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2019 National Research Report on Learning space practices and Teachers' competence in Romania

Daycare and preschool institutions

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Abstract
Our primary aim in the current research report was to explore the quality of toddler and preschool childcare in Romania using the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ITERS-R) and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R), in a sample of 41 education institutions (i.e., daycare classrooms) and 31 preschool classrooms. Given the extensive findings related to the importance of the school environments' physical conditions, the quality and frequency of interaction between children and teacher, in addition to other educational particularities (e.g., program structure, meals, parent-teacher collaboration) for children's cognitive and socio-emotional development, we consider the present study highly important for both policymakers, parents and teachers alike. Our detailed, item-by-item analyses revealed that Romanian toddler and preschool classrooms are insufficient equipped to provide a qualitative learning environment (e.g., insufficient educational toys and materials for children to play with during free play period; long transitions between activities, with nothing to engage children in; a rigid daily schedule with no opportunities for individual or small group work or play. The findings provide a multidimensional assessment of the learning environment and interaction in educational programs for children aged 0 to 6, and thus to gain a better understanding of what kinds of programming have been conducted to improve children's social and emotional competence according to the quality of learning environment.

Keywords: learning environment, daycare classrooms, preschool classrooms, health, quality environment

Quality of Learning Environments for Early Childhood Education: Evidence from Romania

Safe, positive, and constructive educational environments are highly important for children, teachers, and parents alike. A growing body of research highlights the special attention we need to pay in studying the educational environments, climate, and connection with children's well-being (e.g., Bernardes et al., 2017; Borkar, 2016). Bradshaw et al. (2014) suggested that safe and supportive educational (i.e., school) models are formed through three primary factors: commitment, safety, and environment. Additionally, Kutsyuruba et al. (2015) concluded through an extensive literature review that three dimensions are essential for children's subsequent well-being: physical features (i.e., schools' environmental quality), academic features (the personal skills and characteristics of teachers), and the social features, such as the quality of relationships between the schools' members. In the current study, we focus on the Romanian educational environment, e.g., the daycare and preschool system serving children aged 0 to 6 years, aiming to explore the quality of the learning environments and interaction between teachers and children.

The Romanian Education System: Early Childhood Care

The Educational programs for the very young are more caregiving oriented than provision of education. Nurseries used to employ nurses as the caregivers with no educator in the staff. Fortunately, recent legislative measures taken have addressed this issue bringing forth the educational element. Now the programs follow a national curriculum that focuses on the whole child with services for parents and children with developmental delays. Education system in Romania is highly centralized. The Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research is in charge of all education levels from preschool to higher education developing the strategic plans and national policies. All teachers in Romania are required to have a bachelor's degree followed by a year in pedagogical training. In order to secure a permanent position, novice teachers are also required to successfully pass their probation year. Allocations for the nurseries and preschools from the national budget is low making basic maintenance and hygiene, educational materials and furniture difficult to provide. With nowhere to turn to, school administrators ask parents to contribute to school budget. The education requirements for ECEC staff are regulated by legal provision. Qualification in the preschool education range from graduates of pedagogical high schools (with specializations in early childhood education) to staff with university degrees in pedagogical studies and specializations in primary or preschool education. Teacher salaries are very low and below OECD average. Preschool education in Romania covers the ages of 3 to 6/7 with a year in kindergarten being mandatory. Public preschools are free of charge and fall in the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research and the School Inspectorates which supervise also the activities of private institutions. Within the public education system there are also variety of programs with different pedagogical approaches available including Step by Step Program, Montessori Program, Waldorf Program, Jena Plan, Freinet Program.

Do Romanian education settings really cover sufficiently the needs of today's children, teachers and families or whole society? In fact children need confident relations full of love and educational atmospheres that will ensure them to improve their skills and to discover their potential. This potential in children may stay undiscovered and hidden forever (Fox and Schirrmacher, 2014, p. 7). An important component is that the teachers should establish a sensitive, responsive and warm interactions in an effective teaching process in a not over structured classroom atmosphere. The relationship between children and adult is a significant element which leads to social, emotional and academic results in childhood (Pianta, 1998; Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012; Morris, Denham, Bassett & Timothy, 2013).

What makes an educational environment high quality has been a focus of research for many decades. Based on the quality dimensions

defined by empirical findings researchers also evaluate quality of learning environments. Research in many countries reveal that only a small percentage of children currently has the chance to get high quality care (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2006). Especially in early childhood, it is of critical importance that the physical environment of the classrooms is designed in a supportive and instructive manner in order to minimize or compensate for the lack of educational stimuli within home environment (Jackman, 2009, p. 41). The researchers often emphasize the necessity of priority of the investments for the children in high risk group and suggest that increasing the quality of educational programmes and atmospheres will also increase the improvements in education.

The fact that the classroom atmospheres and learning centers should be well prepared, equipped and qualified is of high importance too big to neglect in order to improve and support the preschool and elementary school childrens' all developmental fields and creative thinking skills. Therefore, teachers must be competent on appropriate developmental practices by using a learning space that is enriched by innovative materials and tools regarding five developmental dimensions of children: 1. Learning Abilities and Attitudes 2. Development of Language, Communication and the Prerequisites of reading and writing 3. Cognitive Development 4. Socio-emotional Development, and 5. Physical Development, Personal Health and Hygiene. Synchronization with the needs and particularities of current child generations needs to take into account several variables such as aesthetics, arts, functionality of the learning spaces and innovative educational materials and toys.

It is suggested in the literature that, generally speaking, two basic elements – social-emotional climate and instructional support- often related to classroom process are decisive in childrens' outcomes (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2006). It is seen that many researches have also been done, which covers many different dimensions such as teachers' educatinal level, certification, professional experience (Guo, Piasta, Justice and Kaderavek, 2010; Bassok and Galdo, 2016), number of students in classrooms (Buchanan, Burts, Bidner, White and Charlesworth 1998; Bassok and Galdo, 2016), child-adult ration in classroom, location of school, teacher's self-sufficiency belief (Guo, Piasta, Justice and Kaderavek, 2010), teacher-child interaction, effective classroom implementations and teachers' instructively supportive interactions (Downer, Sabol and Hamre, 2010), language and literacy instruction of teachers (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre and Pianta (2007), income level (poverty), class differences (Bassok and Galdo, 2016).

According to the researchers, studying classroom atmospheres with researches, evaluating several factors related to quality will be supportive in finding new ways and solutions and determining decisive factors for quality. Moreover, it is very constructive to diagnose

relationships and to explore teachers' good practices with children in the classroom, to change professional behaviours, according to problems to promote positive relationship by conducting research design that includes interaction factors.

In recent years, several European countries using the ITERS-R to measure the quality of toddler care reported inadequacy of minimal scores, suggesting the need and importance of rasing quality in TC. For example, in UK the quality of TC was assessed as minimal (Karemaker et al., 2012; M=4.0), in Portugal and the Netherlands as inadequate (M=2.8 / M=2.9; Barros & Aguiar, 2010; Helmerhorst et al., 2015), with very low scores for the *Personal care routines* and *Activites* domains.

