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CONSUMPTION OF PUBLIC CHILDCARE AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES: AN END-USER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Public childcare and educational services are complex services resulting in a relationship that is established between a supplier and a consumer of such services. In 2002 the European Council meeting in Barcelona, established that by 2010, the Member States should develop childcare services for at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age. This will stimulate the consumption of public services for the care and education of children.

This article aims to analyze the consumption of public childcare and educational services in Romanian kindergartens. The first part provides conceptual clarification on consumption and consumers of public childcare and educational services and the second part assessed the rights of children and parents to such services. The last part presents some of the results of a questionnaire based exploratory survey conducted in Bucharest on the quality of services provided in preschool education from the perspective of users: parents of preschool children. The results show that the existence of legal regulations in the field, the access to quality services and the cost of these services represent key elements to determine the consumption of such services.

Keywords: public services, childcare and educational services in kindergartens, consumer's rights, public childcare and educational services consumption

JEL Classification: I21, H4

Introduction

In the classical theory of services (Fourastié, 1949) there are identified and defined three sectors within the economical organization of a country: the primary, secondary and tertiary sector. Starting from this point of view, public services, including education and childcare belong to the third sector. Griliches (1990) highlights the following issues to be identified when talking about services in general: nature/content of the transaction, how to involve consumers in service delivery, the quality, especially the difficulty of quality perception and the difficulty of productivity measurement for some types of services. Bitner, Fisk and

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Brown (1993) identified four characteristics of commercial services: intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability. With reference to commercial services, public services have their own characteristics that distinguish them from the first ones but also from those of general economic interest by objectives, organization, financing. But the public sector, which is a „consumer” of public resources, implies a high responsibility for the public suppliers and achieving its final purpose, respectively the meeting of the general interest, involves the interaction with the customer (Dobrin, 2005). For the public sector, Potter (1988) expressed the view that consumerism seeks a balance of power between providers and beneficiaries by improving consumers' access, by the freedom of choice, real possibilities for information, remedies and the possibility of representation. Potter's approach puts the consumer in the center of discussions about what are public services and how they should be accomplished.

Over the public agent-recipient interaction, obtaining the satisfaction by the latter is closely related to the quality of service provided but, more importantly, to the compliance of the provider with the interests and citizens' rights. This requires a good knowledge of the legal protection enjoyed at national and European level for the beneficiaries.

European legislation on the protection of consumer rights for any kind of services involves an element of education, information and representation of consumers, a component of health protection and consumer safety but also a component of protecting the economic interests of consumers.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the consumption of public childcare and educational services in Romanian kindergartens. Consumption of public childcare and educational services is poorly investigated at this time, especially in terms of user. In year 2007 the authors of this article carried out a questionnaire based exploratory survey within kindergartens from Bucharest on the quality of services provided in preschool education from the perspective of users: parents of preschool children. Results of the research carried out stress the need to deepen this domain in order to adapt its services to consumer's needs.

1. The consumption of public early childhood education services

Public childcare and educational services are provided in kindergartens for children of ages 3-6/7 years old. Early childhood education involves education, protection and care. Therefore, they imply a greater complexity in terms of regulation and provision. For this reason, the international position of many countries is that educational and care services for children are educational services, but they also are social services.

This feature is a direct consequence of the definitions given for this category of services, definitions which are grouped around the same idea, namely: social services refer to activities, programs, techniques for identifying needs and for social intervention, in order to correct social disruptions. Pillinger (2000; 2001) believes that social services are those that are provided in order to meet the needs of the citizens, in direct relation to employment, health, *education*, security and social assistance. The same author also acknowledges that such services shall be driven, financed and provided by public authorities at national or local level, without excluding the possibility of involvement of the private sector or NGO. Providing public social services serves to achieve economic, social and political objectives (Pillinger, 2001) favoring the procurement of a decent life but also serves to build

capacities and skills for various categories of people in need, generating a series of positive effects.

