
QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

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Abstract: The best interest of the child requires a high quality of care and upbringing and socialization, and education from the earliest childhood. It's provision depends both on the effective activity of specialists and their professional qualities, interaction with families and active cooperation between various interested parties. It is determined by the changed focus of education, which is aimed at the individual interests, characteristics and specific needs of children. This emphasis necessitates the development of flexible strategies, differentiation and individualization, which will create an opportunity for learning and development and lead to the achievement of the full development of children's potential. Early childhood education and care has been a European and national policy for the last few years, which includes access to quality services for all families and their children, social inclusion of the diversity of children with different ethnic origins, gender, beliefs, values, qualified staff, to ensure the quality of services and environment and resources necessary for early childhood education and care.

The article touches on the issues related to the need for a unified policy for the development of children from 0 to 6 years, the degree of importance of monitoring the quality of educational services in preschool groups and care in early childhood, which should be carried out by educators and medical and social workers. Analyzes the attitude of pedagogical specialists and assistant educators in kindergartens, as part of the non-pedagogical staff, to the assessment of quality in early childhood care. It tracks which public sectors are most important to the quality of early childhood education and care. For this purpose, a survey was conducted among principals, teachers and assistant educators in kindergartens from the regions of Pernik, Plovdiv, Sofia-city and Sofia-region. An anonymous survey was used as the research method, distributed to the respondents using the capabilities of Google Docs. The conclusions that follow from the study show the interdependence of the interaction between the three sectors - education and quality of educational services, social activities and medical services. Despite the importance of the quality of care, education, upbringing, socialization and inclusion of children from the earliest childhood defined by the respondents, the assessment of the quality of services is still not a fully realized necessity. The research is an opportunity to develop policies and models for researching the upbringing and learning of children from birth and the first years of their life, and to discuss the importance of evaluating the services provided to perceive and better understand the mechanisms of placing quality and quantitative assessments as a way to develop further measures to improve the quality of early childhood education and care.

Keywords: quality of education, early childhood education and care

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education and care is a relatively new issue in quality assurance policies. In 2018, the European Commission issued a recommendation for high-quality early childhood education and care systems from birth to school entry. It offers a quality framework, the aim of which is to promote the development and learning of children and to increase their educational opportunities and ensure in the long term the participation of parents as partners in the process and the orientation of education towards the active participation of children (Proposal for recommendation of Council). Achieving this goal gives all children, including disadvantaged children, the chance to have equal access to health, social and educational services and to actively develop their potential, progressing according to their individual characteristics. The process requires collaboration between different stakeholders to ensure the quality of development and delivery of services that are accessible and inclusive.

The significance of the process for the achievement of a highly effective and quality early childhood education and care system in Bulgaria is determined by the low coverage of children under 3 years of age in childcare facilities and changes in three main areas - access, financing and personnel (Shalapatova, 2019). Comparatively examining the current state of the organization of preschool education in England and Bulgaria, Georgieva focuses on funding, access and provision of early childhood education for learning and development and effective methods of teaching, learning and assessing children (Georgieva, 2021). Most publications analyze kindergartens as places of education and to a lesser extent the quality of services in nurseries or other formal and informal organizations. Attention is paid to the promotion and exchange of good practices in the specific educational space of preschool institutions to ensure accessibility, diversity, efficiency and fairness in relation to educational standards (Gyurova, 2020), the role of communication and literary educational conversation for the development of children's language competences with a view to their inclusion and ensuring equal access to education (Dobрева, Yankova, 2019), policies to support families with children from vulnerable groups as a priority of social policies and directing services towards

acquiring knowledge and skills for raising children with the aim ensuring their better physical, mental and emotional development (Kotzeva, Mineva, Baltov, 2021), the role of the director - leader in ensuring the quality of children's education (Dobreva, 2021), etc. Attention is paid to preparing students to work with children at an early age, including in terms of medical care (Velichkova-Hadzhieva, 2021).

Despite the importance of processes for the management of the quality of early childhood education and care defined by the authors, the opinion of those working in childcare facilities regarding the evaluation of the quality of services for children has not yet been sufficiently studied. The aim of the present study is to track and analyze the attitude of kindergarten principals, teachers and assistant educators to the assessment of the quality of early childhood education and care and their willingness to participate in the assessment process.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purposes of the research, a written survey was used, conducted among 156 principals, teachers and assistant educators from kindergartens in Pernik, Plovdiv, Sofia-city and Sofia-region. It is distributed using the capabilities of Google Docs.