Quality of Toddler and Preschool Children Care: Short and Long-term Effects

Quality of care is a complex issue, defined in several ways along the time, depending on the dominant approach (e.g., quality as a relative concept or as an objective concept; Sheridan, 2011). In the current research report, we refer to *quality of care* in terms of structure (i.e., staff's competence, the size of children's groups, characteristics of the buildings, outdoor areas, equipment, and materials) process (relationships between children, teachers, and parents, interaction and communication, teacher's skills and competence), and results (of the individuals, institution, and communities) factors (Baustad, 2012).

Previous research documented several factors associated with the quality of toddler care (TC) and preschool children's (PC) care. Generally, research examining the associations between TC, PC, and children's short and long-term cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social outcomes confirmed their significant correlation (e.g., Belsky et al. 2007; Cote et al., 2007; Love et al., 2005; Mashburn et al., 2008; Sylva et al. 2011; Vandell et al., 2010). For example, Belsky and his collaborators (2007) suggested that higher quality in PC care predicted higher vocabulary scores, while Vandell et al. (2010) detailed the long-term positive consequences of high-qualitative care of TC and PC in terms of academic achievement and behavioral expression. Sylva et al. (2003) suggested that higher levels of quality care for children under three were associated with higher cognitive performances and lower anti-social behaviors for children aged 3 to 5. The quality of center-based child care was found to be highly important for children's fine motor performance (Corsi et al., 2016), language development, and communication skills (Burchinal et al., 1996). Furthermore, according to Burchinal et al. (2009), the quality of early child may serve as a protective factor of familial social risk in terms of academic achievement in elementary school.

Generally, research related to the school environments' physical conditions (e.g., privacy, dimensions, or type of learning spaces),

ergonomics, and architecture suggested their significant impact for the teaching-learning process and for children's cognitive and socio-emotional development (Amedeo et al., 2008; Evans et al., 1991; Higgins et al., 2005; Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2020). Bjørnestad et al. (2012) suggested that some of the most important factors for high-quality toddler care were positive interactions and relationships between staff and children, high staff-to-child ratios, small group sizes (i.e., for children under the age of two eight children per group is the maximum recommended size), and trained staff members, in line with other similar findings (e.g., Sylva et al., 2003; 2008). Bjørnestad et al. (2012) noted that "small, stable groups seem to be crucial for high-quality learning environments that promote children's interaction and communication as well as their learning and development. In bigger and more flexible groups, children seem less likely to have close relationships with the staff because the latter must care for many children" (p. 3). By contrast, large spaces and changing staff seem to undermine children's engagement in closer relationships to their teachers, which, in turn, impact the quality of their development within the educational settings, according to Skalická et al. (2015).

A growing number of studies also outlined the importance of caregivers' training and individual proffessional development (e.g., onsite mentoring and consultation, work-setting activities directed toward program quality improvement) for childcare quality (Campbell et al., 2003; Campbell & Milbourne, 2005; Fischer & Eheart, 1991; Galinski et al., 1994; Kontos et al., 1996; Morgan, 2003).

The present research report

Our primary aim in the current research report was to explore the Learning Environments and Interaction between children and teachers in daycares and preschool settings to understand the pedagogical quality within Romanian early childhood educational care. Given the extensive findings related to the importance of the school environments' physical conditions, the quality and frequency of interaction between children and teacher, in addition to other educational particularities (e.g., program structure, meals, parent-teacher collaboration) for children's cognitive and socio-emotional development, we consider the present research report study highly important for both policymakers, parents and teachers alike.

Research sample

Convenient sampling was used to recruit all the teachers willing to participate in the present study. We collected data from 41

educational settings, i.e., 10 daycare classrooms (serving children aged 0 to 3) and 31 preschools institutions (serving children aged 3 to 6) located in communities with different socio-economic status. All the teachers from educational settings were female, with 41.2 mean age (*SD* = 9.3), 16.30 years of experience (SD = 11.41). Among them 70% had bachelors (60%) or mastery (10%) level of studies, with only 30% with high school level of education. In addition, in this classrooms the mean number of children was 23.70 (SD = 2.68).

All the teachers from preschools institutions were female, with 35.58 mean age (*SD* = 9.69), 14.30 years of experience (SD = 14.44). Among them 84% had bachelors (54%) or mastery (30%) level of studies, with only 16% with high school level of education. In addition, in this classrooms the mean number of children was 21.36 (SD = 9.12).

2.2. Research Instruments

Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R; Harms et al., 2017**)**. ITERS-R is a valid and reliable instrument that relies on information collected through on-site three-hour-long observation of classrooms (i.e., the whole educational setting, not individual children) for children under 36 months (daycares). The three-hour observation period was followed by an interview with the class teacher to gain information about some of the aspects that could not be observed during the visits, as suggested by Harms et al. (2006). Thirty-three items, based on research from health, development, and educational fields, cover six subscales of the instrument, including Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Books, Activities, Interaction, and Program Structure. Overall, the subscales describe and measure generally accepted elements of global quality care i.e., children's health and safety, the quality and appropriateness of daily activities, quality of the interactions with adults, and promotion of emotional growth and constructive, positive peer relationships (Cryer, 2003; Hestnes et al., 2007).

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R; Harms et al., 1998**)**. Similar to ITERS-3, ECERS-R is a valid, reliable, suitable and a manageable instrument that relies on information collected through on-site three-hour-long observation of preschool classrooms (Mathers et al., 2007). Forty-three items cover seven subscales of the instrument, including Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Reasoning, Activities, Interaction, Program Structure, and Parents and Staff. According to Clifford (2004),

ECERS was developed to "provide guidance to practitioners to help them examine classroom environments in order to make improvements in the provisions for youngchildren" (p. 12).

Two researchers (i.e., observers) matched what they observed with the criteria that defined scoring for each item of the ITERS-3 and ECERS-R. Each subscale item for both instruments was scored on a scale ranging from 1 to 7. The mean score calculated for each subscale and for all test items indicates the program's global quality: 7 = excellent, 5 to 6.99 = good, 3 to 4.99 = minimally adequate, and les than 3 = inadequate care. Following Bjørnestad and Os's procedure (2017), in the current research "all indicators were scored even if the groups did not meet the requirements at lower levels; this approach gives a more nuanced picture of classrooms' strengths and weaknesses. this alternative scoring procedure does not affect the ITERS-R scores; it just gives more information" (p.116). Following Sakai's procedure (2003), we calculated global scores based on the average of all items for both instruments.

Finally, we used a demographic form that included questions related to the age group of the children served, socio-economic statuses of parents, teacher's education level, experience, age, and gender, and whether the program provides free meals.

2.3. Research Procedure

This research report study's protocol was designed following the ethical requirements specific to the faculty where the authors were affiliated. All participants voluntarily joined the study and gave written informed consent, following the Declaration of Helsinki and the national laws from Romania regarding ethical conduct in scientific research. Managers from each educational setting also approved the study. Two research assistants administered the scales following a 5-day extensive training sessions, conducted by experienced psychologists and researchers. The data collection process started following the establishment of test intra-rater reliability to a criterion of 85% agreement. Average weighted kappas were .80 for the ITERS-R and .78 for ECERS-R. Data were collected through observations of the same classrooms by two different researchers on two different days for three hours (in the morning), two-weeks apart, in the Spring of 2019.

