

MAJOR TRENDS IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION FUNDING IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Valentina GUTAN, PhD Candidate,
Trade Co-operative University of Moldova
E-mail: gutan.valentina@gmail.com

Elena FUIOR, Prof., PhD,
Trade Co-operative University of Moldova
E-mail: elena.fuior@rambler.ru

Abstract

This paper focuses on the research of funding issue in terms of pre-school education system reform and streamlining the quality of preschool education. The study analyzes preschool education development and the implementation of appropriate educational strategies facilitating the creation of a training system that would ensure optimal coordination of rehabilitation efforts aimed at pre-school institutions in order to review their work program taking into consideration their financial support. Increased efficiency of funds, guided by pedagogical goals set at system's and process level, is a fundamental variable for organizing the education of children in preschool institutions. At system level it aims both macro-structural finality and medium- and long term educational goals. At process level education involves the design of educational and teaching activities defined in preschool programs. Taking into consideration insufficient solutions to a range of problems related to the education of children in preschool institutions, choosing the directions of study, objectives and scope have a decisive role.

Key-words: *pre-school education, funding, educational strategies, preschool institutions, learning process.*

JEL classification: G29

1. Introduction

Currently, the issue of funding preschool education plays a role in children's enjoyment and multilateral development because early education is the key element in development. According to legal provisions preschool entities financing is carried out mainly from public resources. Starting with national economy development reasons there is a real need to implement an educational policy that, in order to ensure social integration and education of children, would increase their psycho-physiological and intellectual potential, as well as train and establish their creative capabilities.

An appropriate educational policy should provide an effective mechanism to ensure access to quality early education for all school-age children aiming the increase of their enrollment rates into education programs, reaching in 2020 a share of 95% for 3-6 year-old children and of 98% for 6-7 year-old children. To achieve the objectives set, the Strategy "Education 2020" was elaborated in the Republic of Moldova identifying the main problems of the educational system and pointing out directions for the development of education in the Republic of Moldova, including preschool education.

These goals can be achieved by developing financing mechanisms for the preschool system, which implementation requires increasing the number of preschool institutions, completion of educational infrastructure, ensuring the efficiency of the education system, etc.

2. Development of preschool education in Moldova

A major goal of education is to improve the power of understanding of the child and to grow his desire to learn - without effort, without constraints, at the pace and according to parameters required - to ensure the chance of personal success. Modern theories speak more about experiential learning, educator's role in guiding or facilitating learning, valuing and developing the potential of every child, respecting his cognitive style and rhythm, and about early education as basic personality development.

Preschool education is the first step in the education and training, and aims mainly multilateral preparation of children for life, for integration into school work, for creative development by harnessing their psycho-physiological and intellectual capabilities. It is a system of preschool institutions of various types, public and private, with different running programs that meet educational standards. It is primarily aimed at preparing children for life multilaterally, their integration into school work, creative development by harnessing their psycho-physiological and intellectual capabilities.

The education of children up to 3 years is usually done in the family receiving state support, as required by law. At the request of parents, by decision and with the support of local public authorities or employers (in the case of private institutions) preschool education can be organized for children up to 3 years (nursery). The state guarantees the material and financial support to the education of children in nurseries and kindergartens.

Preschool education for children, at the age of 3 to 6 (7) years, is organized within kindergartens - primary schools of different types and forms of ownership with various programs of activity depending on child's development level and on parents' options.

Preparing children for school is compulsory from the age of five years and is done in preparatory groups in kindergartens or schools, or at the request of parents, family. The state provides financial and material conditions necessary for the proper functioning of the educational process in preparatory groups. According to local conditions, they can be organized in primary school.

Local authorities are required to maintain the existing preschool system of institutions and, if necessary, to open new ones, providing them with financial and material support according to the social needs of the population.

The State guarantees care and preschool education of children with physical and mental disabilities and orphans.

It should be noted that education of preschool infancy is largely the state (finance, monitoring) and parents (access, choice, control, etc.) responsibility. The child cannot decide alone to attend or not an institution or a particular course of study. At each upper stage of education, the child is largely depending on previous stages, and in this context, preschool education has become an indispensable part of the educational process.