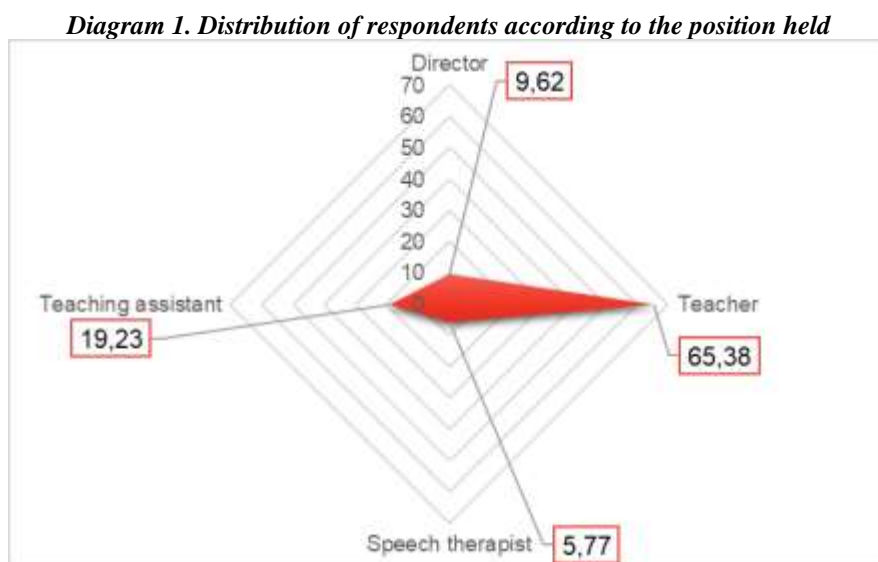
The survey is standardized in content, form and functions. Includes closed-ended and scaled questions. Respondents express their opinion by choosing an indicated degree of fulfillment of a given statement or by a number (from 1 to 5) as a degree of agreement with certain aspects of the quality of early childhood education and care according to a suggested wording. In this way, the significance of these aspects has been assessed with a view to further developing quality assessment mechanisms.

Data on position, length of service, and location of the workplace were collected for the surveyed persons. The aim is to trace the answers according to different sections depending on the position of the respondents and their experience of working with children, as well as to determine their attitude to certain questions related to the quality of early childhood care depending on whether the kindergarten is located in a large or small settlement. The survey is anonymous, which largely guarantees the objectivity of the opinions.

The article presents part of the conducted research, due to the limited volume of the publication.

3. RESULTS

Teachers (65.38% of them) occupy the largest share of the surveyed persons, followed by assistant educators (19.23%), 9.62% are the directors of kindergartens and 5.77% are speech therapists, as part of the pedagogical specialists who deal with the therapy of speech disorders (Diagram 1).



The distribution of respondents according to their work experience is evenly grouped by age into two groups - between 17% and 25% are in the age range from 2 to 5 years, from 11 to 20 years and over 30 years, and the rest from 8% to 17% are found in the ranges of no work experience, 6 to 10 years and 21 to 30 years (Table 1).

The majority of respondents work in kindergartens that are located in a city-district center (46.15% of them), the institutions of 25% of the surveyed persons are in a city, and a small part are located in a village and a city that is a municipal center (respectively 11.54% and 17.31%).

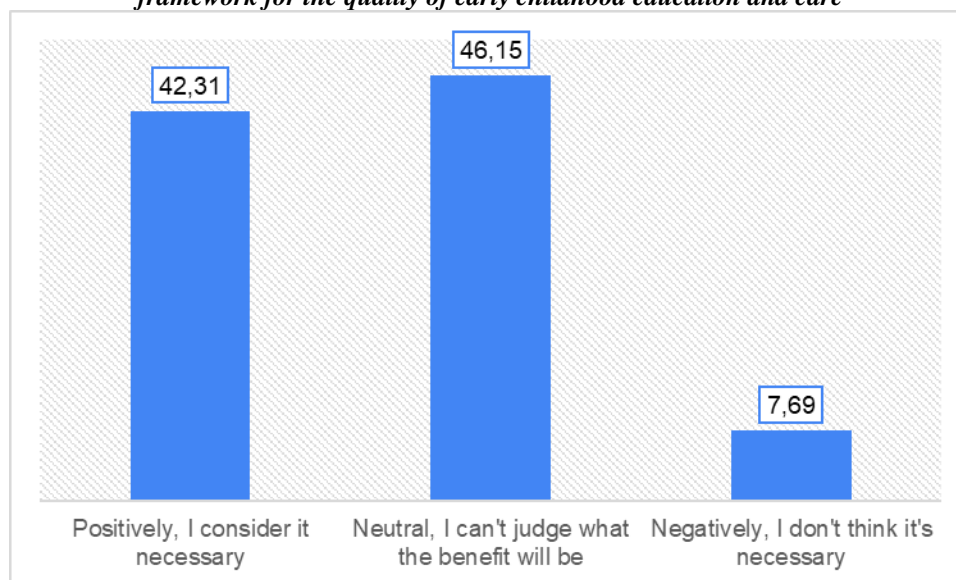
The attitude of 42.31% of the respondents to the introduction of a national framework for the quality of early childhood education and care is positive. This opinion is expressed by all principals and some of the teachers and assistant educators. The rest of the teachers and assistant educators, as well as speech therapists, which are 46.15% or almost half of the persons participating in the study, cannot give a definite opinion and express a neutral position.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents according to their work experience