Following Sakai's research procedure (2003), to increase the accuracy of our data, obswerves were also instructed to 1) stay together in the classrooms, observing (i.e., *shadowing*) the same groups of teachers and children; 2) to address simultaneously (in the presence of

one another) the potential questions for the staff, necessary for specific items within the ITERS-R and ECERS-R, and 3) not to discuss their observations, in order to control the potential influence on other's perception. Interviews with teachers took place during children's nap time or teacher's lunch brakes.

3. Results

Results from all observers were collected and explored following data collection. We used the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-3) for the daycares and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) for the preschools. In the following subsections, we present an item-by-item detailed description of each of the two instruments' (ITERS-R and ECERS-R) subscales to outline a picture as accurate as possible of the results related to the environment's quality and interaction processes within the observed Romanian educational settings.

3.1. *Quality in Romanian toddler groups at subscale and item levels*

A) Space and Furnishings.

Indoor space. This item evaluates the classroom space in terms of sufficiency, cleanliness, maintenance of the furniture and space, ventilation and lighting, and accessibility. Only three classrooms were in good condition, while the others scored between 1 and 3, suggesting inadequacy, meaning most of the observed settings were far from providing adequate space for children to move freely and play and for daily routine care and activities. ***Furnishings for care, play, and learning***. This item evaluates furniture conditions, i.e., whether they are in good condition, an adequate number, and child-sized for infants and toddlers. Only one classroom was in good condition, while the other nine performed poorly in terms of this particular aspect of quality. ***Room arrangement***. This item evaluates how the room is organized to enable adult supervision of children, accessibility, easy traffic flow, and organizing for interest centers. Only one classroom was in good condition. The rest of the classrooms scored very low (*M*-s< 2.5), meaning they failed to provide enough space for children to play and set up learning centers, and they were not or organized properly to enable supervision of all children at all times. ***Display for***

children. This item evaluates whether displayed materials are appropriate and at children's eye level, regularly changed and used as starting points (i.e., topics) for conversations with children. Only one classroom was in good condition, one classroom in minimal condition, while the rest performed poorly ($M < 2.75$), suggesting inadequacy of visual materials that would stimulate learning.

Table 1. Space and Furnishings subscale scores.

	D1	**D2**	**D3**	**D4**	**D5**	**D6**	**D7**	**D8**	**D9**	**D10**
Indoor Space	6	1	1	2	2.5	6	2.5	5.5	3	2.5
Furnishings	6	1	2	1.5	1	3	1.5	2	2	1
Room arrangement	5	1	1	2	2	2	2	2.5	2	2
Display for children	6	1	1	2	1.75	2.75	3	2	2	1.75
Subscale average	5.75	1	1.25	1.87	1.81	3.43	2.25	3	2.25	1.81

Note: D = Daycare institution

Overall, the classrooms observed scored low on the *Space and Furnishing* subscale. Except for one classroom, which received good scores (5 and 6) for each item, and one that had a mean score of 3.43, indicating a minimal quality level, all the other classrooms received scores that generally indicated inadequacy.

B) Personal Care Routines

Meals/snacks. This item evaluates whether the food served to children is nutritious, meal/snack times are pleasant and flexible enough to meet individual children's needs, and supervision and sanitation are ensured. Two classrooms were in excellent condition (M-s=7), and four classrooms received good (N=3) and minimal scores (N=1). Four classrooms, however, were scored as inadequate (M-s<3), mostly because they failed to follow the required sanitary procedures related to meal serving. ***Diapering/toileting*.** This item checks if sanitary procedures are followed, the diapering/toileting schedule meets children's needs, adult supervision is provided, and whether any teaching moments occur during these procedures. Three classrooms received excellent scores, while three were found to be inadequate (M-s<2).***Health practices***. This item evaluates hygiene practices in terms of sufficiency, pleasance, and teaching moments. Only two classrooms received

good scores, while the rest failed to follow proper handwashing rules and generally lacked evidence for proper sanitation practices (*M*-s <2.5). ***Safety practices*.** This item evaluates indoor and outdoor space in terms of safety hazards and adult supervision. Three classwooms scored excellent, two classrooms received good scores (*M*-s =5), while the rest of the classrooms raising concerns about children's safety.

Table 2. Personal Care Routines scores. ITERS-R results for daycares (N=10)

	D1	**D2**	**D3**	**D4**	**D5**	**D6**	**D7**	**D8**	**D9**	**D10**
Meals/snacks	7	1	5.5	2.5	3	7	5.25	4	5.5	2.75
Diapering/toileting	7	5	7	2	2	7	4.5	1.5	4	4.75
Health practices	6	1	5.5	2	2.5	1	2.5	1.5	2.5	2
Safety practices	5	3	1	1.5	2.5	7	7	7	5	4
Subscale average	6.25	2.5	4.75	2	2.5	5.5	4.81	3.5	4.25	3.37

Note: D = Daycare institution

To sum up the findings for this subscale, in 30% of the classrooms, the quality was not ensured in meeting children's basic needs through personal care routines. In another 20% of the classrooms, quality was minimal (*M-s* ranging from 3.37 to 4.81).

C) Language and Books

***Talking with children*.** This item evaluates the occurrence and nature of the conversations between the daycares' staff and children. 30% of the observed classrooms received a score between 1 - 2, meaning conversations between adults and children were limited, insensitive to children's interest, play, mood, or unplayful. Staff in the other classrooms showed a good performance, characterized by a personalized, informal, pleasant, and playful talk with children.

Encouraging vocabulary development. This item evaluates how teachers support new vocabulary acquisition. Staff members working in the classrooms that were found inadequate were also evaluated as performing poorly in cultivating children's language development. The scores of the 50% of classrooms in regards to this aspect ranged from 5 to 7, meaning teachers working in those classrooms made a conscious effort for promoting language development by naming objects, people, actions as they appeared in children's play and routines,

repeating words, talking about both current and past/future experiences of children.

Responding to children's communication needs. This item evaluates whether teachers respond in a pleasant, educative, and constructive way to children's communication needs. The teachers who showed a previous poor performance in *Talking with children* and *Encouraging vocabulary development* also showed inadequacy in their responses to children. 40% of the teachers observed had minimal performances in responding to children's communication needs, 20% showed inadequacy, while another 40% of teachers responded positively to children's communication intentions and expanded on what children tried to say.

Encouraging children to communicate. This item evaluates how teachers initiate conversations with children, ask questions, and answer questions raised by children. The teachers who showed a poor performance in terms of previous items (i.e., *Talking with children*, *Encouraging vocabulary development*, and *Responding to children's communication needs*) also scored low on this item, as they did not engage in back and forth conversation with children, asked meaningful questions for children, or stayed positive when questions were not answered. In 40% of the observed classrooms, staff had minimal scores, with relatively low frequent turn-taking conversations with children, appropriate questions directed to children during their play and care, or time spent waiting for children's answers.

Staff use of books with children. This item evaluates how staff reads books to children and responds to children's behavior and reactions during book time. In 8 out of the 10 observed classrooms, scores indicated inadequacy in this regard, while the other two scored 5 (suggesting a goodquality level).