In recent years, the Moldovan authorities have taken extensive measures to upgrade the network of preschool institutions, to diversify preschool programs, to provide preschool institutions with teaching materials and qualified teachers.

According to statistics, in 2013-2014 school year 1512 kindergartens in Moldova employed about 12 000 educators and 760 nurses. The number of children enrolled in preschool institutions and programs was about 145000, or about 80 % of all preschool children. In terms of expanded and inclusive education practices preschool institutions are attended by nearly 2150 children with special needs. Thanks to measures taken by central and local authorities in close collaboration with communities, civil society and development partners, the number of children attending preschool institutions has been increasing.

Preparation of children for school is so important that it has led to increase in the number of preparatory groups and the number of children enrolled in these groups. Thus, in 2014 there were 1724 active preparatory groups in educational institutions, 85 groups more than in 2013. The number of children attending these groups increased to about 31 000 in 2014. However, this growth has been registered only in urban areas, while in rural areas the number of preparatory groups is decreasing.

The main actions taken by authorities to upgrade preschool education are:

- a) implementation of preschool flexible working schedules of 4, 6, 9, 10 or 12 hours a day;
- b) additionally to standard educational services there have been developed and implemented new types of services - psychological, physical development, psycho-social (dance, chess, computer, languages etc.);
- c) expansion and development of the individualized early education, supported by UNESCO, UNICEF and MSIF, providing educational services to children from vulnerable families;
- d) development of preschool curriculum, educational standards, professional standards and implementation guidelines, training materials;
- e) training of managers, teachers, doctors, social workers, civil servants in terms of public dignity of persons responsible for education;
- f) rehabilitation of preschool institutions and creation of Community Centers in areas without kindergartens;
- g) provision of kindergartens with books, toys, educational games, furniture, etc.

The Project “Education for All - Fast Track Initiative” had an important role in achieving these activities; it started in 2006 and was implemented by the Ministry of Education in co-operation with the World Bank as grant administrator and UNICEF as lead agency.

Thanks to measures taken in the field of preschool education the Republic of Moldova has made significant progress; monitoring indicators in preschool education are increasing.

In 2013, gross enrollment rate of preschool children (3-6 years old) was 77.1% exceeding the targeted 75.0% value set for the year.

The progress was modest for 6-7 years old children and the target for 2013 was not achieved. A certain increase in enrollment rates for children of this age is determined by the progress achieved in urban areas, in rural areas this indicator registering variable values.

The main obstacles currently faced by preschool sector are:

- lack of kindergartens in 230 municipalities;
- 80% of kindergartens require repairs;
- 65% of preschool institutions lack facilities;
- 65% educators need training;
- inclusive educational practices are institutionalized at the national level;
- acute lack of teaching materials, especially for parents and children;
- lack of preschool furniture fully complying with age peculiarities of children;
- lack of preschool development and educational games and toys;
- outdated sanitary-hygienic norms.

In order to overcome these obstacles and fully accomplish the established tasks, Moldovan government envisages further expansion of education in terms of early child development and improvement of quality by means of providing preschool institutions with methodological, technical and teaching materials. Planned activities are aiming at institutional reforms through creation of educational alternatives, establishment of viable and cost-effective educational services in areas that currently do not have such services, creation of community educational alternatives and establishment of social support services for families with toddlers requiring psycho-

pedagogical assistance, development and implementation of complex social programs to help disadvantaged children.

For 2013-2015 the following activities are planned:

- Based on the fundamental social needs of communities and on the results of technical evaluation of buildings in eligible districts, 33 kindergartens will be selected and rehabilitated, each being awarded 50 000 USD for renovation;
- 15 Community Centers for parents and children and 1 Pilot Centre for children with disabilities will be opened;
- 337 kindergartens will be supplied with books, toys, educational games, furniture etc., the total cost of equipment purchased will be 1.5 million USD;
- For the purpose of allocating grants to create alternative education centers, competition among communities lacking kindergartens will be organized; 73 municipalities will participate in the competition of which 50 towns will be selected;
- Curriculum for early and preschool education (for 1-7 years old children) will be developed and implementation guide curriculum nominated;
- Monitoring and evaluation system of preschool sector performance will be developed and implemented and a mapping system for educational institutions will be developed and integrated into preschool education component;
- National trainers will train 210 managers in 1200 kindergartens, training courses will be attended by 1200 educators more.

