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MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, RESEARCH, YOUTH AND SPORTS
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FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL-POLITICAL
SCIENCES
Doctoral School
Specialization: SOCIOLOGY

PH.D. THESIS

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN
EUROPEAN POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

- ABSTRACT -

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IAȘI
2012

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood care and education are new infant welfare guidelines, which may generate *social capital* and can reduce the costs of recovery social services (Garner, Shonkoff, 2012:226), assuming parental and society education in this respect.

Legislative changes have facilitated child care by own mother/parents by providing child-rearing leave, and the revenues from social benefits for children and families are the advantages that families with children should benefit from. In Romania, in the period 2000-2005, the contributions for families increased by 11.1%, as reported by Eurostat¹. Moreover, the law articles² which refer expressly to children aged 0-2 years shape the idea that early childhood conception has changed in our country as well. The discoveries in the field of bio-socio-psychology have positively influenced the family policy in our country, in favour of the young child. But, in order to identify *how* and *how much*, even *when* to invest in early childhood if referring to the disadvantaged families, we need the scientific approach of this Romania-Germany comparing study.

The main objective of the research is focused on early childhood education as this is new European policy guidance

¹http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-08-046/EN/KS-SF-08-046-EN.PDF reports were published in 2008, for the year 2005 (accessed on 14.05.2012)

² With reference to Article 60 (1) of Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of child rights.

on early investment in *human capital* formation. Through this Romania-Germany comparative study we investigate:

1. The beneficial role of family policies on the reduction of social exclusion, promotion and observance for the rights of young children who come from single-parent families and socio-economically disadvantaged families;
2. The role of early education and parental education in shaping the future adult, in strengthening society's resources through the formation of *human capital*.

Early investment for the development of social capital is a priority, especially for the children belonging to disadvantaged families, with great economic and social benefits in the long term.

1. *EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION AS AN OBJECTIVE OF FAMILY POLICIES*

We focus our research on little childhood because it is recognized a new trend in the sociology of childhood - towards early childhood paradigms (Hübenthal, Ifland, 2011:114) and investment in early childhood (Evans, Meyers, Ilfeld, 2000:11). *Parental care* is a set of rights and duties provided by law to parents in terms of rearing and education of the child who comes from and outside the marriage and lasts until acquiring full legal capacity of the child, namely up to the age of 18 years (Macovei, 1989:23).

Safety is more than care. It is the fear or anxiety felt by the parents responsible for any hazard or unpleasant events that would affect the life or future of the small child, included in the notion of positive signals of the maternal/parental competence (Nair, Morrison, 2000:528).

Sustainability of any society depends on its ability to promote health and well-being of the next generation. Today's children will become tomorrow's citizens, workers, scientists, and parents. „*Childhood does not influence only the whole life. It lasts for generation after generation*” (Killen, 2003:16).

Early childhood

According to the meaning of specialists in the field of education, in our country the term of early childhood includes³:

- *Pre-natal period of development* - from conception to birth.
- *Period of continuous development* for children aged:
 - from 0 to 3 years, ante-pre-school children;
 - from 3 to 6/7 years-old, pre-school children.

Early education is the cumulation of individual and social experiences, existing or organized, which the child enjoys in the first years of life, serving to protect, grow and develop the human being through endowment with physical, psychological and cultural capacities and acquisitions that can give rise to identity and own dignity (Kumar *apud* Evans, Meyers, Ilfeld, 2000:7). It provides the fundamentals for a healthy development physically and mentally and a complex development socially, spiritually and culturally. What children learn in the early years represent more than half of what they will learn the rest of their life (Curtis and O'Hagan, 2003; Tassoni, Beith, Bulman, 2005; Muntean, 2009).