Encourag children's use of books. This item evaluates appropriateness, circulation, availability, accessibility of books, and whether staff provides positive attention when children engage in independent reading. Out of the ten classrooms observed in this study, only two received scores indicating a good performance in this regard. The rest of the classrooms observed received very low scores (rannging from 1 to 2.5), suggesting inadequacy (e.g., there were no books available or accessible for children).

Table 3. Language and Books. ITERS-R results for daycares (N=10)

	D1	**D2**	**D3**	**D4**	**D5**	**D6**	**D7**	**D8**	**D9**	**D10**
Talking with children	5	1	4	2.5	2	1	5	3.5	5.5	3.5
Encourage vocabulary development	6	1	5.5	2	2	7	5	6	3.25	3.75

Responding to children's communication	5	1	5.5	3.5	2.5	7	4	6.25	3.5	3.5
Encourage children to communicate	5	1.5	2	3	2.5	3.25	2	4.25	2.75	4.25
Staff use of books with children	5	3	2	1	5	1	1	1	1	2.25
Encourage children's use of books	6	1	2.5	1	5	2	1	1.5	1	1
Subscale average	5.33	1.41	3.58	2.16	3.16	3.54	3	3.75	3.04	3.04

Note: D = Daycare institution

Overall, among the ten observed classrooms selected from different nursery programs, two received inadequate scores (i.e., M<2.16)) in promoting young children's language development. In the other 80%, teachers showed minimal (N=6) and good (N=2) performances in their communication with children. However, none of the programs offered a literacy-rich environment in which numerous and age-appropriate books and reading materials were made available for children throughout the day, nor an environment where informal reading was encouraged and facilitated.

D) Activities.

Fine motor skills. This item evaluates the availability and accessibility of learning opportunities provided for the use of fine motor skills. Of all classrooms, 20% received scores from 4 to 6, indicating good performances in promoting children's fine motor skills. The rest of the classrooms observed received scores from 1 to 3.5, suggesting inadequacy.

Art. This item is about the availability and accessibility of art materials, supervision, and support provided during their use. 70% of the classrooms received low scores, indicating inadequacy (i.e., there were no art materials or activities available/accessible for children during the observation periods in those classrooms).

Music and movement. This item evaluates the availability and accessibility of music materials, use of music, and music/movement activities. In 50% of the classrooms, there were no such activities observed (i..e, scores lower than 2.5, suggesting inadequacy), while the rest of the classrooms received minimal (N=2) to good quality scores (N=3).

Blocks. This item evaluates the availability, accessibility, and storage of blocks and block centers and how staff cultivates learning at block play. Almost all of the observed classrooms (80%) showed inadequacy (i.e., there were either no blocks available for children's use or

blocks accessible but no accessories and no adult involvement in block play).

Dramatic play. This item evaluates the availability and accessibility of dramatic play materials and dramatic play centers and whether the staff promotes and engages in dramatic play. All of the classrooms except one were inadequate in their promotion of dramatic play.

Nature/science. This item checks the availability of opportunities to observe nature indoors and outdoors and other related activities such as playing with sand and water, having conversations about natural/scientific phenomena, and the presence of a science center in the classroom. 70% of the observed classrooms were inadequate in this respect.

Math/numbers. This item checks the availability and accessibility of math materials, the use of math language by staff in their interactions with children, and the provision of opportunities to learn math. One classroom scored good and four scored minimal in this regard, while half of the classrooms were inadequate in this respect.

Appropriate use of technology. This item evaluates the nature and appropriateness of tech materials and their use. Among all, 30% of the observed classrooms scored good and excellent, while the rest of the classrooms were found inadequate.

Promoting acceptance of diversity. This item evaluates whether diversity is reflected in classroom displays and activities. However, according to Harms et al. (2006), this item should be considered if there are children with disabilitiesin the observed groups. Since it wasn't the case for our groups, this item wasn't considered.

Gross motor skills. This item evaluates the access, quality, and use of indoor and outdoor gross motor play areas. All classrooms except one scored very low (*M-s*<2.5) in promoting gross motor play and providing appropriate spaces and equipment for gross motor play encouragement, and were considered inadequate.

Table 4. Activities. ITERS-R results for daycares (N=10)

	D1	**D2**	**D3**	**D4**	**D5**	**D6**	**D7**	**D8**	**D9**	**D10**
Fine motor	6	1	2	3.5	3	1	1	4	2	1.5
Art	5	2	4	3	2	5.5	2	1.5	1.5	1.25
Music and movement	5	6	4	2	1.5	5.5	2	3.5	2.5	2
Blocks	6	1	1.5	2	2.5	2.25	2	3.5	1.75	1
Dramatic play	6	1	1	1	1	1.5	1	1.5	1	2

Nature/science	7	2	1	1	1	1	6	1	3.75	1.75
Math/ number	6	4	1	3	1	1	2	2	3	3
Appropriate use of tech.	6	1	1	1.75	1.5	7	7	2	1	1
Gross motor	6	1	1	1	1.5	1	1	2.5	1	1
Subscale average	5.88	2.22	1.83	2.23	1.84	2.86	2.66	2.38	1.94	1.78

Note: D = Daycare institution

Overall, all the daycare classrooms observed in the present study, except for one, showed inadequacy in the *Activities* subscale. More specifically, there were hardly any educational materials available or accessible for children, and the teachers did not provide sufficient or proper materials and learning opportunities for art, music, science, math activities.

E) Interaction.

Supervision of gross motor play. This item evaluates the provision of challenging, vigorous, and pleasant gross motor play under adult supervision. Thirty percent of the programs were considered inadequate, another 40% scored minimal, and three classrooms showed good performances by providing encouragement, appropriate supervision, and good behavior management during gross motor play.

Supervision of play and learning (non-gross motor skills). This item checks if children's constant and individualized supervision is provided and how staff intervenes when needed. More than half of the classrooms (i.e., 60%) received scores indicating inadequate or minimal quality. More specifically, in these classrooms teachers were mostly busy with managerial or routine care work and their attention was on the large group as a whole, ignoring the individual play or children's particular interests. One classrooms scored good (M=6), due to the provision of constant supervision, interventions and encouragement of individual play.

Peer interaction. This item evaluates how staff facilitates and guides children, models social skills, and acknowledges and encourages positive social interactions between them. 20% of the observed classrooms showed inadequacy, i.e., children only played and interacted in large groups, and conflicts were ignored. In 40% of the classrooms, a minimal level of quality was reported, while 20% scored good and 20% scored excellent (i.e., children were allowed the freedom to play alone, teachers intervened when needed, and facilitated the children's interactions).

Staff-child interaction. This item evaluates whether staff provides emotional support to children when needed, positively responds to children's communication efforts, and interacts with all children in their care. Out of the classrooms observed, two classrooms were found inadequate, while in three of them evaluations suggested an excellent level of quality related to staff-child interaction.

Providing physical warmth/touch. This item checks whether teachers represent a source of constant caring and warm physical contact, matching children's individual preferences and needs. Half of the classrooms were found to be inadequate in this regard, while another 40% received scores indicating good and excellent quality.

Guiding children's behavior. This item whether the staff uses positive behavior management strategies including focusing on positive behavior, teaching empathy and social skills to solve conflicts, and setting appropriate expectations. Of all classrooms, 50% were considered inadequate, and only one as excellent.