Preschool education continues to operate child-centered early education (with the child placed in the spotlight and the teacher is the one who supports and sits around, knows the peculiarities of the age, needs and interests of the child) through integrated activities and openness to new trends in education. Continuity of educational standards in preschool education is achieved by compliance with regulatory and educational policy documents:

- Concept of preschool education development in the Republic of Moldova, Newsletter, 1997;
- National Strategy “Education for All” for 2004-2015, Government Decision no. 410 of 04.05.03;
- Regulations regarding preschool institutions (Ministry of Education Board, Case no. 8.5, December 16, 2010, Order of the Minister of Education no. 04 of January 4, 2011);
- Regulations regarding educational institutions “Kindergarten - Primary school” (Ministry of Education Board, Case no. 8.7 of December 16, 2010, Order of the Ministry of Education nr. 04 of January 4, 2011);
- Regulations regarding the organization of training required for school children from 5 years (Ministry of Education Board, Case no. 8.6 of December 16, 2010 Ministerial Order no. 07 of January 4, 2011);
- Regulations regarding the organization and operation of Early Childhood Development Community Centers for 3-6 (7) year old children (Government Decision no. 567 of 10.09.09, Monitorul Oficial no. 144-147 (3477-3480) of 18.09.09);
- Educational curriculum for early and preschool age children (1-7 years) in Moldova (Ministry of Education and Youth, 2008);
- Learning and Development Standards for 7 year old children (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Each pre-school education institution and every teacher have crucial interest in stimulating and monitoring the participation of 3-6/7 year old children in the programs offered by kindergartens. This aspect has been given special attention. In light of the above one can find that absenteeism and school failure implicitly lead to abandonment and/or, in order to avoid early school leaving, it is appropriate to employ a measure that has already proved to be effective: encouraging the inclusion and participation of the child in early education programs within an organized system, e.g. school or community center; to ensure access to education, especially in relation with disadvantaged children groups and promotion of inclusive education.

Directly related to reducing absenteeism and encouraging school participation, the aspects regarding educational environment and teaching-learning assessment quality were monitored by inspectors responsible for preschool education and management frameworks.

For the academic year 2013-2014 the following objectives were established:

- increasing access and improving quality of care and early and preschool education in terms of treating them as preparation for life and education in school;
- expansion of early childhood education to preschool age children;
- extension of the quality of early and preschool education;
- methodological and technical supply for teaching in preschool institutions;
- providing normative-legal operation of preschool institutions;
- implementation of new state standards and curriculum for 1-7 year old children in Moldovan preschool institutions;
- ensuring continuity and consistency between preschool and primary education;
- ensuring economic and financial conditions for mandatory training of school children from 5 years under Moldovan law.

Preschool institutions have increased access and improved the quality of education; however the problem persists with smaller communities. The main activities undertaken by the Ministry of Education with the support of the Government and in close collaboration with the local government had a positive impact on the state of early childhood education and preschool education. The increase in the number of institutions as well as in the number of children attending these institutions expanded access to quality preschool education and created positive premises to prepare children for school.

Trends of increased gross and net enrollment rates in preschool education recorded both in urban and rural areas confirm the relevant efforts of the Ministry of Education and of local government bodies in this area. However, certain problems still relate to lack of pre-school institutions in small communities, high degree of deterioration of existing preschool buildings, shortage of well-trained teachers and managers, insufficient methodological and didactic materials, low integration of children with disabilities and of those belonging to certain ethnic minorities.

3. Funding preschool education in Moldova

Increasing efficient use of funds guided by pedagogical goals established at system and process levels is a fundamental variable for organizing the education of children in preschool institutions. At system level it aims preschool macro-structural finality that defines the ideal personality and achievement of educational purposes in the medium and long term, i.e. the level of educational policy. At the process level, education involves the design of educational activities and teaching, achievable objectives and targets as defined in preschool programs, effective under concrete situations of educational structure.