Work experience	Percentage distribution
I don't have a year of work experience yet	7,69
From 1 to 5 years	25
From 6 to 10 years	17,31
From 11 to 20 years	21,15
From 21 to 30 years	7,69
Over 30 years	21,15

Negative opinions are a negligibly low percentage (7.69%) belonging to teachers and teaching assistants (Diagram 2). The opinions expressed are independent of length of working career and positive, neutral or negative responses are found across all career ranges.

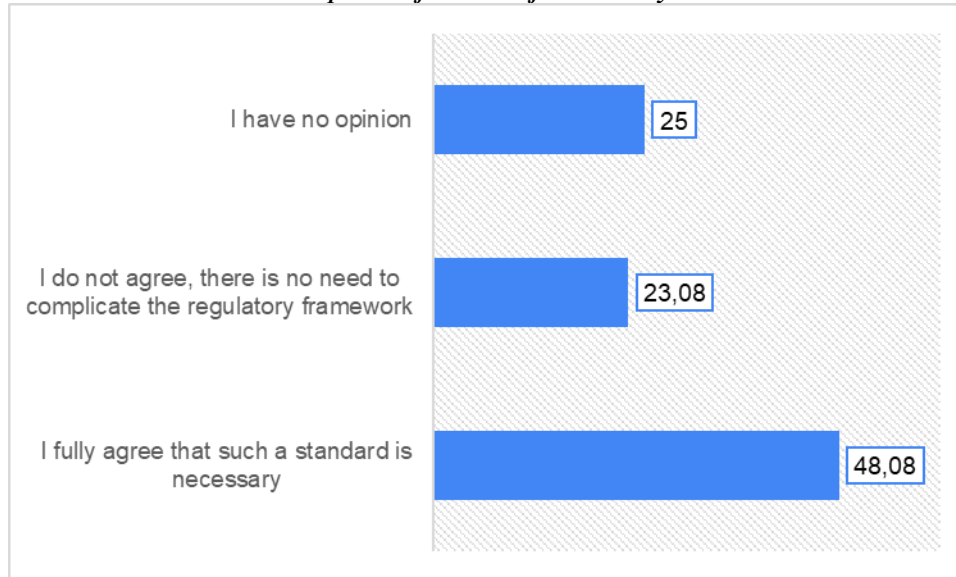
Diagram 2. Distribution of respondents' views on their attitudes towards the introduction of a national framework for the quality of early childhood education and care



Almost half of the respondents (48%) see the need to introduce a standard and a unified policy for the development of children from 0 to 6 years old, despite the fact that the state educational standard for preschool education determines the organization of activities in preschool education, the requirements for the implementation of a program system and the interaction mechanism between the participants in the preschool education process. The remaining responses are divided between participants who have no opinion (25%) and those who express a negative attitude (23%). Again, all kindergarten directors who participated in the study, as well as speech therapists, fully agree that a standard and uniform policy is needed for the development of children from 0 to 6 years old, and that the existing standard for preschool education is not sufficient, but must to cover all children until they enter school and to ensure high quality of all services that provide an opportunity for comprehensive care and education. The teachers are not so positive, some of whom have no opinion, and some express a completely negative opinion, since