Table 5. Interaction. ITERS-R results for daycares (N=10)

	D1	**D2**	**D3**	**D4**	**D5**	**D6**	**D7**	**D8**	**D9**	**D10**
Supervision of gross motor play	5	1	5	2.5	2	6.75	6.5	6.5	4	4.5
Supervision (non-gross motor)	6	1	1	3	2.5	1	1	3.5	4.5	4
Peer interaction	5	3	1	2	3.25	7	7	5	4.25	3.5
Staff- child interaction	5	1	7	3.75	2.5	7	7	6	5.25	4.5
Providing physical warmth/touch	5	1	2	2	3.5	7	7	6.5	2	2
Guiding children’s behavior	4	1	1	2.75	2.5	7	6.5	5.5	3.5	2.5
Subscale average	5	1.33	2.85	2.5	2.7	5.95	5.83	5.5	4.58	3.5

Note: D = Daycare institution

Overall, when subscale average scores were considered, in none of the daycare classrooms, the staff provided an excellent atmosphere where children's emotional needs were met through care and warmth. While 40% of the classrooms were in good condition, 40% were considered inadequate concerning the quality of interaction.

F) Program Structure.

Schedule and transitions. This item checks whether schedule and transitions are flexible enough to meet the children's individual needs and whether activities are prepared ahead of time to leave no room for waiting periods with nothing to do (i.e., smooth transitions). We found that 30% of the classrooms were in excellent condition, and 20% in good condition. However, twenty percent of the classrooms were found inadequate due to the long transition periods, while 20% received scores ranging from 3 to 4, suggesting that their daily schedule was flexible enough to meet children's individual needs, transitions were almost smooth, but teachers were somehow too busy with the related preparations. ***Free play***. This item evaluates whether children are given enough time and materials for free play while they facilitate and promote these activities. Results indicated that 50% of the classrooms were inadequate in terms of availability and accessibility of play materials, and only one classroom was considered excellent. ***Group play activities***. This item evaluates whether group play activities are voluntary, engaging, carried out in smaller groups, adjusted to the needs of children, and go along with alternative activities for those not participating. One classrooms scored excellent, while three were considered inadequate, meaning that participating in staff-led small-group activities was rarely an option.

Table 6. Program structure. ITERS-R results for daycares (N=10)

	D1	**D2**	**D3**	**D4**	**D5**	**D6**	**D7**	**D8**	**D9**	**D10**
Schedule and transitions	5	3	7	2	3.5	7	7	5.5	4.75	2.75
Free play	6	1	1	2.25	2.5	7	6.5	5.5	3.5	2.25
Group play activities	6	1	1	4.5	2.75	7	6.5	5	4.75	3.25
Subscale average	5.66	1.66	3	2.91	2.92	7	6.66	5.33	3.66	2.75

Note: D = Daycare institution

Overall quality in daycare classrooms

Mean scores for ITERS-R in the observed daycare classrooms showed a range of 1.65 to 5.64 (see Table 7). Overall, out of the ten classrooms observed, only one classroom was qualified providing a general good quality of care, while half of the observed educational settings failed to provide a qualitative environment (e.g., insufficient educational toys and materials for children to play with during free

play period; long transitions between activities, with nothing to engage children in; a rigid daily schedule with no opportunities for individual or small group work or play) and were qualified as inadequate.

Table 7. Overall quality in daycare classrooms

	D1	**D2**	**D3**	**D4**	**D5**	**D6**	**D7**	**D8**	**D9**	**D10**
Space and Furnishings	5.75	1	1.25	1.87	1.81	3.43	2.25	3	2.25	1.81
Personal Care Routines	6.25	2.5	4.75	2	2.5	5.5	4.81	3.5	4.25	3.37
Language and Books	5.33	1.41	3.58	2.16	3.16	3.54	3	3.75	3.04	3.04
Activities	5.9	2	1.75	1.85	1.6	2.67	2.5	2.25	1.85	1.55
eraction	5	1.33	2.85	2.5	2.7	5.95	5.83	5.5	4.58	3.5
Program Structure	5.66	1.66	3	2.91	2.92	7	6.66	5.33	3.66	2.75
Total average score	5.64	1.65	2.86	2.21	2.44	4.68	4.17	3.88	3.27	2.67

Note: D = Daycare institution

3.2. *Quality in Romanian preschool institutions at subscale and item levels*

The scale consists of 43 items organized into seven subscales, including Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language-Reasoning, Activities, Interactions, Program Structure, and Parents and Staff.

A) Space and Furnishings.

Indoor space. This item evaluates the classroom space in terms of sufficiency of the space, maintenance of furniture and space, ventilation and lighting, and accessibility. Nine preschool classrooms obtained scores ranging from 6 to 7, meaning their indoor space was evaluated as good or excellent. Among the preschool classrooms observed, nine were considered inadequate.

Furniture for routine care, play and learning. This item evaluates furniture conditions, whether they are adequate in number, child-sized, and in good condition. Thirteen classrooms were vealuated as good or excellent, while most of them were considered at a minimal level of quality.

Furnishings for relaxation and comfort. This item evaluates how much comfort and coziness is created within the classroom. Nine classrooms were vealuated as good or excellent, and one preschool classroom received a score of 2 (i.e., inadequacy), meaning that, within this classroom, there were no soft toys and furnishings available for children (e.g., upholstered furniture, cushions, rugs, bean bag chair, stuffed animals, and soft dolls).

Room arrangement for play. This item evaluates the organization and functionality of learning centers. Among the classrooms observed, twelve of them (39%) met the criteria for good or excellent quality (scores ranging from 5 to 7, i.e., they had at least five different interest centers with a variety of learning experiences organized for independent use by children: labeled open shelves, labeled containers for toys, open shelves are not overcrowded; additional materials available to add to or change centers).

Space for privacy. This item is about whether space is provided for children to work individually. Results showed that 70% of the classrooms (*N*=22) were either inadequate or scored minimally in this area, meaning there were no (or few) such spaces available for children to work alone or with a colleague without any intrusion by other children. Only one classroom was considered to be excellent conditions in this area.

Child-related display. This item evaluates whether displays on the walls are appropriate, related to children's activities, and placed at children's eye level. Three of the classrooms observed were evaluated as very low in this regard, while the others scored good and excellent.

Space for gross motor play. This item evaluates the adequacy of indoor and outdoor playgrounds and their general organization. Among those observed, three preschools received scores ranging from 1 to 2, meaning the outdoor or indoor space used for gross motor /physical play was too small and/or unsafe. One classroom was considered to provide excellent conditions, i.e., different play types encouraging gross motor skills were possible in the outdoor space.

Gross motor equipment. This item evaluates the adequacy and accessibility of gross motor equipment. Thirteen classrooms were evaluated as inadequate and two classrooms were considred in excellent conditions regardin gross motor equiment (i.e., both stationary and portable gross motor types of equipment are used).

Table 8. Space and Furnishing dimension

3	4.6	4.5	3.5	3.3	3.8	5.8	4.7	3.7	4.6	2.5	5	3.7	5.5	6.5	4.5	3.6	2.3	4.8	5.7	2.3	5.7	2.9	2.3	1.9	2.6	2.7	2.7	4.6	6.1	6.5

Notes: S1 = Indoor space; S2= Furniture for routine care, play and learning; S3= Furnishings for relaxation and comfort; S4= Room arrangement for play; S5= Space for privacy; S6= Child-related display; S7= Space for gross motor play; S8= Gross motor equipment; T= Total average scores.