In 2007 the project “Education for All - Fast Track Initiative” was implemented as a global partnership between organizations and developed countries aimed to ensure accelerated progress toward the achievement of Millennium Development Goals related to preschool education. Moldova was accepted among recipient countries in 2005 which facilitated obtaining funds for educational needs, particularly for activities within the National Action Plan in Education.

The National Development Plan (2008-2011) outlined the need to improve the quality of education and to increase access to education. Regarding preschool institutions children were provided with the following in terms of increasing access to preschool education:

1. improved infrastructure within 82 preschool institutions;
2. illustrative material supplied to preschool teachers;

3. every year during this period (2008-2011) according to the objectives the following should be accomplished:
4. connection to natural gas supply network of 35 preschool institutions;
5. development of preschool institutions network and creation of 16 alternative preschool centers;
6. increased average spending power of preschool children (2 lei per year/per child);
7. renovation of 35 preschool institutions.

From the above mentioned one can notice that preschool education in Moldova is facing many problems which need to be solved in due time. However, all these actions should be transparent and monitored.

Unfortunately, budget funding is limited and covers more than a half of preschool institutions needs. Access to these institutions often implies costs for parents whose children attend kindergartens. The unavailability to pay such costs for certain categories of parents is the main reason for officials when trying to explain the much lower rate of children enrollment in rural areas compared to urban areas – from the total rate of 100 places for average 73 preschool children this indicator in urban areas is 85 children per 100 places and 65 children per 100 places in the countryside. Difficult financial situation of the rural population as well as decreased ability to cover preschool education expenditures are an explanation of the above.

Analysis of access to school in terms of attending these institutions acknowledges the need for preschool education coming both from the parents' perspective so that they can carry out daily activities and be able to go to work and in terms of children's socialization at an early age and their learning of practical skills and accumulation of basic knowledge, i.e. this is our first concern.

Preschool education in Moldova is a necessity imposed by the system; therefore children not attending kindergartens are disadvantaged during primary studies which imply some already gained knowledge by preschool children.

Preschool institutions absorb a large proportion of total expenditure on education (16%, equivalent to 1.1% of GDP, compared with the average of 0.5% in the OECD). However, these financial resources are insufficient taking into consideration the needs of institutions and reasons for ensuring proper conditions for children.

Resources allocated to preschool institutions are directed mainly to salary payments, utility expenses and provision of food for children. Money allocated from the state budget for current repairs of buildings are insufficient and parents often help, however it is more difficult to make these repairs when financial resources are considerably small and additional allowances from local budgets, districts, different economic agents or funds from different projects are required.

This form of "per child" money allocation causes preschool underfunding and consequently poor conditions for children. In this case, it is quite difficult to finance small preschool institutions; it is difficult to pay even maintenance costs and salaries.

Parents also contribute to preschool institutions financing. Buildings of these institutions are generally subjected to cosmetic repairs supported by parents, but the infrastructure of these buildings is largely supported due to the skills of preschool institution manager in collecting funds from various sources: donors, parents, projects implementation, etc. The current practice of collecting funds from parents directly and indirectly affects the situation of vulnerable families, placing children from these families in disadvantageous positions or exclusion context.

Often kindergarten administrators are forced to focus on the basic needs of children, such as food, because they don't have the resources to cover other needs.

As mentioned previously, preschool institutions are missing in about 270 communities of the Republic of Moldova. In particular, this situation refers to small villages, but there are also larger villages that have kindergartens and local governments cannot afford their financial support. In 2009-2014 state allowance to local budgets planned for preschool children was increased by about

2.05 times, from 4764.54 lei (2009) to 9756.60 lei (2014). The most significant growth was recorded in 2010 by about 1.68 times (8022.40 lei). Based on children nutrition rules, funding of preschool institutions by state in 2009-2014 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Per child state allowance to local budgets for preschool institutions (2009-2014)

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Cost, lei	4764.54	8022.40	8798.7	9051.5	9299.50	9756.60

Source: Ministry of Finance

Increased spending on education has created prerequisites for improving the financial situation of preschool education. Thus, according to the Ministry of Finance, financial resources allocated to this sub-sector steadily increased from about 433 million in 2009 to 943 million in 2012. It is expected that this growth will continue in the coming years from about 1028 million in 2013 to 1167 million in 2015.

