

# **Social-Emotional Development - Highlights in the Romanian Curriculum for Early Education**

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## Abstract

### Keywords:

social-emotional development; preschool Romanian education; early childhood curriculum .

Social-emotional development represents a main developmental domain proposed by the current curriculum for early education in Romania. The main aspects related to this domain are the proper initiation and maintenance of social interactions, the ability to identify and express emotions, to react adequately to the emotions expressed by others, and the self-concept development. Thus, in kindergarten, children learn what solidarity and responsibility for their own actions and for their own behavior mean and that they can control their behavior towards others. All these are essential for the individual wellbeing and learning outcomes, as well as for his future social integration. The Romanian curriculum for early education describes behavioral indicators related to the social-emotional development of children, which can be followed by educators within daily didactic activities. The current study describes the main highlights related to this developmental field found in the main document of the regulatory framework for the Romanian preschool education system. Taking the pandemic context into consideration, we can affirm that educators are required to reconsider the implications of the proper development of social-emotional skills more than before.

## Zusammenfassung

### Schlüsselworte:

sozial-emotionale Entwicklung; Rumänische Vorschulbildung; Curriculum für die frühe Kindheit.

Die sozial-emotionale Entwicklung ist ein Hauptentwicklungsbereich, der im aktuellen Curriculum für die Früherziehung in Rumänien vorgeschlagen wird. Die wichtigsten Aspekte im Zusammenhang mit diesem Bereich beziehen sich auf die richtige Initiierung und Aufrechterhaltung sozialer Interaktionen, die Fähigkeit, Emotionen zu erkennen und auszudrücken, angemessen auf die Emotionen anderer zu reagieren und die Entwicklung des Selbstkonzepts. So lernen Kinder im Kindergarten, was Solidarität und Verantwortung für das eigene Handeln und für das eigene Verhalten bedeuten und dass sie ihr Verhalten gegenüber anderen kontrollieren können. All dies ist wesentlich für das Wohlbefinden und die Lernergebnisse sowie für die zukünftige soziale Integration des Individuums. Das rumänische Curriculum für die Früherziehung beschreibt Verhaltensindikatoren in Bezug auf die sozial-emotionale Entwicklung von Kindern, die von Erziehern im Rahmen der täglichen didaktischen Aktivitäten verfolgt werden können. Die aktuelle Studie beschreibt die wichtigsten Hauptmerkmale in Bezug auf dieses Entwicklungsfeld, die sich im normativen Rahmen des rumänischen Vorschulbildungssystems befinden. Unter Berücksichtigung des Pandemie-Kontextes können wir bestätigen, dass Pädagogen die Auswirkungen einer angemessenen Entwicklung sozial-emotionaler Fähigkeiten stärker als bisher überdenken müssen.

## 1. Introduction

Early childhood education and care in Romania addresses the children aged 0 to 6. Usually, the children aged 0 to 3 are included in nurseries or day centers, while the children aged 3 to 6 participate to the activities that take place in state or private kindergartens. The preschool education is structured in three main stages: small, middle and the big group. Often children are divided in homogeneous age groups, but there are also contexts where heterogeneous ones are present. The activities conducted in the preschool education are structured according the curriculum and to some national standards (Romanian Ministry of Education, 2021).

The last curriculum for early education came into use in September 2019 and represents an updated, adjusted version of the last curriculum for preschool education from 2008. The latest curriculum for early education reflects that in the last period many efforts have been made in order to close the gap between the pedagogical activity in the kindergarten and the daily life and the rapid major changes of the society (Colberg-Schrader & Krug, 1980). This process represents the result of a long-term team work (kindergarten teachers, experts in the field of educational sciences, psychologists, sociologists etc.). The curriculum implemented in 2019 brings a modern

approach, aiming to ensure continuity within the same curricular cycle and interdependence between school subjects and learning activities within the preschool system. It was necessary to reconsider some elements of the curriculum implemented in 2008 as a result of some changes that took place in the educational system: the introduction of the preparatory class in the school system, the need to focus more on children's competences and observable behaviors and less on goals and knowledge, and to promote a systemic approach to early education. Thus, the Romanian preschool education has a strong dynamic character, being continuously influenced by main social changes. Education of the young generation focuses both on the cognitive and social-emotional development by educating prosocial, desirable behaviors, self-control and empathy, will and creativity and involving also the elements of the sensorial education.