In summary, observing the details related to space and furnishing subscales, nine classrooms were considered inadequate, which means that only 2/3 reached a minimal level of quality related to space and furnishing.

B) Personal Care Routines.

Greeting/departing. This item evaluates the warmth provided to children during arrivals and departures. Fourteen classrooms reached minimal and average levels, while sixteen were evaluated to be good or excellent in this regard (i.e., each child was greeted individually in these classrooms). One classroom was considered inadquate (*M*=2.5). ***Meals/snacks***. This item evaluates whether the food served is nutritious, mealtimes are pleasant, and child independence is encouraged. Scores varied from 2 (inadequate; *N*=1) to 7 (excellent; *N*=7). In general, the meal schedule was considered appropriate and presented to children in a non-punitive atmosphere. Moreover, children were given opportunities to help during meals (set the table, clear tables, wipe up spills). ***Nap/rest.*** This item evaluates sanitary and supervisory

conditions, timing, and pleasantness of nap time. Scores varied from 1 (inadequacy) to excellent (7). In general, nap schedules were considered appropriate for children. ***Toileting/diapering.*** This item evaluates the material, sanitary and hygienic conditions, and pleasantness during toileting/diapering. Fourteen classrooms (45%) were evaluated as having good to excellent condition (5-7 points), providing appropriate sanitary conditions such as child-sized toilets and low sinks, in addition to the promotion of self-help skills. ***Health practices.*** This item evaluates the precaution measures undertaken to prevent germs from spread and whether the staff serves as a role model for children in this regard. Seven of the observed classrooms were found to be in good or excellent condition (e.g., individual toothbrushes adequately labeled and stored and used at least once during the day in full-day programs; children taught to manage health practices independently), while 1/3 were considered inadequate. ***Safety practices***. This item evaluates the safety precautions taken. Scores ranged from inadequate (*N*=4) to excellent (*N*=4), but the general view suggested that preschools were generally underprepared concerning safety practices (e.g., lacked proper supervision indoors and outdoors).

Table 9. Personal Care and Routines dimension

S6	6.0	6.6	6.3	3.6	3.2	4.1	6.8	4.8	3.6	7.0	2.5	4.6	3.7	4.6	7.0	4.3	3.5	2.5	6.2	6.1	3.5	6.1	4.3	3.8	3.2	5.8	4.3	5.3	5.3	4	5.1

Notes: S1 = Greeting/departing; S2= Meals/snacks; S3= Nap/rest; S4= Toileting/diapering; S5= Health practices; S6= Safety practices; T= Total average scores.

In summary, the detailed subscales scores showed good and excellent levels for less than half of the observed preschool settings.

C) Language and Reasoning.

Books and pictures. This item evaluates the variety, appropriateness, accessibility, and richness in reading centers and whether book reading is a daily routine. One of the observed classrooms scored 1.1, suggesting inadequacy, which means that, in this classroom, there were few books, and staff rarely read to children since there was no daily storytime. Ten classrooms were evaluated at a minimal level (they received scores ranging from 3 to 4.75), while the remaining classrooms were evaluated as good or excellent in this regard (i.e., books were available and accessible to children, and there was at least one staff–initiated receptive language activity time daily).

Encouraging children to communicate. This item evaluates whether children are encouraged to communicate throughout the day and during activities. Our findings varied between inadequate levels (1 classroom scored 1 point) and good or excellent levels (18 classrooms, i.e., 58% scored 5 to 7 points). Most teachers provided opportunities that would encourage children to communicate and balanced listening and talking appropriately for children's age and abilities during communication activities (e.g., time for children to respond; appropriate use of language and explanations for children with limited communication skills).

Using language to develop reasoning skills. This item evaluates whether children are encouraged to reason to solve problems and are introduced concepts accordingly. The majority of teachers observed talked with children to cultivate their reasoning skills and usually presented logical relationships or concepts to introduce new concepts.

Informal use of language. This item evaluates how many communication opportunities are given to children throughout the day and the nature of the conversations between children and staff. Eleven classrooms (35%) were evaluated at a minimal level, while most classrooms received high scores.

Table 10. Language and Reasoning dimension

4.	5.	3.	5.	4.	4.	7.	4.	3.	5.	3.	3.	4.	4.	6.	4.	4.	3.	3.	5.	4	4	3.	3.	3.	5.	3.	3.	5	4.	5.8
5	7	5	5	3	7	0	7	7	5	1	8	6	7	3	5	3	0	0	3			4	8	3	5	5	5		5	5

Notes: S1 = Books and Pictures; S2= Encouraging children to communicate; S3= Using language to develop reasoning skills; S4= Informal use of language; Total average scores.

In summary, only nine of the observed classrooms (29%) reached good or excellent levels concerning the language and reasoning subscale.

D) Activities.

Fine motor skills. This item evaluates the amount, variety, accessibility, and organization of fine motor skills materials. Seven classrooms were evaluated as inadequate in providing fine motor skills materials accessible for children's daily use, and only 16% of the classrooms were evaluated as excellent.

Art. This item evaluates the amount, variety, and accessibility of art materials and whether children are given extended periods to engage in art projects. One classroom received 2 points, which means that art activities were rarely available. In general, the results varied between minimal levels (*N*=12) and excellent (10 classrooms scored 7 points). In these classrooms (i.e., excellent), three-dimensional art materials such as clay, play dough, wood glue, and carpentry tools were accessible to children at least once a month. Furthermore, some other art activities were provided through different occasions, such as painting the seasons following a field trip.

Music/movement. This item checks the amount, variety, accessibility of music materials, and whether occasional music activities occur. One of the classrooms observed in this study was considered inadequate, while four were evaluated as excellent (e.g., music materials and music activities were accessible as a free choice or group activity daily for children).

Blocks. This item checks the amount, variety, and accessibility of blocks and accessories and whether a particular block area is set aside from the classroom's traffic. Two of the classrooms observed in this study were evaluated as inadequate. Nineteen classrooms (61%) reached the good and excellent levels, meaning they provided enough blocks and accessories to allow three or more children to build blocks

simultaneously.

Sand/water. This item checks if water and sand are provided indoors and/or outdoors as means of play, along with toys that are provided indoors or outdoors in this regard. Ten classrooms (32%) provided related (i..e, to sand and water play) activities and toys, scoring good to excellent, while, in general, the other observed classrooms reached low scores in this regard.

Dramatic play. This item checks the amount, variety, and accessibility of dramatic play materials and whether there is a dramatic play area set aside. Four classrooms were inadequate in providing dramatic play materials such as dress-up clothes, hose keeping props, and dolls. Classrooms generally had minimum conditions and means for dramatic play (e.g., materials and accessible furniture to be used in children's acting performances).

Nature/science. This item evaluates the amount, variety, and accessibility of nature/ science materials and if nature/science activities are provided. Results vary from inadequate levels (4 classrooms) to excellent (*N*=3), where nature-related and science activities (e.g., cooking, simple experiments, field trips, related books, and reading materials) requiring more input from staff were offered at least once every two weeks.