Disadvantaged family

The Family, defined as parents and their children, is the most important source of love, and it ensures the highest

³Early education curriculum for children aged between birth and 6/7 years, 2008, www.edu.ro

quality of child care. This is the most important truth that matters utterly for the harmonious development of the child but not such preconceptions as: whether the family includes two parents, having or not a job, a single parent, children from previous marriages, etc. (Spock, Rothenberg, 1994:691). The way children are protected in the first years of life, providing them a proper development in the home family has become a concern for the family policy makers in European countries. The concern is to identify the ways in which we can prevent discrimination and social exclusion in early childhood connected with the home families (Meier-Gräwe, 2006:4). The discoveries concerning early development of the brain, language and skills acquisition in early childhood constitutes a great challenge for family policies, which should ensure equal opportunities also to children whose families are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

Family Policy

Family policy guarantees functioning of the family to its full capacity, supporting the deployment of family functions, the tasks of the institutions including all the aspects related with the regulatory framework of these functions, with an emphasis on the respect for uniqueness of the family and its culture (Moss, O'Brien, 2006:5).

Family policy includes „all the actions undertaken by the Government to maintain, support the change structuring of family life” (Dohotariu, 2011:46).

2. *COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF FAMILY POLICIES: ROMANIA AND GERMANY*

Introduction in the family policy of nowadays Germany

Three main features of good governance in Germany, highlighted by Evens (2006), can be referred to support the idea of simultaneous, subsidiary and in partnership actuation of institutions and families for child welfare (Evens, 2006:9-11):

- (1) A strong emphasis on the responsibility of the parties concerned: helping people is for „help themselves”. Not only the better living conditions are aimed at, but also improvement of the ability to act and willingness to act. In terms of poverty reduction among children, accountability means early learning, education, and awareness of the child's young age, the courage to make positive changes for him.
towards the age of the child, the courage to make positive changes for him.
- (2) Economic and social capital investment (partnerships) for families with young children, the capital invested here „promises long term high returns”.
- (3) New concepts of governance are ultimately new forms of addressing the needs of families who are in an ever-changing structure and way of life.

We mention in this context that since 2004, the German Parliament has proposed the *TAG* Draft Law which assigned the local authorities the obligation to provide sufficient child care places for children under the age of three years. The Government has legislated through labour market reforms that every year EUR 1.5 billion is invested in young children, and

nannies are „institutionalized” (Rüling, 2010:160). Investing in caring for young children is considered an investment for the future, which is designed to stimulate economic growth.

In Germany, the public perception of „*demographic change in detriment of birth*” has generated a considerable boost in family policy, which has had a long time a secondary importance (Strohmeier *et.all*, 2006:2). Growth of social investment for families with young children was matched by investments in the quality of vocational training for employees who provide services to families and young children, considering that for human capital development, „quantity imposes quality” (Naumann *et.all*, 2007:676). It is clear that family policy is a „cross policy” (Rüling, 2010:156), which must be consistent with policies focused on labour market, economic or financial policies.

The Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth - *Bundesministerium für Family, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend* (BMFSFJ) aims at a „sustainable family policy”(Bert Rürup, 2006) composed of „*infrastructure, time and money for families*” according to „The 7th Family Report”⁴ held to be the most complex and comprehensive country report (Spieß, 2006:417). The institutional objectives included in the *sustainable family policy* are focused on assuming tasks of training (*Bildung*), child care (*Betreuung*), education (*Erziehung*) in the governance at the federal level and at land level (Evers, 2006; Fagnani, 2007).

Early child education coupled with early intervention and parent education is not achieved only through specialized

⁴ Siebter Familienbericht, Familie zwischen Flexibilität und Verlässlichkeit Perspektiven für eine lebenslaufbezogene Familienpolitikn. In translation: „The 7th Family Report. The family between flexibility and abandonment. Prospects for a course of life related to family policy“

social institutions, but also by federal projects carried out in those 16 Länder of Germany, with different names, but with common objectives. For the relevance of the idea only a few will be mentioned here:

- „A good start in children's live” - *Gutes Start ins Kinderleben*, developed by Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend and *Nationales Zentrum Frühe Hilfen (The national Center for early Help)*;
- *Federal Pilot Project „Several Generations in the House” - Mehrgenerationenhäuser* developed by *Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend*;
- *Family Support Networks – Early Help for Parents and Children - Frühe Hilfen für Eltern und Kinder and Early Social Systems - Soziale Frühwarnsysteme*;
- *Promoting „Local Alliances for the Family” - Lokale Bündnisse für Familie*.
- *Federal Foundation „Mother and Child” (Bundesstiftung Mutter und Kind)*.