In light of these characteristics, researches on the concepts of consumerism, consumption and consumers in childcare and educational services require complex approaches. The concept of consumer requires an economical relationship with the supplier (J. Clarke, 2007) who in return for the payment submits a good or provides a service. Public childcare and educational services are sustained by the consumer-citizen through taxes and tariffs, so he is entitled to the same rights as for commercial services.

In Romania, statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics for the time horizon 1990-2007/2008 show that the specific rate of school enrolment for children aged 3-6/7 years continuously increased from 54.3% in 1990 to 66.1% in 2000 and to 81.8% in 2007. On the other hand, teaching staff employed in early education system grew in a much reduced rate from 36,447 people in 1990 to 34,023 in 2000 and 37,348 people in 2007. Data from the National Institute of Statistics include pre-school teaching staff both from the public and private education system. Moreover, the number of preschool establishments during 1992-2008 significantly decreased from 12,603 units in 1992 to 10,080 in 2000 and 1718 units in 2008. In 1991 there were 752,141 children enrolled in kindergartens and in 2007 their number reached 648,862 children.

2. Owners' rights to public childcare and educational services in Romania

At national level there have been taken several legislative steps aimed to increase the quality of education provided in kindergartens. Current legislation establishes rights and obligations for beneficiaries' right to public education services and childcare, which turns citizens into customers and promotes a culture of consumption in developing public preschool education.

Currently, child care and educational services in Romanian kindergartens are part of the pre-school educational system located under the coordination of the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, preceding the first level of compulsory education, but national legislation does not clarify if these services belong to the category of educational services and / or social services. In Romania, during 2008-2009, the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, through its subordinate bodies, initiated public debate on regulating the system of care and education of children during the day as a type of social service.

2.1 Children's rights at public childcare and educational services

Work on children's rights and protection has been regulated for the first time in Romania in 1970, by the Law no. 3/1970 regarding the treatment care for minors. Since then and until now the Romanian legislation on children's rights and their protection has suffered changes that have occurred also as a result of aligning the Romanian legislation with the *Acquis Communautaire* and with the provisions of international conventions, agreements to which Romania is part. When we speak about international conventions, we refer primarily to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20, 1989 and ratified by Romania in 1990 by Law no.18/1990. Later, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child has been

integrated into the content of current law (Law no. 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, published in M. Of. Part I, no. 557 / 23.06.2004) which explicitly, inter alia, that the Romanian state *guarantees access to education for all children without discrimination*. In fact, the Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of child rights guarantees Romanian children not only the right to education, but many rights that can be grouped into 3 categories:

- rights referring to protection - protection against any form of physical or emotional abuse, and against all forms of exploitation;
- rights relating to development - the child has access to all basic services such as education and health care;
- rights relating to participation - the right of child to be involved in decisions affecting him.

Turning to the children right to education, we can say that this right is well defined by Law 272/2004: *"The child is entitled to receive an education enabling his skills and personality development, in non-discriminatory conditions."* (Article 47, Paragraph 1). Also within the Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of child rights is stipulated that, within the educational process, *"the child is entitled to be treated with respect by teachers, to be informed of his rights and on how to exercise them. Corporal punishment within the educational process is prohibited."* (Article 48, Paragraph 2). In Article 49 of the same law it is stipulated the right of children to rest and take vacation, stating the fact that every child must *"to have free time for rest and vacation, to participate freely in their recreation of his age and cultural, artistic and sports community. Public authorities are obliged to contribute according to their duties, to ensure conditions have equal exercise of this right."* (Article 49, Paragraph 2).

Moreover, the right to education is provided in Article 32 of the Constitution of Romania. Paragraph (1) of Article 32 of the Romanian Constitution stipulates: *"The right to education is provided by the compulsory general education, by secondary and vocational education, by higher education and other forms of instruction and improvement"*.

