Iowa Department of Education