The share of total funds allocated to preschool education within the entire education sector is also increasing from 16.3% in 2012 to 18.9% in 2015 (expected). This increase shows that preschool area education policies become a priority, thus creating prerequisites for better preparation of children for school.

Efficient use of funds allocated to preschool education is determined largely by their distribution according to expenditure category. According to available data, in 2011 the main categories of expenditure were salaries (48%), infant (30%), and renovation of inventory and procurement of teaching materials (16% of total expenditures). The number of non-teaching staff in preschool institutions (administrative and ancillary staff) was 2.2 times higher than the number of teachers, non-teaching staff wage costs were 1.4 times higher than those related to teacher salaries.

4. Conclusion

Research allows us to conclude that, at present, access to preschool education shows a positive trend of development. It is notable that in 2013 the total number of preschool institutions operating mostly in urban areas increased by 6.3% compared to 2012 and the number of children attending preschool institutions increased by about 13%. In urban areas this indicator was 13.8% and in rural areas - 12.2%. The number of children up to 3 years of age in the same period increased by 24.6%, while that of 3 year old children and older - by 11.4%. Of 100 places occupied by average 77 incumbents 90 preschool children were from urban area and 68 children - from rural area.

Although in recent years the situation regarding children's access to preschool education has improved, kindergarten enrollment rate remains low. The need for diversification of early education in local communities must be encouraged through the development of private services in the area, including at family level.

In this regard, the main task set by the Government is the increase of preschool enrollment rate in pre-school programs for 3-6 year old children from 41.3% in 2002 to 78% in 2015 and for 5-6 (7) year old children - from 66.5% in 2002 to 98% in 2015, and to reduce to less than 5% the gap between rural and urban areas, between disadvantaged and middle-income families.

As a priority direction it is highlighted the need to develop and upgrade the network of institutions to ensure access to quality education for all children through local preschool institutions renovation and construction, increase of the number of preschool institutions with flexible activity, improvement of preschool institutions infrastructure and supplying them with educational materials, creation of conditions for the expansion of inclusive education, modernization of initial

and continuing training of teachers for pre-school education, community mobilization and attraction of national and international donors in preschool education reform.

REFERENCES

1. Law on the approval of the Strategy for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction (2004-2006), no.398-XV of 02.12.2004, Art.504, 506 and 507.
2. Resolution of the Minister of Education regarding the National Curriculum Council, no.268 of 20.09.2006, www.edu.md
3. Law on education no. 547-XIII of 21.07.1995 (with amendments).
4. 2012 –2020 SECTOR DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY.
5. 2011 Activity Report of the Ministry of Education. Approved by Decision of the Ministry of Education no. 4.1 of January 26, 2012 // www.edu.md
6. Medium Term Expenditure Framework for 2007–2009, 2008–2010 and 2009–2011
7. Network, staff and contingency Report on “Education” chapter as of 01.01.2014
8. Network, staff and contingency Report on “Education” chapter as of 01.01.2013
9. Reports on budget execution for 2013
10. Annex no. 2 to the Decision of Municipal Council regarding the approval of Chisinau municipal budget for 2013, no. 3/4 of 02.04.2013
11. Government Resolution regarding the development of medium-term expenditure framework and of the draft budget, no.82 of January 24, 2006
12. Law on budgetary system and budgetary process, no.847-XIII of May 24, 1996;
13. Law on local public finances, no. 397-XV of October 16, 2003;
14. Methodological notes regarding the development of draft budget by local public authorities for 2013 and of estimates for years 2014-2015.
15. Government Activity Program “European Integration: Freedom, Democracy, Welfare” (2011 – 2014), Medium Term Budget Framework, Consolidated Education Development Strategy for 2011-2015, Consolidated Action Plan for the Education Sector 2011-2015, National Action Plan for the implementation of structural reform in education, Approved by the Decision of the Ministry of Education no. 3.1 of 23.12.2011
16. The Project EDUCATION - 2020 Sectorial Development Strategy for 2014-2020, Ministry of Education, 2013
17. http://particip.gov.md/public/documente/137/ro_427_Proiectul-Strategiei-Sectoriale-de-Dezvoltare-Educatiei-2020.pdf
18. Consolidated Education Development Strategy for 2011-2015