

PRESCHOOL EDUCATION'S QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN UKRAINE

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Abstract. For modern preschool education, given its current state of development, one of the urgent tasks of a preschool educational institution is to ensure the quality of preschool education in accordance with the requests of the state, society and parents. Attention from the European Commission on Education and culture and the communication «Pre-school education and childcare: providing all of our children with the best start in the world, what will it be like tomorrow? ». In order to summarize the current trends and prospects of achieving quality preschool education, an analysis of current decisions, developments and changes in the educational field of and upbringing of preschool children is made. Understanding the problems and perspectives in organizing adult education for the youngest citizens of the state requires that EU pre-accession professionals and EU candidate countries join forces to address the further developing the industry strategic challenges.

Introduction. The development of early childhood education is one of the priority areas of public education policy in Ukraine. As stated in the Law of Ukraine «On Preschool Education», pre-school education is an obligatory primary component of the continuous education system in Ukraine, aimed at ensuring comprehensive development of preschool age child in accordance with its intellectual age, formation of moral norms, acquisition of a person's life social experience. Lifelong education is a key and at the same time a tool for personal development. It is a mechanism for the development of modern society. The preschool level of the education sector is basic, elementary, and therefore should correspond to the tendencies of lifelong education development, which are specified in the Law «On Preschool Education», the Basic component of preschool Education – the State Standard for preschool education of Ukraine and the concept «New Ukrainian School».

For Ukraine, the issue of creating a safe educational environment is an important factor in ensuring quality education and well-being for children, including children with special needs. This is especially important for families and educators living in Donetsk and Luhansk regions who are experiencing the effects of the armed conflict. However, until recently, the quality of the preschool level of education has not attracted the attention of the pedagogical community and state institutions as the quality of its subsequent links.

The **purpose of the article** is to summarize current trends and prospects of achieving quality preschool education; analysis of current decisions, developments and changes in the area of preschool children education and upbringing.

Presenting main material. The quality of education is the basis for ensuring and improving the quality of a person's life as the main purpose of the state existence. This criterion is basic, has a special place in the process of reforming Ukrainian society and is an integral part of the social function of public administration, which considers education within the mechanism of social reproduction of the population through creating conditions for the development of personality and creative self-realization of every citizen of Ukraine, education of people capable of working effectively and to learn throughout life, to provide a social environment that generates the need for quality education for citizens and provides opportunities for its receipt.

Quality as a category is considered by scientists in various scientific fields. In particular, from a philosophical point of view, it reflects the internal determination of an object that constitutes a specificity that sets it apart from all others; in economic terms – a set of products' properties that determine the degree of its ability to meet the needs of consumers in accordance with their purpose; legal is one of the essential conditions of many civil contracts and so on.

Unlike other industries, in pedagogy quality is multifaceted, which in its essence reflects various aspects of the educational process (philosophical, social, pedagogical, political, demographic, economic, etc.) and is considered as a set of education properties that determine its ability to meet the needs of individuals, society, state according to the purpose of education. Therefore, the quality depends on the requirements set for the purpose of use.

According to T. Lukina (2011), the concept of «quality of education» distinguishes two main approaches in defining its essence: normalized – it is considered in terms of meeting the needs and achievement of certain norms, standards, goals (personality, society, state), which are normatively approved by the respective documents; managerial is presented from the standpoint of modern theory and quality management practice (the quality of education as an object of managerial influence is viewed simultaneously from the standpoint of the educational system quality, the quality of the educational process (as the process of educational services consumption) and the quality of the graduate as a result of the educational system activity by indicators his education and the formation of socially significant values.

According to the author, the education reflects' quality of the education system and society development in a certain period and changes over time depending on the individual's requirements, society and state (3, p. 620-622]. Thus, the quality of education is an indicator that determines the effectiveness of the national education system and the effectiveness of its management, which is a mandatory component of public education management.

In modern world, quality management education is the pivotal direction of management activities in the educational field. Developed countries of the world are actively involved in the quality management of education, in particular through participation in the formation of public

requirements for the quality of education, the definition of promising directions of public education policy in this area, control over the results achieved in the functioning of the educational sector.

Therefore, in the modern world it is considered mandatory to have internal and external state and public quality control systems for education.