One of the main development domains mentioned in the current curriculum for early childhood is the social-emotional one. The balanced development of this domain has a major impact on the other developmental domains mentioned in this document, and also on the wellbeing, learning outcomes and social integration of the individual. Within the current study we aimed to identify the current approach of this domain, since in the last period it has been observed that due to the pandemic context the need to ensure that children continue to develop social-emotional skills requires educators to rethink the existing perspectives and to teach children new social skills that are essential in the pandemic times (Egan, Pope, Moloney et. al., 2021).

## 2. Theoretical foundation

The most frequent name related to the field of social-emotional development is D. Goleman, who demonstrated that children's social and emotional skills can be stimulated and trained at early ages and the proper, balanced, development of these has both short and long term multiple benefits (Goleman, 2018 a, b): well-balanced cognitive development, success in the academic field and maintaining the state of wellbeing.

The link between the social and emotional skills and their development can be observed in the model of emotional intelligence proposed by Goleman (2018a), which encompasses five elements: self-awareness, self-control (emotion management), motivation, empathy and social relations management. Although the social-emotional skills of children are more limited

than the ones of adults, the development of these competences at the early ages is characterized by a rapid rhythm of acquirements. Children experience a wide range of social interactions and become more aware of their own person. All these determine progress in the self-regulation capacity, young children become more capable to inhibit their action, to postpone rewards, to tolerate frustration, to obey rules and to adjust their behavior according to the context they find themselves in (Șerban, 2019).

Another particular aspect that can be observed in early education is that the development takes place in stages, but it is not uniform; each child has his own rhythm and periods of progress, stagnation or even regression. Therefore, children need, in order to become increasingly competent in the social-emotional field, to feel capable and stimulated to learn. Bilmes (2012) shows that a supportive environment, multiple activities and practice enables children to internalize the specific of social-emotional skills.

The social-emotional education was first mentioned in the context of preschool Romanian system in the curricular documents in 2008 (Bocoș & Brănișteanu, 2012), but it has been observed that until then elements related to this theme were found in the official documents that regulated the implementation of educational activities conducted in kindergartens. The curriculum is designed as a collection of ideas, as support in structuring and planning educational activities. The curriculum can offer suggestions and guideline for analyzing a current situation in order to identify future objectives, for preparing the stages of a didactic activity and for their implementation (Colberg-Schrader & Krug, 1980). The learning activities are not detailed to offer preschool teachers the possibility to design the activity according to the available resources, the age of the children and other particularities and to generate a learning experience that is reflective of the behavior of children.

The model of the modern child, as an active and competent actor, determines the need of simultaneous stimulation on all levels of development: cognitive, emotional, social, motor, aesthetic, creative and moral. Ensuring this complex stimulation represents an important milestone in establishing the quality in a preschool education institution. In other words, *a good kindergarten* is one that:

- helps preschool children develop an individual point of view and prepares them as effective as possible for future school life,

- develops fairness and respect,
- ensures equal chances to all children,
- supports families,
- contributes to the development of society's culture (Honig, Joos & Schreiber, 2004).

Rakap et. al. (2018) show that the development of social-emotional skills at early ages does not occur naturally. Children need to interact with nurturing adults and competent peers. These types of interactions take place frequently in early education institutions, so the role of the teacher in managing them is essential. The same authors show that if the social-emotional skills are not developed adequately, children are likely to develop and demonstrate challenging behaviours, so social-emotional learning at early ages can represent a way of prevention of future disruptive behaviours.