Yet, the general framework in the field is provided in the Law. 84/1995 - Education Act, as republished. Thus, the Education Law 84/1995 and also the Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education (Ministry of Education and Research Order 4464/07.09.2000) determine as fundamental principles *children free access to pre-school education*, the types of schools for preschool education and types of services provided within them. School unit providing education and care is kindergarten, which can operate as follows:

- normal program (5 hours per day), providing appropriate education and training of children for school and social life;
- extended schedule (10 hours a day), which provides education and adequate preparation of children for school and social life and their social protection (food, supervision and recreation);
- weekly program, which provides education and adequate preparation of children for school and social life and protection, nutrition, supervision and rest for those from

disadvantaged families and social backgrounds, during a week (Article 22 of the Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education).

Also, the Romanian legislation sets minimum standards of work (necessary to achieve quality in the educational process) as follows:

- groups can not contain more than 20 children but no less than 10 (Article 24 of Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education),
- interdiction for kindergartens operating in unsanitary buildings with classrooms equipped with furniture and equipment that may endanger the health and lives of children (Article 25 and Article 26 of the Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education),
- prohibition of child discrimination by criteria that contradict their rights (Article 43 of the Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education),
- conducting the educational program only by teaching staff authorized by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports.

Other rights that are covered in the *Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education* refer to the fact that all children are entitled to be enrolled in a kindergarten, being "*prohibited discrimination by any criteria*" (Article 32). Article 43 of the *Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education* complements Article 32 and clearly establishes that "*during the educational approach is prohibited child discrimination based on criteria that come in contradiction with his rights*". Moreover, the child's right not to be abusively removed from the records of kindergarten is stipulated in Article 37 of the same Regulation, Article that clearly states the situations in which the child is removed from the records of kindergarten: the case of chronic infectious disease, with medical advice or if the child is absent for two weeks consecutively, without reasons.

Therefore, according with the law, in Romania, all children are entitled to access preschool education, the access being free and non-discriminatory. In addition, every child is entitled to an educational approach strategically thought so that each child is valued, differentiated and individualised in order to support its development in line with his own rhythm of development. However, *education services for children* offered by the Romanian state until now is only open to children aged between 3 and 6/7 years, children aged between 0 and 3 years having only access to care services provided through nurseries .

Regarding children's right to an education program, the *Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education* stipulates the fact that the program is proceeding according to education plans, curriculum and programs approved at national level, establishing that the *game* represents "*the activity, the fundamental learning form, the means of making and method of stimulating children's creativity and ability as his right as an opening to freedom of choice, according to the needs of their own*" (Article 44 of the Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education).

Regarding the educational approach of the preschool educational institutions, Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports has developed a curriculum on which to provide early education (*Curriculum for early education of children aged between 3 and 6/7 years*). Among the fundamental values promoted by this curriculum is stipulated also the right of

children to education. Curriculum stipulates the fact that it is important that diversity is recognized and appreciated in a positive way. In the same document it is specified the types of activities in kindergartens: routines (repeated daily, have the same content, "cover the basic needs of children and contribute to overall development of the child"), transitions (switch from routine to the instructive-educative activities) and educational activities (organized and run by educators in order to achieve the purpose from the curriculum; involving collaboration between educators, parents and children). What we must point out however is that, in the curriculum, is set out clearly as possible that, in the educational process, *"will emphasize inclusion, recognizing the right of all children to be educated together and considering that education for all children is equally important"*.

At kindergarten level, the responsibility for how all activities are organized and conducted (including the activities of instructive and educational nature), the responsibility for staff activity, but also for the activities aimed at parents and settling differences occurred, adapting to the personality of each child, to ways of cooperation with the local community and all stakeholders in the protection and education of children, passes to the manager of the institution. At national level, in terms of organizational and financial responsibility, the responsibility rests with the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports.

2.2 Parents' rights regarding public childcare and educational services

The relationship between kindergarten and parents is a topic often addressed in the literature, especially after Romania entered the European Union, because, before that moment, the partnership between the kindergarten and parents was rather one-sided, parents considering that child's education is solely the responsibility of the kindergarten. In the documents of the Council of Europe it is highlighted the fact that this unilateral approach should be replaced with a new approach which refers to a partnership between the two parties (family and kindergarten). Thus, at European level, emphasis is placed on a mutual commitment clearly established between parents and kindergarten, based on a *"parental contract"*. For this reason, the new approach establishes the parent's quality of consumer, quality to which there are associated rights and obligations. The parental contract involves, therefore, parents collaborating in kindergarten activities, not only under economic aspect, namely to participate, support and evaluate efforts and financial measures of kindergarten, but also under educational-cultural aspect.