There are different quality assurance systems in the European Union, which were formed under conditions where the demands on the quality of education were made by direct users of educational services – education providers, academics, employers, and society. Ukraine is currently developing a national model of quality management education based on international best practices and meeting the requirements of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

International organizations, in particular the United Nations, emphasize the importance of quality early childhood education as a first element in the education system. The UN Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals has stepped up global activity in early childhood development and early childhood education. The goal of sustainable development is to «provide all girls and boys with access to quality systems for the development, care and preschool education of young children by 2030 so that they are ready for primary education» and calls for at least one year of pre-school education. Therefore, the inclusion of preschool education services in sustainable development is a main element in promoting national and global efforts to increase the investment, political will and commitment required to increase equal access and high quality preschool programs.

Since 2000, there has been an increasing number of requests from EU Member States and EU candidate countries to address the quality of early childhood education (Milotay, 2016). The response to these requests was the 2011 Commission Communication on Preschool Education and Child Care: Ensuring All Our Children Have the Best Beginning in the World Tomorrow. The communicate required the Commission to take steps to improve the quality of services and access to them for children from birth to compulsory education. The Commission has initiated the creation of a thematic working group of 25 EU Member States, Norway and Turkey to exchange and summarize the experience of developing, analyzing and comparing policies, gathering the results of European research on successful policies, and providing good practice guidance. In 2012–2014, members of the Working Party on Education, Social Affairs and the Family worked together, using methods of education, country visits and exchange of political experience.

Based on a study of policy, research and practice, the Working Group identified key issues for the quality of pre-school education in five broad areas. As a result, a proposal for a quality framework for pre-school education and childcare was developed and published in the group's final report in autumn 2014. The proposal for a framework for the quality of pre-school education and childcare for the EU was presented as one that covers the diversity of pre-school education systems in the EU Member States and candidate countries.

The question of the education quality in general and the quality of pre-school education in particular remains relevant both in the light of the current reforms in the educational sphere of Ukraine and in the international context. Important initiative for reforming the preschool education sector are set out in the Law of Ukraine «On Preschool Education», the Basic Component of Preschool Education is the State Standard for Preschool Education of Ukraine and the concept of «New Ukrainian School». At the time of writing, the concept of preschool quality assurance is being developed.

In 2014, a working group was set up by the European Commission to develop recommendations for defining the quality criteria for early childhood education. Emphasizing the complexity of the concept of quality pre-school education, the working group outlined the following basic criteria, namely: 1. Quality of structure: program features accreditation and licensing; ratio of staff to the number of children in the pre-school education; ensuring equal access to quality education for all children, hygiene standards, etc. 2. Quality of the process: practices used in preschool, the role of play forms of learning in educational programs; cooperation of caregivers with parents of children; interaction between caregivers and children, as well as between the pupils themselves, an integrated approach to the education, care and education of children. 3. Quality of results: benefits for children, families, local communities and society at large. Benefits for children include emotional, cognitive, physical development, development of social skills and preparation for further learning and adulthood (2).

In 2018, the European Commission has set up a working group to develop a European framework for the quality of early childhood education and to recommend it to all EU Member States when developing public education policies. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine has initiated activities that show great attention to the issue of early childhood education. A working group has been set up to work on the development of the Concept for the Development of Preschool Education, which is part of its quality assurance. Together with UNICEF representatives, the Ukrainian foundation «Step by step» is actively involved in the work of this group.

During January – March 2019 research of «Step by step» was conducted on the basis of ECERS (Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales) quality of pre-school education. The study was conducted as part of an international study. Nine countries have participated in the International Quality Criteria for Pre-School Education: Vietnam, Denmark, Spain, China, Germany, Norway, Russia, Ukraine, Chile. A sample of each country included 50 pre-school institutions (one preschool group / 2 educators). The study included surveys of educators, parents, students, and administrators about the importance of the 52 pre-school education quality criteria offered by the study. In Ukraine, the study was supported by the Ministry of Education and Science, UNICEF.

In the course of the project implementation Ukraine has used two main documents: the European Quality Framework, which is also used in the development of the Concept for the development of preschool education in Ukraine, and the results of the study in accordance with the ECERS quality indicators.

Against this background, there is a great need to develop a shared vision of early childhood education quality and to increase of early childhood education awareness of the quality across all stakeholders.

Developing a common vision for the quality of pre-school education and raising of pre-school education awareness of the quality among all stakeholders and developing the capacity of all stakeholders to ensure quality of pre-school education have become the goals of the activities.

The European Quality Framework gives the following definition of early childhood education and care (ECEC): «Early childhood education and care applies to any regulated regime that provides for education and childcare from birth to compulsory primary school age, which may vary within the EU. It includes child and family care, private and public resources, preschool care. Quality education and assistance in early childhood can lay the foundations for further success in life in terms of education, well-being, employment and social inclusion, and this is especially important for disadvantaged children. Therefore, quality education and early childhood assistance is an effective and efficient investment in education and training» (6, p.4).