### 3. Methodology

We conducted a study on the main document that is included in the regulatory framework of the preschool Romanian education in order to establish which are the main aspects mentioned regarding the domain of social-emotional development of children. We chose to analyze this development domain as it is well known that social and emotional skills represent the main factors of the adjustment to school life and for the social integration of the individual throughout life. Its importance was also demonstrated within the rapid major changes in our life due to the current pandemic.

### 4. Results

The main document we analyzed for the current study was the Romanian curriculum for early education released in 2019 (Romanian Ministry of Education, 2019). The curriculum offers guidelines and information for teachers and other specialists working in the field of education with children ages 0 to 6. The structure of the curriculum covers the following aspects:

1. Arguments in favor of curricular changes in the early childhood
2. General principles underlying the development of the curriculum
3. Curriculum for early education
4. Methodology for applying the curriculum for early education

5. The teaching plan for early education. Curricular structure and the promoted model for curricular design

6. Developmental domains

7. Appendixes including: the scheme of designing the annual study topics, thematic activities or activities on experiential fields; the content of the annual study topics; the daily schedule for each age group and sheets for assessment of the individual progress of the child.

The first quote on the first page of the document refers already to the importance of adequate social-emotional development for the efficacy of learning: "Children learn better when they are in a safe socio-affective climate, when they have a pleasant relationship with their parents, educators and others around them" (John Bennet UNESCO, 2004).

In the first section of the curriculum the holistic perspective on child development is mentioned, and the field of social-emotional development is mentioned within the five developmental domains along with the other four: physical development, health and personal hygiene; cognitive development and knowledge of the world; language, communication development and the premises of reading and writing; learning abilities and attitudes. The curriculum explains that there are interdependencies between these development domains; an acquisition in one area determining the child's progress in other areas. These developmental fields are established according to another document present in the regulatory framework of the early education in Romania, namely: Fundamental landmarks in early learning and development (2010).

The curriculum presents in this first part some general characteristics of early childhood education, which are also relevant for the social-emotional development of children: the toughed curriculum has a great impact on the children's development; the approach teachers choose can be individualized for each child; the balance between social-emotional aspects, learning and the wellbeing state of children can be achieved by involving all backgrounds (kindergarten, family, community) in conducting a coherent early education.

The principles and values underlying the conception (pages 4-5) of the curriculum for early education allow the efficient support of socio-emotional development for all children, by offering

the possibility of unique didactic approaches, by imposing respect for the child, by involving him in many activities and by creating an educational environment characterized by unconditional acceptance and openness to his needs. These are: the principle of child centeredness, the principle of respecting children's rights, the principle of active learning, the principle of integrated development, the principle of multiculturalism, the principle of fairness and non-discrimination, the principle of education as interaction between educators and children.

The principles that refer to the implementation of the curriculum for early childhood (pages 4-5) reinforce those mentioned above: the principle of individualization, the principle of game-based learning, the principle of diversity of learning contexts and situations, the principle of alternating the forms of instruction and of learning strategies, the principle of partnership with family and community.

In the next sections of the curriculum the main categories and types of learning activities conducted in the early education units are presented and detailed. Children aged 0 to 3 take part in games and freely chosen activities; routines and transitions and thematic activities, while children aged 3 to 6 participate in games and freely chosen activities, activities for personal development and activities conducted on experiential fields. Many details are offered for educators regarding these activities: number of activities for each day, time spent for each activity and explanations of each main category and type of activity for each age group, guidelines for organizing the daily routine. It is emphasized that the child should be actively involved in the learning process and his involvement depends on the occasions offered to him daily by educators. The way the learning environment is designed has an essential role, as well as promoting the play (organized, but also free play), as the main activity of the child, which supports all kinds of learning activities. We observe that within all categories and types of learning activities proposed in the curriculum and conducted daily in early childhood units, there are multiple possibilities for designing and implementing activities that determine the social and emotional development of children.