In the case of the Romanian society, the *"parental contract"* is still being planned. From the legal point of view, the relationship between parents and kindergarten is clarified especially as economic, rather than educational and cultural issue, and parents continue to live with the idea that their children's education is entirely the responsibility of the kindergarten.

Parents' rights related to the need for childcare and child education are enacted in Romania both in the Family Code and in the Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of child rights. But, as pointed above, the Romanian legislation is based on a rather unilateral approach and neglects the mutual aspect of the relationship between parents and kindergarten. Article 97 of the Family Code states that *both parents have equal rights to their children and these rights must be exercised only in the interest of their children*. Article 47 of Law 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights stipulates that, in addition to the obligation to register children in school and to ensure regular

attendance by the school courses, parents “have a priority right to choose the type of learning to be given to their children”.

The Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education developed by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports and approved by Ministry Order no. 4464/7.09.2000 ensures *the right of parents to may transfer their child, on request, from one kindergarten to another, within the planned sites* (Article 36). In addition, the same document establishes the fact that parents should be informed on this right (Article 38) and of the fact that on the child's enrolment in kindergarten, the personal data extracted from documents contained in the dossier for children inclusion in kindergarten are recorded in the Register filing of the entry of children.

3. Questionnaire-based survey on consumption of public childcare and educational services in Bucharest: user approach.

A good quality of childcare and educational services contributes in providing important benefits to children, to their families and, not ultimately, to society as a whole. The future of public childcare and educational services in Romania, like in many other European countries and not only, seems to be, at this point, *a public service available for all children*. To support care and education of children in Romania, the state provides subventions to local authorities according to a set of indicators (for example: *population number, territorial area assigned to that population, etc.*). Therefore, the proportion of the subvention to be used for preschoolers is also determined at local level. Local contribution for pre-school institutions is subjected to budgetary limitations. In this context, communities should be innovative in order to raise additional funds to supplement the budget granted for pre-schools by the local budget.

In order to achieve the objectives related to reconciliation between professional and family life, in March 2002, the European Council, meeting in Barcelona, took the initiative of inviting Member States to remove disincentives to female labour force participation, taking into account the *demand and in line with national patterns of provision*, to provide childcare by 2010 for at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and for at least 33% of children under 3 years of age. This will stimulate the consumption of public services for care and education of children.

All investments which are made in care and educational services for children should be included in the *quality of services* they offer, the consumer of public education and care services having the right to quality services that enable him a better balance of family and professional life. Public childcare and educational services are sustained by the consumer-citizens through taxes and tariffs, so he is entitled to the access to these types of public service with respect for his rights.

We present below some of the results of an exploratory survey conducted in Bucharest on the quality of services provided in preschool education from the *perspective of users* of such services: *parents of preschool children*. The questionnaire-based survey conducted by the National Scientific Research for Labour and Social Protection (INCSMPS) assessed, inter alia, the necessary for care and education services of children attending kindergarten in 2007 in Bucharest. For collecting the information it was used a *standardized questionnaire*. *Face to face* interviews were conducted at household level by interviewing

one of the two family adult persons (parent or legal guardian of preschoolers) selected according to the sampling procedure provided in the methodology developed by INCSMPS. The target group of the questionnaire based survey was thus composed of adults (parents or legal guardians of preschoolers) from families with children between 3 and 6 (7) years (preschool children) attending kindergarten at the time of the survey (at least half of a month). If in the family there were more preschoolers, reporting was made to the preschooler with the largest age.

The sample size: 703 respondents

The margin of error: +/- 3.62%, 95% confidence interval

Type of the sample: stratified random sample

Data collecting took place in Bucharest in the period October 25 - November 12, 2007 and it was carried out by IMAS S.A operators according to the research methodology developed by INCSMPS.