Family Policy in Romania

Early childhood care and education in Romania still lacks a theoretical or practical boundary. Small child-rearing is the responsibility of the family, supported by the measures taken by family policies. If we make reference to the family facing socio-economic disadvantage or single-parent families we will find protection measures for the child without a complementarity in order to pursue the best interests of the child.

The protection of motherhood and social support to single parents families and those in socio-economic

disadvantage tends to produce „perverse effects” (Păunescu, 2012:156) without parental responsibilities assumed by families receiving financial rights for children and parents, families receiving social services, observing, sometimes investments without a positive result for the child in the long-term.

Services presented selectively:

In Romania, the nursery type services that provide support to parents for a limited period of the day for raising children under 3 years are organized and subordinated to local municipalities, the Department of Local Nurseries. Also specific to our country, the General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection have day centers as their subordinates, which can be organized for children under three, as well as maternal centers, responsible for the social protection of mother and child. Prevention services are organized under the authority of Local Public Services of Social Work within the local municipalities or for the County under the authority of the Department of Community Assistance.

3. EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION FROM THE PSYCHO-SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

If, ten years ago, the doctors recommended pregnant women to speak with the child before birth, there is now evidence that memory develops in the womb and learning starts by early communication through before the speech development stage. These abilities of unborn children underlie

the reported successes in a series of scientific experiments with prenatal stimulation.

Robert Grill, a psychologist in Sydney, Australia, is the author of „*Parenting for a Peaceful World*” and „*Heart to Heart Parenting*”. The author states that each important emotional experience of the child after birth - whether joyous or painful - is stored in memory and has a lasting impact on the nervous system in the long term. The suffering experienced by the small child creates neural patterns and pathways that make him vulnerable later, and the nerve connections strengthened by human interactions after childbirth underlie human intelligence, the relationships with those who look after him being crucial to the functioning of the brain (Grills, 2008:35)

At birth the brain is not mature. Maturation process occurs rapidly in the early years through overproduction of neurons, which develop interconnections between them (synapses), undergoing an astounding proliferation of neural circuits, happening that at the age of 2 years to have 50% more connections than at the age of 16 years (Muntean, 2009:102). In time, in the development of human brain connections takes place a reduction in connections and death of neurons through specialization and maturing of the brain areas with the improvement of their functions.

Any child who is normally loved does not form a memory from such a banal gesture of affection. This does not mean that he does not record it into his memory. The affective constraint is a situation of serious sensory deprivation and trauma deceiving, and the more heartbreaking heart-rending the hardest to realize in early childhood (Cyrulnic, 2005:15).

How are shaped our actions in time, who are the individuals and factors that shape our social behaviours represent the long way towards assuming the responsibilities

related to early intervention in care and education of the families blessed with a small child. Care giving responsibility, early childhood care and education belong to the parents, the family, but it can not be isolated from the world or members of the community. What is the limit between family responsibility and community responsibility?

After birth, the situations are very different in terms of the environment in which the child will receive care and education. Postpartum care and education begins at home, in the family. The priority of this work is represented by the children from socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged families. Children coming from these environments present a risk factor in terms of mental health, certainly because there is a neglect of early intervention in education. A low socio-economical status is a sign to many risk factors, which may include poor maternal education, lack of living space, unexplained estrange from their parents, poor diet, lack of a daily organized program, exposure to violence and to other neighbourhood risk factors, insecurity, abuse or neglect (Tassoni, 2006:43).

Socio-cultural influences in becoming human

People, human groups differ according to cultural and behavioural practices that have been developed. The influence of socio-cultural context, the way we conduct and carry out our existence represents a whole mechanism to form concepts, mentalities, our beliefs. The cultural ideological environment and the community thinking style „anchor” every individual belonging to them, shaping him and throwing him into the world (Moscovici, 1995:12).

When a person is bombarded the whole life, or a great part of it, with a certain set of images, interpretations or categories of thought, he appropriates these patterns and rejects everything that contradicts with his system of values. Thus, the man becomes the prisoner of his cultural context.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It is considered as appropriate for this study the action-research which is useful as scientific method because it involves planning, action, reflection and evaluation as variants of identifying new opportunities for change of social action (Moscovici, Buschini, 2007:49). Action research is a type of practical social survey aimed at improving social situations through interventions that produce change, involving a process of collaboration between researchers and participants. Whatever form it takes, action research is a qualitative research (Mucchielli, 2002:53).