The Commission of the European Council has adopted a proposal (recommendations) for high-quality early childhood education and care systems aimed at supporting member states in their efforts to improve access and quality of their early childhood care and care systems. This proposal includes a quality framework that identifies five keys components of a quality system:

- access to early childhood education and care;
- training and working conditions of the staff responsible for early childhood education and care;
- defining appropriate curricula and management;
- financing;
- monitoring and evaluation of systems.

The quality framework has already supported reforms in many countries and promoted the provision of early childhood education and assistance.

EU benchmark is 95% of children over 4 years of age receiving pre-school education and care have achieved worldwide, but there are still major differences between countries and regions. The European Commission supports member states in identifying and addressing problems in this area.

The Commission also promotes cooperation between member states in the field of pre-school education and care, providing data and analysis of current developments in Europe. The following steps have been developed.

A working group was set up every two years to bring together national representatives from relevant ministries and European organizations interested in the topic to promote discussions on quality early childhood education and care, with a particular focus on staff inclusion and development. The Commission will continue to fund projects that promote the quality of early childhood education and care, including through training and in-service training for the sector. The Council examines the current state of the National Childhood Education and Care Quality Framework (ECEC) in the EU Member States.

The Council highly appreciates the role of high quality childcare and care systems. An integrated early childhood development policy is seen as a tool to reduce poverty and promote inclusion. It also emphasizes the role of pre-school education and primary education in fostering creativity and innovation. School development and excellent learning are essential for a great start in life. The Commission's report assessed the impact of early literacy competences on later mathematical achievement. The advantages of pre-school education and care and the conditions of their qualitative receipt are determined. Attention is drawn to need for the professionalization of childcare assistants in pre-school education and care, their working and learning conditions, and the quality of their early childhood care services. The Commission pays particular attention to research on the effective use of pre-school education and care to prevent early school leaving.

Experts believe that the EU Preschool Quality and Child Care Framework is an effective means of promoting proper political engagement in pre-school education, raising the of preschool education staff's profile and «possibly protecting against budget cuts planned in many Member States» (Milotay, 2016, p. 124). In May 2018, the European Commission published a «Proposal for a Council of Europe Recommendation on high quality early childhood education and care systems» based on proposals for a quality framework for early childhood education and care for the EU. This means that the EU Preschool Education and Child Care Framework is becoming the starting point for all EU Member States and candidate countries for EU preschool education.

Until recently, external evaluation and monitoring of pre-school education in Ukraine have not been formulated into a coherent system, which has led to the absence of systematic statistics on the activities of pre-school institutions. In recent years, the situation with monitoring of pre-school education has improved somewhat, as evidenced in particular by the launch in 2019 of the Institute of Educational Analytics of Ukraine a pilot project on the collection of statistical reporting forms in the field of pre-school education. It is noteworthy Jan Peters' consultative report «The quality of pre-school education and childcare in Ukraine» prepared for the UNICEF office in Ukraine in 2018.

In it the author notes that the monitoring of the quality of educational services in the field of preschool education by the state is underdeveloped.

In view of the above and in order to obtain up-to-date information on the state of pre-school education, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine has prepared and conducted a study of the quality of pre-school education by interviewing participants in the educational process, processing questionnaires and analyzing data on educational programs, staffing potential, contingent of children. , the material, financial and psychological conditions that are created in pre-school institutions to ensure a safe life and development of the child.

During study the information provided by the State Statistics Service of Ukraine for 2017, it was found out that in general 75,4% of children aged 3 to 6 years attend pre-school establishments in Ukraine (84,5% – in urban settlements and only 57,8% – in rural areas). This figure is slightly higher than that of neighboring countries such as Georgia (69,5%), but it is low compared to the EU target (95% of children aged 4 to 6 years). The coverage rate for children aged 3–6 is 75,4%, but there are significant differences in the coverage of urban and rural settlements. In rural areas, the coverage is only 57,8% and in urban areas – 84,5%. In rural areas, parents, directors and caregivers noted the absence of queues and the small number of children in groups.

