POLICY AND PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION COUNSELING: A LEGISLATIVE AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, early childhood education has become a central priority in the reform of the Romanian pre-university education system, emphasizing the critical importance of intervention from birth or even prenatally. National educational policies have increasingly focused on improving early education quality, addressing the initial and continuous training of educators, caregivers, and school counselors, as well as on preventive strategies for challenges that might hinder later school integration. Legislative changes have introduced significant shifts, such as the gradual inclusion of preschool groups in compulsory education; however, these measures raise challenges related to resource allocation and human capital development. Despite the growing legislative framework, participation rates in early education remain low, especially among disadvantaged groups. This study analyses the legislative documents regulating early childhood counseling in Romania, identifying the involved educational actors and the practical challenges of counseling implementation. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive evaluation of counseling needs in early education, highlighting gaps in resources, training, and coordination. The study proposes future directions for policy and practice to enhance the quality and accessibility of counseling services for young children and their families, thus supporting their developmental trajectories from the earliest stages.

Keywords: early childhood education, counseling services, Romanian education policy, educational reform, early intervention

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, early childhood education has emerged as a priority in Romania's pre-university educational reforms, emphasizing intervention from birth or even the prenatal stage. National policies have increasingly focused on enhancing teacher preparation – both initial and continuous – for educators, preschool teachers, school counselors, and child care specialists, alongside developing strategies for prevention and intervention in situations that may hinder later school integration. The urgency of these measures is underscored by both national statistical data and EU reports, which reveal low participation rates in early childhood education, particularly among disadvantaged, Roma, and rural populations.

Legislative reforms have progressively expanded compulsory education to include the preparatory grade in 2012, the final preschool year in 2020, the middle group in 2023, and, by 2030, the youngest preschool group. These reforms require substantial investment in both infrastructure and human resources. The 2023 European