Data entry and processing was done in the SPSS 15.0 program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), and the analysis and interpretation of the data were made using unweighted database. The quality control on data collecting and on the reliability of interviews was conducted using the method of checking logical connections between variables.

From this survey we analyze below the *reasons for consumption* (reasons for choosing the kindergarten for the preschooler), *the typology of kindergartens attended by preschoolers* (kindergartens with normal hours or longer working hours) and the *cost associated with consumption of public care and education services of children* (the cost of services provided in kindergartens attended by preschoolers).

3.1 The motivation for choosing kindergarten

Most of the interviewed respondents said they were motivated to choose kindergartens for their children firstly by *the distance kindergarten-home* (reduced distance), 54%, *secondly by the type of kindergartens' program (with longer working hours)*, 42,8% also and by the *types of services offered by the kindergarten, particularly language courses for preschoolers*, 43,1% (Table no. 1).

Table no.1: Percentage references for reasons which have led parents to choose the kindergarten for their child

	Percentage references
The quality of teachers in the kindergarten, despite the lack of language courses, computer courses, etc.	20.4%
Services offered by kindergarten :	
Language courses for preschoolers	43.1%
PC courses for preschoolers	26.7%
Other courses (dance, music, ballet)	10%
Distance close to home	54%

Kindergarten program type:	
Normal program	12%
Program extended	42.8%
Low cost that I had to pay for services provided by kindergarten	21%
This was the only kindergarten that I could choose one close to home	33%
Small number of children in the group, which guarantee me a better quality of child care and education.	9.8%

For single parents families data analysis reveals that respondents supporting single-parent families were primarily motivated to choose the kindergarten for their children depending on the distance kindergarten-home (reduced distance from home), 62.7%. This motivation in choosing kindergarten is about 10% more frequent in the case of single parent families compared to dual-parent families.

3.2 Type of kindergarten attended by the preschooler

Most of the respondents had children enrolled in *state kindergartens with longer working hours*, 85.7%, while only 14.3% of respondents had children enrolled in *state kindergartens with normal program*.

An analysis by the mother's employment status at the time of the survey shows that 86.4% of mothers who had preschool children enrolled in *state kindergartens with longer working hours* were full-time employed, while only 67.6% of mothers who had preschool children enrolled in *state kindergartens with normal hours* were full-time employed. Also, if the mother stays at home, the trend is twice as likely to use the services offered by the state kindergarten with normal program compared with the selection of *state kindergartens with longer working hours*.

Designed to ensure a balance between family and professional responsibilities, care and education services of children stimulates consumption of such services for certain categories of people as we argued above.

3.3 Cost of services provided by kindergartens

Administrative costs for public kindergartens are paid from the budgets of local government authorities, while the salaries of the staff (teaching and ancillary) are supported by the state budget allocated for education. In addition, parents pay for supplies, meals (in the case of kindergartens with longer working hours or kindergartens with weekly program), optional hours (foreign languages, music, dance, computer) or hygienic materials. Transport facilities are quite rare for public kindergartens.

Among the respondents who had, at the time of the survey, children enrolled in *kindergartens with normal hours*, only 26.9% said they paid a monthly sum of money especially for optional courses included in kindergarten program. From among these persons, 33.8% stated that it was an amount that they could not afford easily, the rest having no problems in paying the amount.

Among the respondents who, at the time of the survey, had children enrolled in state kindergarten with extended program 65.2% said they could easily afford that amount, while 34.8% did not.

An analysis based on the typology of the preschooler's family, dual-parent families or single parent families, shows that, such as it can be seen in the chart below (Figure no. 1), everything connected to the *costs associated with consumption of care and education services of children* is more difficult to bear for single-parent families than for dual-parent families. Unaffordable childcare can be a serious poverty trap (Esping-Andersen, 2002a). If the childcare service is too expensive, families with low-incomes, especially single parent families, will not be able to afford it. Children will remain thus in the care of the parent who will be forced to reduce working hours, if possible, or will give up work to care for children. Therefore, care and education services for children should be accessible in terms of cost, but not only, in order to allow low-income parents to maintain their employee status on the labor market.