Math/numbers. This item evaluates the amount, variety, and accessibility of math materials and the frequency of daily activities to promote math skills and concepts. Two classrooms were evaluated as inadequate, while 15 classrooms (48%) provided good to excellent conditions, with various developmentally appropriate related materials.

Use of TV, video, and/or computers. This item evaluates whether technology is used to encourage children to involve and extend classroom learning actively. Eight classrooms were considered inadequate (i.e., materials were not developmentally). Only two classrooms were considered at an excellent level of using developmentally appropriate technological educational materials.

Promoting acceptance of diversity. This item evaluates whether diversity is reflected in classroom displays and activities. According to Harms et al. (2006), this item should be considered if there are children with disabilitiesin the observed groups. Since it wasn’t the case for our groups, this item wasn’t considered.

Table 11. Activities dimension.

3	6	5	1	3.2	1	7	2	3	7	2.5		3.6	4.5	5.3	1	1	2	2.1	5.0	2.6	2.1	2.0	3.0	3.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	7.0	1.0	5.0
3	5	1	1	3.2	1	7	5	3	1	3	4	3	5	3.2	3	3	2	4.1	5.0	3.5	4.1	4.0	5.2	5.2	7.0	7.0	3.0	7.0	6.0	5.0
1	4	1	3	3.7	3	7	5	4	1	2.5	4.6	4.6	6	7	5	3.5	3	4.0	5.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	3.0	6.2	6.2	5.0	5.0	7.0	5.5
3	5	3	5	3.2	4	7	5	4	1	3	4.6	4.6	5.5	7	5	3	3	5.1	6.0	3.6	5.1	3.5	3.0	3.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	7.0	1.0	6.0
3	4	1	3	3.2	2	5.4	4	3	7	1	3.6	4.3	4	5.3	5	3	2	2.1	5.0	2.6	2.1	2.0	3.0	3.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	7.0	1.0	5.0
3.8	5.3	3.6	3.7	3.4	3	6.8	4.2	3.6	5	2.5	4.3	4.1	4.9	5.7	4.5	3.5	2.3	3.6	5.3	3.3	3.6	3.2	3.4	3.4	5.7	5.7	4.5	6.5	3.4	5.3

Notes: S1 = Fine motor skills; S2= Art; S3= Music/movement; S4= Blocks; S5= Sand/water; S6=Dramatic play; S7=Nature/science; S8=Math/numbers; S9= Use of TV, video, and/or computers. T=Total average scores.

E) Interaction.

Supervision of gross motor activities. This item evaluates whether supervision is provided and precautions are taken to prevent accidents during gross motor play and how the staff interacts with children and whether they help children develop their play. Most classrooms received 5 to 7 (N=17, 55%) points, suggesting good to excellent levels (i.e., appropriate supervision in gross motor areas to protect children's health and safety). Most of the staff-child interactions were evaluated as pleasant and helpful. However, five classrooms were considered inedqauate.

General supervision of children (other than gross motor activities). This item evaluates how and what kind of supervision is provided. Staff

generally helped children and encouraged them when needed, and talked about topics related to their play. In most classrooms, teachers encouraged children to independently explore the environment and ask questions, maintaing a balance between the child's need to explore independently and staff input into learning.

Discipline. This item evaluates the disciplinary methods used in the classroom. The findings in our study varied from minimal levels (*N*=13) to good excellent levels. Higher points were given to the classroom where staff used non-punitive and effective discipline methods. Within these classrooms, the staff actively involved children in solving their conflicts and problems and used various activities to help children understand social skills.

Staff-child interactions. This item evaluates how the staff interacts with children, whether they display caring behavior when needed, provide warmth, and establish a respectful environment for everyone. The findings vary between inadequate (1 classroom scored 1 point) to excellent levels (23%). We found that the staff generally encourages the development of mutual respect between children and adults.

Interactions among children. This item evaluates whether there are sufficient opportunities for children to interact and develop their social skills. Observers rated the quality of interactions among children from inadequate (*N*=6) to good or excellent (*N*=15, 48%), with teachers setting good examples for the children to develop positive and active social behaviors with their peers.

Table 12. Interaction dimension

			5																												
7	5	6	3	5	4	7	5.5	4	7	3		4.3	2.5	7	7	3	3	2.1	5.0	2.6	2.1	2.0	3.0	3.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	7.0	1.0	5.0
7	5.8	6.8	4.4	4.5	5.2	7	5.7	4	7	3.3	4	4.1	3.5	6.6	6	4.8	3	3.4	5.3	3.2	3.4	3.1	3.4	3.4	5.8	5.8	4.6	6.6	3.2	5.3

Notes: S1 = Supervision of gross motor activities; S2= General supervision of children; S3= Discipline; S4= Staff-child interactions; S5= Interactions among children; T=Total average scores.

Overall, in most classrooms, the interactions between the staff and the children and in-group interactions between children were active, positive, and constructive.

F) Program Structure.

Schedule. This item evaluates whether the daily schedule provides a balance between structured and child-initiated activities, individual needs are considered, and transitions are smooth. More than half of the classrooms received good and excellent scores (*N*=16), while five of them were considered inadequate (i.e., the schedule needed consistent changes to acquire the needed balance).

Free play. This item evaluates if children have sufficient time and materials to engage in free play under adult supervision. Scores ranged from minimal (1 classroom) to good and excellent (*N*=18), most of them providing enough materials and time for free play.

Group time. This item evaluates the frequency and quality of group activities. Our findings vary from inadequate levels (e.g., one classroom scored only 1 point) to good and excellent levels (nineteen classrooms), where play routines were done in small groups and children had plenty of time to play with their peers.

Provisions for children with disabilities. This item evaluates whether teachers follow an individualized education plan for children with disabilities included in the classroom (e.g., inclusive activities). Since it wasn't the case for our groups, this item wasn't considered.

Table 13. Program Structure dimension

6.3	6.6	6.6	3	4.9	4.6	7	5.5	4	7	3	5.3	4.2	5.5	7	5	4.3	3	3.4	5.1	3.3	3.4	3.3	3.7	3.7	6.3	6.3	4.3	6.3	4.6	5.1

Notes: S1 = Schedule; S2= Free play; S3= Group time; T=Total average scores.

G) Parents and Staff. This subscale explores the quality related to the following:

Provisions for parents. This item evaluates whether parent involvement occurs, and parents are provided information about the program, pedagogical approaches used, information about their children, and referral services when they are in need. Our findings vary from minimal levels (12 classrooms received scores ranging from 3 to 5) to good and excellent (19 classrooms received scores ranging from 5 to 7). Parents were generally informed about administrative processes, activities, school decisions and encouraged (in some of the cases) to get involved in children's activities. In some classes, parents were involved in the decision-making processes for children's programs and activities.

Provisions for personal needs of staff. This item evaluates whether the staff members' personal needs are considered, e.g., if they have, for example, a separate lounge area for breaks when needed. Nine classrooms received minimal scores, while four classrooms was qualified as inadequate in this regard.