The reason that most parents in rural areas do not send their children to pre-school is the distance between the home and the preschool; many cannot drive children to kindergarten. Preschool education institutions in some of the rural areas covered by the study have only short programs, and it is too difficult for parents to bring children for such a short period of time. At the same time, there are large queues in cities, for example, in the Dnipropetrovsk region, 4,000 children are expected to enroll in pre-school education institutions. Data on enrollment of children from families in difficult life circumstances are missing. This is due, firstly, to the lack of a child's identification from a family in difficult life circumstances in Ukraine, and secondly, to the fact that representatives of the Ministry of science and education statistics department, as they stated, do not have sufficient technological capacity to collect the necessary data all over Ukraine. Data on licensed private kindergartens are collected on a common basis. Another reason for the low attendance is the lack of a comprehensive approach to integrating children with special needs and children from families in difficult life circumstances, both at community level and in kindergartens. In communication with various stakeholders, and after a careful study of the Law on Preschool Education, we came to the conclusion that inclusive education and the way it is seen in Ukraine is limited by the integration of children with special needs. Much less attention is paid to children from families in difficult life circumstances. In some communities, privileged children may have children from internally displaced families, children of servicemen or children who have resided in Chernobyl zone.

At the same time, there is no real strategy to expand the coverage of kindergartens for children from low-income families or families in difficult circumstances. In order to integrate children with special needs, caregivers need to be supported in their ongoing professional development and training of assistants. In Ukraine, following the example of other countries, such as Armenia, a digital registration system was introduced, which aims to make the enrollment system more transparent and become a mechanism for ensuring equal access for children and families in difficult circumstances. Up until now, priority has been given to enrolling children only for working parents. In Ukraine, existing effective systems are in place to ensure that all children from families in difficult life circumstances (such as parents who are unemployed) are involved in pre-school education (Peeters, 2018).

The next criterion and aspect of the analysis is frames. The study found that 99% had a college degree, of which 62% had a master's degree (Sofiy, 2017). In 2016, a new position was introduced in the country – an assistant educator who is responsible for working with children with special educational needs. The qualification requirements for the assistant are the same as for the tutor (bachelor's or master's degree). Today, additional training is needed for pedagogical staff working in inclusive groups. This training involves changing the vision of inclusive education – moving from a medical model to a social one. The reforms of 1989 – 1997 led to the closure of 25% of pre-school institutions in Ukraine, which still affects working conditions: the position of pre-school tutor is not attractive because of low status and wages, and pre-school institutions have difficulty finding pre-school teachers bachelor's degree. Higher education educator wages are insufficient to support a family. There is a pay raise system for different groups, but it is quite complex. Respondents indicated that caregivers remain in the profession because of their desire to work with young children and limited employment opportunities. Experts also warn that most caregivers are over 40 years of age or retirement age, which means there will be a shortage of staff in the near future.

The next evaluation criterion is to determine the quality of the relevant training programs. Yes, the Ministry of Education and Science has approved a number of educational programs that can help the kindergartens put the based component of pre-school education in practice. The list of educational programs is quite comprehensive and involves very different approaches, including highly specialized ones (such as chess or programs for children with autism) and complex but quite traditional ones.

The basic component of pre-school education in Ukraine has a focus similar to centralized programs with defined outcomes that services in practice must achieve. However, it should be noted that too long and descriptive Quality Frameworks do not provide sufficient opportunities for

educators to work creatively. The family section is limited to the traditional family model of father, mother, grandparents, and focuses on traditional family values.

Preschool education programs should be open and provide children with a variety of resources to play, express themselves, share experiences, create content, engage with peers and the outside world, and not aim at pre-determined goals. Only responding to the (diverse) needs of children can help to develop their identity and belonging. The basic principles and attributes of such an open-ended program aimed at the holistic development of the child, taking into account his or her circumstances, are inclusive, equal, democratic, empirical and educational. Promoting the well-being of the child through responsiveness, warmth, and support is essential for the best possible involvement of the child in the learning process. At the same time, it is clearly warned: the increased emphasis of the program on results can lead to the neglect of all other school and extracurricular factors that strongly influence these results.

When it comes to working with children from low-income families, their different circumstances and cultural identities should be taken into account, preferably in socially mixed groups. The training program should shape the rights of children in their daily lives and build on the principles of access, involvement of all children, and the provision of a safe and supportive environment in which ambitious tasks can be set.

Along with the development of new pre-school training programs, they should also collaborate and engage in dialogue with parents of children. One of the main ideas is to take into account the parental perspective in pre-school education. Formal training programs as such have little impact on the development and learning outcomes of children from families in difficult life circumstances, compared to the significant impact of the family environment and the level of interpersonal and pedagogical skills of preschool education practitioners. Therefore, early childhood development professionals need not only engage with children to support their full development; they should also involve parents and local communities. Such involvement of families and local communities should be reflected in the training program.