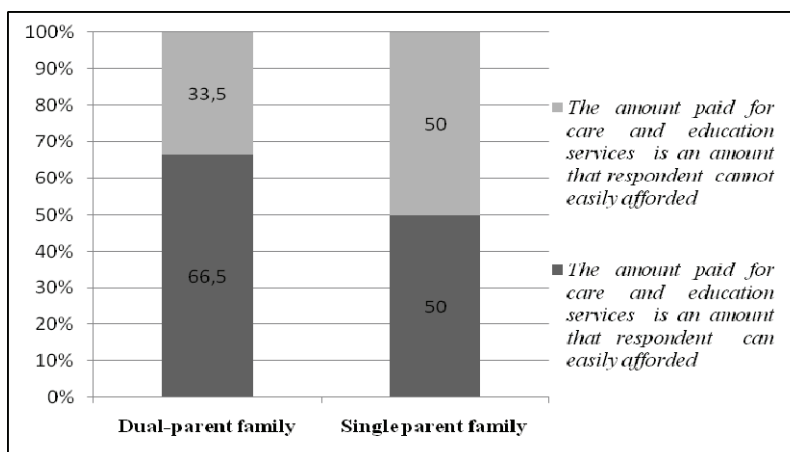


Figure no.1: Percentage distribution of responses to the question:
"How do you assess the amount you must pay for services provided by kindergartens services, compared to your family budget?", by family typology

3.4 Complaints about services provided by kindergartens

Consumers of care and education services for children mentioned, in the percentage of 72.1%, that, in general, had no complaints concerning the activity of kindergartens where their children attended. In the case of 27.9% respondents who had declared themselves dissatisfied with the activity from kindergarten where their children attended; the most frequently mentioned complaint was that related to *the large number of children in the group compared with existing staff in kindergartens*: 38.3% references.

They also expressed dissatisfaction with *the too short program of kindergartens*. It is felt acutely the need for extension of the program of such public service so that parents can be able to achieve a balance between family and professional life, the latter being revenue-generating for the family.

In Romania, however, policies on early childhood education are in the process of legislative change and the adverse effects, such as survey's data confirmed, are felt by families with children in care, who manage quite difficult to harmonize work and family life, on the ground of this type of services' deficit.

Conclusions

Analysis of statistics provided by National Institute of Statistics from Romania shows that the upward trend for the rate of coverage of children and teachers was not reflected in an increase of the number of day care units, which means that there are situations where minimum educational standards for group formation in kindergartens and for the maximum number of children in a group are not obeyed. The Education Law, The Regulation regarding the organization and the functioning of preschool education, the existing curriculum detail the pattern of pre-school instruction, while defining a set of rights and obligations associated with the consumption of childcare and educational services. But, in the absence of adequate budgetary availability, these principles have remained only legal regulation, as evidenced also in the research conducted by INCSMPS.

Childcare and educational services consumption provides families with children significant benefits. Due to the raising participation in paid work of women with children, demand for regulated childcare services has been increasing all over the Europe, including in Romania. The provision of formal childcare services is an important indicator of work family balance. There is a direct link between childcare provision services and the access of parents to paid employment. One of the important elements that influence the consumption of such services, just as it emerged from INCSMPS's survey, is *the cost* of the service. If childcare service is too expensive, families with low-income will not be able to afford it. Thus, children will remain in the care of the parent who will be forced to reduce his working hours, if it is possible, or to give up work in order to care for children. Also, the access to *good quality childcare services, operating at hours enabling parents to exercise their professional skills on labor market* are a key element in determining consumption of such services.

In Romania, consumption of public childcare and educational services is poorly investigated, especially in terms of user. The research carried out by INCSMPS stresses the need to deepen this field in order to adapt services to consumer's needs.

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