Provisions for professional needs of staff. This evaluates the availability of enough storage space, meeting rooms, and administrative spaces for staff members. In 16 classrooms, staff had access to the phone, storage places, and areas that could be used for individual meetings. Nine classrooms scored excellent, having enough comfortable spaces and administrative offices for personal and group meetings.

Staff interaction and cooperation. This item evaluates whether children's information is exchanged between staff members working in the same classroom if their interaction and information exchange interfere with their duties towards children. ***Supervision and evaluation of staff*** evaluates whether annual staff evaluations are provided and communicated as performance feedback (followed by constructive and supportive measures related to the annual results), while ***Opportunities for professional growth*** measures whether staff members receive orientation, in-service training, and support to attend professional development activities. Since we had little or no information for 18 of the observed classrooms, we did not further consider the results related to these three dimensions.

Table 14. Parents and Staff dimension

S	
2	

6.	5.	6.	3	3.	4.	5.	4.	3.	7	2.	4.	3.	5	6.	4	3.	3	3.	5.	3.	3.	2.		4.	4.	6.	5.		4.	5.	
3	3	3		1	3	2	8	6		3	9	9		4		5		4	5	2	4	3	7	8	8	4	6	7	6	5	

Notes: S1 = Provisions for parents; S2= Provisions for personal needs of staff; S3= Provisions for professional needs of staff; T=Total average scores.

Overall quality in preschool classrooms

Overall, this subscale's average scores indicated a lot of room for improvement to meet teachers' and parents' basic needs related to the educational environment (see Table 18). The average mean score was 4.60, suggesting minimal quality levels of the observed classrooms. Moreover, two classrooms were considered, overall, as inadequate.

Table 15. Average scores for ECERS-R (*N*=31) and each subscale

3	4.	4.	3.	3.	3.	5.	4.	3.	4.	2.	5	3.	5.	6.	4.	3.	2.	4.	5.	2.	5.	2.	2.	1.	2.	2.	2.	4.	6.	6.	
	6	5	5	3	8	8	7	7	6	5		7	5	5	5	6	3	8	7	3	7	9	3	9	6	7	7	6	1	5	
6.	6.	6.	3.	3.	4.	6.	4.	3.	7.	2.	4.	3.	4.	7.	4.	3.	2.	6.	6.	3.	6.	4.	3.	3.	5.	4.	4.	5.	4	5.	
0	6	3	6	2	1	8	8	6	0	7	6	7	6	0	3	5	5	2	1	5	1	3	8	2	8	3	3	7		1	
4.	5.	3.	5.	4.	4.	7.	4.	3.	5.	3.	3.	4.	4.	6.	4.	4.	3.	3.	5.	3.	5.	3.	3.	3.	5.	3.	3.	6.	4.	6.	
5	7	5	5	3	7	0	7	7	5	1	8	6	7	3	5	3	0	7	3	8	3	4	8	3	5	5	5	0	5	5	
3.	5.	3.	3.	3.	3	6.	4.	3.	5	2.	4.	4.	4.	5.	4.	3.	2.	3.	5.	3.	3.	3.	3.	3.	5.	5.	4.	6.	3.	5.	
8	3	6	7	4		8	2	6		5	3	1	9	7	5	5	3	6	3	3	6	2	4	4	7	7	5	5	4	3	
7	5.	6.	4.	4.	5.	7.	5.	4	7	3.	4.	4.	3.	6.	6.	4.	3	7	6.	5.	6.	4.	5.	4	6.	4.	4.	7	5.	7	
	8	8	0	6	2	0	7			3	0	2	5	6	0	8			4	4	4	4	1		8	5	5		4		
6.	6.	6.	3	4.	4.	7	5.	4	7	3	5.	4.	5.	7	5	4.	3	3.	5.	3.	3.	3.	3.	3.	6.	6.	4.	6.	4.	5.	
3	6	6		9	6		5				3	2	5			3		4	1	3	4	3	7	7	3	3	3	3	6	1	

6.	5.	6.	3	3.	4.	5.	4.	3.	7	2.	4.	3.	5	6.	4	3.	3	3.	5.	3.	3.	2.		4.	4.	6.	5.		4.	5.
3	3	3		1	3	2	8	6		3	9	9		4		5		4	5	2	4	3	7	8	8	4	6	7	6	5
5.	5.	5.	3.	3.	4.	6.	4.	3.	6.	2.	4.	4.	4.	6.	4.	3.	2.	4.	5.	3.	4.	3.	4.	3.	5.	4.	4.	6.	4.	5.
2	7	3	7	8	2	5	9	7	1	7	5	0	8	5	6	9	7	5	6	5	8	4	1	4	3	7	2	1	6	8

Notes: S1 = Space and Furnishings; S2 = Personal Care Routines; S3 = Language-Reasoning; S4 = Activities; S5 = Interactions; S6 = Program Structure; S7 = Parents and Staff; T= Total average scores

4. General discussion

The aim of this research report was to explore the quality of toddler and preschool childcare in Romania using the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ITERS-R) and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R), in a sample of 41 education institutions (i.e., 10 daycare classrooms and 31 preschool classrooms).

Analyses of the ITERS-3 data indicated that Romanian daycares are not in such a great condition in terms of space and furnishings. In terms of personal care routines, Romanian daycare centers need more support. Regarding the support for language and literacy development, Romanian daycares are in deep need on it. Quality of interaction, educational activities, and program are another dimensions were the Romanian daycares should be focused on. This lack of disregard for very young children's educational needs is actually reflected in common government policies that run an age based dual system with an assumption that what very young children need is just quality care (preferably in the hands of the mother). Drawing from this understanding a separate government agency governs and regulates childcare services without much collaboration with the ministry of education. This is the case for Romania where the Ministry of Health is responsible for regulation of daycares where no bachelor's degree in ECEC is required from the daycare givers. The end result is that without any accountability measure or even expectancy for educational provisions daycare staff only focus on care aspects of their jobs.

On the other hand, maybe the new direction of daycares to hire qualified teachers will be auspicious and might compensate for the systemic challenges (EURODICE, 2019). These findings pinpoint the importance of advanced level teacher education as well as uniting ECEC agencies under the ministry of education. Integration of care and education in ECEC practice with equal importance given in each dimension should be the running thread of the system.

As far as those six dimensions of quality in preschools institutions, Romanian preschools scored to be in a minimally acceptable condition

in terms of space and furnishings. Only interaction subscale scores average was close to being good. Romanian preschools institutions showed good quality in regards to personal care routines and as well as interaction subscale. These findings seems to be a reflection of countries ranking according to the public spending on early childhood education and care, which goes for Romania around 0.3% of its GDP. In 2017, in Romania, general government spending on education was equivalent to only 2.8% of GDP, significantly below the EU average of 4.6% and the lowest percentage in the EU.

The evaluation, comparison and reflection of the different kinds of practices carried out by the researchers in daycares and preschool and primary institutions give more realistic ideas about the needs of children and teachers in educational system and also a chance to think about successful solutions that lead to stimulates.

Moreover, the research report results may be used for planning the lectures for teacher training and intensive programs for research learners in the next project stage in order to transfer or exchange teachers who needs support about how to design and create a special learning space with enriched equipment with different kinds of educational materials - indoor and outdoor environment.

The information we collected through this study will provide teachers and researchers with information they can use to better support children and improve their children learning environment and mental health.

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