Analyzing an aspect such as monitoring, it should be noted that monitoring child development is a common practice in the field of pre-school education in Ukraine. Most communities use a qualitative model developed by Ukrainian researchers to evaluate their child's developmental progress. This tool is intended to provide educators with information about the progress of children in the group. Some caregivers use its individual results to inform parents. Other caregivers surveyed find that using the qualimetric model is too time consuming. However, there is a need for other tools that are less time consuming and can help caregivers monitor and document each child's development.

Discussions were critical of addressing issues related to physical and environmental monitoring (for example, fire safety), as they are sometimes out of reach of preschools and in this case no budget for infrastructure improvement is provided.

Regarding the monitoring of pedagogical aspects of preschool education, some communities have methodologists who regularly visit preschools and conduct quality audits. According to the respondents, decentralization requires reorganization of the external monitoring system. Accurate and up-to-date data on access, quality and personnel in Ukraine is largely not provided, as there is no system at the municipal level to evaluate the effectiveness of regular data collection. This slows down the process of planning policies based on evidence collected locally (for example, identifying needs for enrollment, training). External monitoring should also be seen as an extremely important aspect of the pre-school institutions quality, including in the private sector. This requires qualified monitoring specialists, unified assessment and monitoring documents, as well as the capabilities and authority to realistically improve the quality of preschool services.

Analysis by criterion such as governance showed that, in addition to benefits, the decentralized system in the state created many problems. Yes, rural communities do not have the human capacity to provide audits, personnel management, adequate funding and the establishment of a continuous professional development system.

We have a conclusion that funding is a major problem, especially in communities in rural or relatively underprivileged communities: caregivers receive low wages, lack of financial resources to provide children with toys and books. This leads to differences in funding per child in all municipalities and limits the opportunities for children living in poor areas. In most municipalities, there is a lack of policies regarding the continuous professional development needed to implement the State Standard for Preschool Education in Ukraine. Also, the external monitoring system in Ukraine is underdeveloped.

Initiatives for preschool education for all children from internally displaced families are very successful. Necessary measures have been taken to enroll almost all children from internally displaced families in kindergartens. There are also special trainings for caregivers and children to support families living in the conflict zone. The caregivers and parents who live near the line of contact, during our visit, demonstrated amazing courage and intent to provide the best conditions in the pre-school educational institution for their children, despite difficult circumstances. Kindergartens there are many problems, including the lack of tutors in kindergartens located near the line of contact, and modern didactic materials.

Conclusions. The findings of a study initiated by the European Commission on Education and Culture and conducted in 15 European countries are of great importance for analyzing the quality, benefits and disadvantages of developing early childhood education in Ukraine. The results

of this review suggest that there is very little information on how pre-school education is controlled in Ukraine and in the EU. Evidence suggests that many countries have sophisticated systems for monitoring and regulating early childhood education programs, and some countries use indirect indicators such as the ratio of caregivers and children, working time and quality standards for quality control infrastructure (if implemented).

The review notes that the Commission of the European Council has adopted a quality framework that identifies 5 main components of a quality early childhood education system: 1) access to early childhood education and care; 2) training and working conditions of the staff responsible for the education and care of the early child; 3) identification of appropriate training programs and management; 4) financing; 5) monitoring and evaluation of systems.

The identified quality assessment parameters can be used as a basis for global monitoring tools or frameworks. It is well known that in high-income countries (such as Belgium and the Netherlands), the implementation of quality control systems is costly and requires considerable resources, often from numerous entities and institutions. The development and implementation of a national system for monitoring the quality of pre-school education requires sufficient national (if necessary international) knowledge and resources, and pre-schools should have some incentive to comply with the standards. Data from high-income countries indicate that quality assurance and preservation in early childhood education requires a continued focus on improvement. Similarly, quality monitoring systems are being developed to promote improvement. The complex diverse societies in which we live do not allow us to find standardized solutions for all families and children. It is important that practitioners / preschool teachers acquire basic professional competences. Reflection on professional development, search for possible different ways to achieve professionalism. Comprehensive and long-term training initiatives can be just as rewarding as initial training.

Ukraine's active participation in international networks is crucial to improving the quality of pre-school education in the country. Participation in European projects, UNICEF projects, as well as in international and other networks at the level of learning communities, practitioners, parents, local and national policy makers and scholars can stimulate innovation.

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