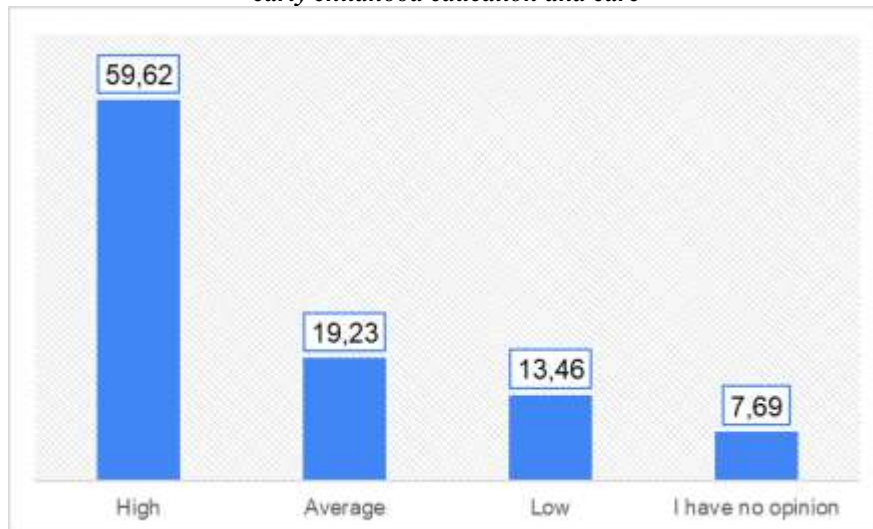
its introduction will complicate the regulatory framework. Assistant educators are also included in the group of respondents expressing disagreement, but their share is smaller compared to teachers (Diagram 3). Similar results were also observed in the study of the attitudes of the respondents on the importance of follow-up, in addition to the quality of education in preschool groups, as well as the quality of early childhood care provided by medical and social workers and educators.

Diagram 3. Distribution of respondents' opinions regarding the need for a standard and uniform policy for the development of children from 0 to 6 years



A high degree of importance was determined by 59.62% of the respondents, including participants holding different positions and with different work experience. An average level was indicated by 19.23% of the respondents, 13.46% of them consider that the evaluation of the quality of education and care in early childhood is not significant, and the surveyed persons without an opinion on the matter occupy a low share of 7.69% (Diagram 4).

Diagram 4. Distribution of respondents' opinions on the importance of monitoring and evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care



The importance of educational, social and medical services as public sectors having a role in ensuring the quality of early childhood education and care was investigated, as well as the attitude of the respondents to other aspects of quality, ranked according to their importance, which will be commented on in next posts. In general, the respondents

expressed the opinion of interdependence and equal importance of the provision of quality educational services, as well as social and medical services for the full development of children's potential and abilities.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The results of the conducted survey show that the introduction of a national framework for the quality of education and care in early childhood is significant to a high degree for the directors of kindergartens and some of the pedagogical specialists and assistant educators who belong to the non-pedagogical staff. The attitude towards the introduction of a standard for children's development and quality assessment is similar.

These data provide information that the formed policies, the processes for their implementation and the benefits of their implementation are not sufficiently communicated among the pedagogical specialists and other interested parties involved in the process. In support of this statement are the negative answers and the share of respondents who do not have an opinion, although almost half of the respondents express a positive attitude. They also show that the willingness of those working with children to participate in the quality assessment process is not complete and there is hesitation, mainly on the part of teachers. It is likely that insufficient confidence to participate in the evaluation process is dictated by a misunderstanding or underestimation of the significance of the evaluation or by experiencing doubts about the quality of services that will become public knowledge.

In this sense, certain recommendations can be given. Creating sustainability in the provision of quality services for children that lead to comprehensive care and education requires knowledge of the processes in detail from all stakeholders to ensure their committed and active participation. There is a need to disseminate and discuss the benefits of establishing a national framework for quality and assessment of early childhood care delivered by health and social workers and educators, and of the developmental outcomes of care provided. Transparency of information and broad public discussion with follow-up of the opinion of various stakeholders will lead not only to a better understanding of the benefits of researching the quality of education and care for children, but also to the formulation of better criteria for evaluating and improving monitoring and evaluation practices.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Personality development of adolescents is a leading policy in the educational space. Knowledge and the skills and attitudes formed lay the foundations for success in the global society in which we live. They create prerequisites for integration and well-being, prevent social exclusion. They provide an opportunity for self-knowledge and self-development of children. They also show that the willingness of those working with children to participate in the quality assessment process is not complete and there are fluctuations. It is likely that insufficient confidence to participate in the evaluation process is dictated by misunderstanding or underestimation of the significance of the evaluation or by experiencing doubts about the quality of the services that will become public knowledge.

The introduction of a national framework for the quality of early childhood education and care, including a quality standard and a scale for assessing the degree of its achievement, have their essential role in creating sustainability of the processes for ensuring the quality of early childhood education and care age to ensure the successful realization of children and prevent social exclusion. Specific and clear criteria for evaluating the quality of services are needed to examine the degree of their achievement and to take next steps to increase the results of learning, socialization, upbringing and inclusion of children and to stimulate learning processes from the most early childhood.

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