The uniqueness of the present research lies around the comparative research value of the policy measures impact on disadvantaged and single-parents families in terms of ensuring equal opportunities in respect of their rights, equal access to early childhood care and education. Using qualitative research methods (observation, interviews, focus groups, case studies) and choosing random sampling (both of the sample consisting of the social institutions employees from Germany and Romania, and of the sample consisting of socially disadvantaged persons) it is considered that we have successfully achieved a full and accurate view of what is currently done in the two countries for early childhood care and education.

5. INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH: TOWARDS A NEW MATERNALITY THEORY

In the interpretation of the research results we start from „*the value truths of this research*”, which we consider relevant:

1. Both in Germany and Romania there are women who abandon their child (mentioning child abandonment studies in Romania - UNICEF, 2006; statistical figures presented in this respect, but also the recommendations of the Federal Council of Ethics, concerning the illegality of anonymous birth – babyklappe⁵).
2. Prevention and early warning positively affects this phenomenon, as well as the child development who may remain with his mother, thereby reducing long-term costs, with reference to the costs of his care in the child protection system.
3. Inclusion of children from disadvantaged families in early education programs reduces long-term risks and generates social capital.
4. Parental education is the long-term success and appropriate policies that suit the needs of current society - early motherhood (prevention, intervention and monitoring).

The most important prerequisite for ensuring and put in practice a good enough care for the child is that the parents may have had themselves a good enough care during their

⁵ *babyklappe* or *klappe for children* – established in Germany in 1999 within the hospital (in 2009, there were a number of 80), it allows leaving of the baby under identity anonymity, as well as quality medical care immediately after leaving. <http://www.ethikrat.org/ueber-uns/ethikratgesetz> (accessed on 27.09.2011)

childhood. It is therefore very important to understand „the social stock of knowledge” of the parent who is experiencing difficulties in assuming responsibilities (Berger, Luckmann, 2008).

Early construction of maternity

We mention at least two major aspects in assuming the role of mother:

- The type of attachment developed in her little child to her own mother will be the model of attachment that her child may develop (Becker-Stoll *et.all.*, 2008);
- Her own preparing, those „actions of routine”, the desire to develop such skills for assuming such an important role especially for her child, for the future human being, for the whole society: the maternal role.

Considering the practical aspects presented in this chapter of the research conducted in Romania and Germany, it is shown the need for early childhood education, mandatory records of pregnant women from disadvantaged backgrounds, with their inclusion in parental education programs before birth and involvement in parental education programs after childbirth, and we must take German models of good practice because:

- Most mothers who come from disadvantaged backgrounds think the baby is unable to experience feelings and postpones the strengthening of attachment for the higher age of the child, „when he’ll understand he’s loved”;
- Mothers who have not received early education does not accept by own initiative a program of psycho-emotional stimulation of the child;
- Mothers who have not received maternal care in their little childhood do not make interest for structuring a child's

individualized program. During the baby's sleep periods they do not consider themselves useful, do not make a close supervision, neglecting the child's requirements.

6. CARE, EDUCATION AND LOVE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

From the analysis of the maternity construction difficulties that have been highlighted in this research, and because of the multitude and diversity of cases, we suggest focusing on early childhood care and education. Parental support and educational programs contribute to the construction of maternity, preventing separation of the child from mother, preventing risk situations for the child, but also compliance with the rights of the child. A few proposals:

1. Development of mandatory parental education programs for parents who have economic insecurity and low education, support programs in developing parenting skills and abilities;
2. Support network for single parents, for young mothers with many children;
3. The existence of social housing for single-parents families, disadvantaged families. Co-payment: parents/state or private providers of rental housing fee;
4. Development of the mandatory free prenatal counselling for pregnant minors, systems of early intervention and early warning;
5. Including small children in early childhood programs - legislative provisions on school curricula development and including early childhood in the mandatory services for children from disadvantaged families.

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