Regarding content division, the annual study program is organized around six main themes. One of these (*How do we express what we feel?*) refers directly to elements of social-emotional development, while the remaining five themes refer indirectly to

aspects of this area of development (*Who am I/are we? When, how and why is it happening? How it is/was/and will be here on Earth? Who and how do we plan/organize an activity? What and how do I want to be?*).

The curriculum explicitly mentions that “for groups of children aged 0 to 6 the activities conducted with children will all aim the child's socialization (communication, familiarization, integration, collaboration, cooperation, negotiation, joint decision-making, etc.), the gradual obtaining of a personal autonomy, as well as the preparation for social life (part of it being the preparation for school)”. (p. 12).

Elements regarding the social and emotional development of children can be also identified in the main finalities of early education mentioned in the curriculum:

- “The free, integral and harmonious development of the child's personality, depending on his own rhythm and his needs, supporting his autonomous and creative formation;
- Developing the ability to interact with other children, adults and the environment to acquire new knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors;
- Encouraging explorations, exercises, trials and experiments, as autonomous learning experiences;
- The discovery, by each child, of his own identity, of autonomy and development of a positive self-image;
- Supporting the child in acquiring the knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes necessary to enter school and throughout life” (p.14).

These general finalities of early childhood education constitute premises for the future key-competences that children should acquire later in the next educational stages. Also, in order to help educators follow these finalities, the curriculum structures them as it follows: developmental domains – developmental dimensions – behaviors. So, for each domain of development more specific types of finalities are established, so that educators can observe them better in case of each child and so that, they can adequately formulate their objectives for each activity they wish to implement.

The curriculum specifies that the domain of social-emotional development “aims the beginning of the child's social life, his ability to establish and maintain

interactions with adults and children. Social interactions mediate the way children look at themselves and the world around them. Emotional development focuses on the ability of children to perceive and express their emotions, to understand and respond to the emotions of others, and the development of self-concept, crucial for this area. In close correlation with the concept of self, the child's self-image develops, which decisively influences the learning process" (p. 17).

Regarding the domain of social-emotional development the established development dimensions are the same for both age groups (0-3 and 3-6 years): interactions with adults and children of similar ages; prosocial behaviors, acceptance and respect for diversity; self-concept; self-control and emotional expressiveness. The behaviors described for each of these dimensions are different from one age group to another. So, when children are three years old, they should demonstrate the following behaviors for each dimension (pp. 19-20):

- For the dimension: interactions with adults and children of similar ages the child imitates and plays with adults, interacting positively with them; asks the adult for help when he is in trouble and enjoys the company of children at play;
- For the dimension: prosocial behaviors, acceptance and respect for diversity – the child plays in the presence of other children, different in terms of gender, language, ethnicity or special educational needs; anticipates and follows of simple rules / routines, with supervision and if he is reminded; starts sharing and returning toys with the help of adults; with the help of an adult, talks to another child to resolve a conflict and demonstrates awareness of different emotional states through role play;
- For the dimension: self-concept – the child draws attention to him, in photos or in the mirror and recognizes his own objects;
- For the fourth dimension - self-control and emotional expressiveness – the child recognizes and names simple emotions (fear, joy, sadness) and begins to control his/her impulses;

The expected behaviors for children up to the age of six for the four dimensions are the following:

- Dimension "Interactions with adults and children of similar ages": the child shows confidence in known adults by practicing interaction with them;

demonstrates abilities to ask for help and receive it in specific problematic situations; initiates / participates in positive interactions with children of similar age;

- Dimension "Prosocial behaviors, acceptance and respect for diversity": the child expresses recognition and respect for similarities and differences between people; acquires and follows rules, understanding their effects in terms of social relations, in familiar contexts; Practice, with support, the assumption of age-specific responsibilities, in various contexts; practices, with support, negotiation and decision-making skills and demonstrates acceptance and understanding towards other people in the immediate environment;
- Dimension "Self-concept": the child practices, with support, positive self-esteem in different educational situations and promotes his self-image, through his manifestation as a unique person, with specific characteristics;
- Dimension "Self-control and emotional expressiveness": the child recognizes and expresses basic emotions, produced by musical pieces, literary texts, art objects and demonstrates emotional self-control skills.

We positively appreciate the emphasis of the current curriculum on the social-emotional development of each child. It is also remarkable that each component of this developmental domain is materialized in the form of direct observable behavioral manifestations, which eases the work of educators. They can observe the manifestations of each child and can decide regarding the most efficient strategy in order to develop the skills that are not acquired already. The connections between this domain and other domains of child development explained in the curriculum, allow educators to design an authentic learning situation.

Mentions regarding the social-emotional development of children can also be observed in the field of assessment of children at early ages. The last appendix of the curriculum presents a model of assessment sheets targeting the individual progress of the child before entering preschool/ primary education. For each group, behavioral indicators are mentioned and the teacher has to establish the degree of its fulfilment (achieved, developing, needs support). The indicators of social-emotional development for the children of 3 years old mentioned in this sheet are (pp. 33-34): interacts positively and plays with adults;

plays near another child; follows group routines; says his name and age if asked; recognizes simple emotions (fear, happiness, sadness). For children at the end of the preschool period (age 6) and beginning of primary school the indicators for the social-emotional domain are (p. 37): follows adults indications regarding the proper behavior in certain situations; interacts, on his own initiative, with children close in age, in different contexts; adjusts his behavior according to rules of different situations (e.g. whispers in the library); properly mentions his name, surname, age, month, day, city and country in which he was born; shares with others his feelings/ emotions and reacts adaptively to various social contexts. The educator can also mention within each developmental domain other specific behaviors of each child, which are relevant in order to get to know the child better and identify the most adequate future pedagogical approach for him.

We also went through the document entitled *Fundamental landmarks in the early learning and development of children from birth to 7 years* (2010), which represents an important framework for the early childhood curriculum in Romania, and we observed that there is a complementarity between this document and the curriculum. The presentation of the social-emotional domain is rendered again, and for each landmark of this developmental domain the educators receive indications regarding supportive practices they can implement to enhance children development.

## 5. Discussions and conclusions

Taking into consideration the results identified in the current study, we observe that the curriculum for early childhood in Romania integrates the domain of social-emotional development with others developmental domains, fact that determines that some of the main kindergarten outcomes are the training and achieving of positive social behavior and learning engagement at preschool children.

In order to facilitate preschool children with an efficient development of their social and emotional skills, teachers can reflect on the following parameters involved in their daily didactic activity, since the curriculum presents a flexible, open, character and enables them to train these skills daily, in multiple contexts:

- the constant care for a comfortable, pleasant atmosphere in the group
- discussing situations with strong emotional impact directly with the preschool children

- stimulating children to reflect to the value of feelings and objects
- stimulating each child to compare different emotions (such as anger and pride)
- teaching children to behave properly towards animals and plants
- offering preschool children the opportunity to express feelings by drawing, gestures, music or drama
- presenting children images and stories in which they can find different emotions
- teaching each child to distinguish between proper and inappropriate behaviors
- taking care that preschool children listen one to another when they communicate
- stimulating children to perceive, recognize and accept certain individual differences
- discussing the group situation frequently with the children (from the perspective of a person from outside the group) (Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports from Baden-Württemberg, 2007).

As Rakap et.al. (2018) mention, the existence of the guidelines regarding the social-emotional development of children does not guarantee that teachers implement the recommended practices and strategies to support this domain of children's development. Further research on this aspect should be necessary in order to identify eventual training needs of teachers working in early education institutions in order to help them manage inadequate behaviors of children and also enhance social-emotional development.

The way in which teachers working in early education institutions manage to support social-emotional development of young children should be also addressed in future studies that take into considerations the effects of the interruption caused by the pandemic on the wellbeing of children during this special period (Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021). Nowadays there are many programs for social-emotional development that are implemented in the Romanian early education system at different units and levels: kindergarten, kindergarten group, family, community (Bocoş & Brănişteanu, 2012). But all these should be reconsidered in the current pandemic context.

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