

# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE INTEGRATION OF NURSERY EDUCATION INTO THE NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

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**Abstract:** The Early Childhood Curriculum in Romania has already foreseen upcoming changes in the field of nursery education in 2019. This became concrete in the autumn of 2021, with the publication of Emergency Government Decree No. 100 (Emergency Government Decree No. 100/2021), which made crèches part of the public education system, providing integrated education, care and supervision services for young children aged 0-3 years. Our study aims to show the impact of the introduction of early childhood education in the educational system on the professional activities and career prospects of early childhood educators. We hypothesized that the judgment of legislative changes is ambivalent among early childhood educators. As a research method, documentary analysis was used for the theoretical groundwork, while the empirical investigation was based on the method of a questionnaire. In data analysis, we used the techniques of frequency, mean, chi square, analysis of variance, factor analysis. An access sampling procedure was used, and we included 103 early childhood educators who were working as nursery teachers in autumn 2023. (It was very difficult to access the sample, probably due to the changing legal framework and the uncertainty created by these changes.)

Our results show that respondents perceive institutional change as positive overall and tend to emphasize the benefits. They consider that the inclusion of nursery education in the education sector has given it its rightful place in the system of social activities. Those who have taken up a job as early childhood educators are committed to the age group and are facing challenges and difficulties, despite the uncertainty brought about by changes in the sector. Furthermore, the study has revealed the current situation of early childhood education in Romania from the perspective of the early childhood teachers.

**Keywords:** early childhood education in Romania, early childhood educator, curriculum, the change in the institutional structure.

## 1. Introduction

Early childhood education in Romania is unified under the 2019 curriculum, which regulates the implementation of both nursery and kindergarten level educational activities. The anticipated changes outlined in the early childhood education curriculum took effect in the fall of 2021, with the publication of Government Emergency Ordinance no. 100/2021, which stipulates that nurseries are part of the public education system, providing integrated education, care, and supervision services for children aged 0-3. The operation of nurseries is regulated by Ordinance no. 566/2022, under which the following types of early childhood education institutions can operate as nurseries: nurseries attached to kindergartens with legal personality; nurseries attached to educational institutions with legal personality, which include kindergartens; nurseries, which have been maintained by local authorities, and have become independent legal entities under the jurisdiction of the county school inspectorates; day-care centers with nursery groups (these are not considered educational institutions).

The sectoral reclassification of nurseries has effected considerable change in the scope of the services provided. In addition to supervision, protection, and care, educational tasks have also been integrated based on a well-defined curriculum, thus ensuring the conceptual unity and complementary nature of nursery and kindergarten education (Barabási, 2023).

Given the psychological characteristics of this age group, it is unquestionable that the primary form of activity at this age is play. Therefore, playfulness should be a defining feature of early childhood

development activities. The types of pre-kindergarten educational activities included in the curriculum (Curriculum for Early Childhood Education, 2019) include thematic activities, routines (habits) and transitions, as well as optional games and activities. Learning at this age takes place through exploring and experience gaining by way of situational games. The most important aspect in early childhood education, is for young children to gain independent learning experiences through interactions with peers, adults, and the environment, as they discover, experiment, and try out new things, developing their skills, abilities, knowledge, attitudes, and forming new patterns of behavior (Albulescu, 2022).

The curriculum, which defines the learning activities, presents a professional challenge for educators, requiring them to interpret the curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education, to filter it through their own educational perspective, to implement it, and to constantly discover modern interpretations, approaches, and application strategies. The curriculum encourages early childhood educators to engage in meaningful reflection on their own work, which can serve as a motivator for their professional development. The quality of reflective thinking is demonstrated by our ability to think meaningfully about what needs to be done for our development (Gyöngy, 2021).

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1. Research problem**

The present study aims to investigate the extent to which early childhood educators are familiar with the emergence of early childhood education within the educational institutional framework, and the impact of changes in the legal framework on the career aspirations of early childhood educators. Involving early childhood educators in a more comprehensive study, which also explores the opinions of kindergarten teachers and teacher trainees, can be advantageous for the respondents, encouraging early childhood educators to engage in meaningful reflection and thus professional development.

By way of a synthesis of the empirical findings, this research seeks to shed light on the awareness of institutional alternatives for early childhood education in Romania, on the professional framework of early childhood education, and on early childhood educator's perspectives on the esteem of their profession.

### **2.2. Hypothesis**

Our hypothesis assumes that the legislative changes open up alternative career paths in early childhood education, which may be more attractive to pragmatic individuals. Another hypothesis is that the integration of early childhood education into the educational segment is ambivalently perceived among early childhood educators, as opinions vary along the spectrum of risk perception and opportunity recognition.

### **2.3. Tools and techniques**

The theoretical framework of the study is based on document analysis. The empirical dimension of the study is exploratory in nature and is based on the survey method. The tool for the study is a self-designed questionnaire.

The questionnaire for early childhood educators is structured to include six survey blocks, besides the demographic data, each block focusing on aspects related to nursery/early childhood education. The first block assesses early childhood educators' awareness of issues related to nursery education, its sectoral classification, and the recent change in the educational system. The second block aims to explore the extent to which respondents are familiar with the curriculum and its implications for early childhood education. The aim of the third block is twofold: to investigate the awareness of the requirements for the profession of early childhood educator and the perspectives on the esteem of this profession. The fourth block asked for an evaluation of the integration of nursery education into the educational system, assessing its advantages, disadvantages, opportunities, and challenges. The penultimate block aims to uncover respondents' feelings of preparedness to work as early childhood educators and their openness and interest in this segment of the educational system, investigating the potential consequences of the structural changes on career paths. The final survey block focuses on the methodological aspects of early childhood education in practical experience, addressing issues such as

group size, working hours, colleagues, and the distribution of care and educational tasks. It also examines the practical application of the curriculum, focusing on developmental areas, activity types, and their durations, as well as methodological aspects of thematic activities, routines, and optional activities. The questionnaire concludes with the possibility to share potential best practices.

The analysis of the questionnaires was carried out using the SPSS statistical software (frequency, mean, chi-square, variance analysis, correlation, and factor analysis).

## 2.4. Sample

The convenience sample consisted of kindergarten teachers (N=213), teacher candidates (N=340), and a total of 103 early childhood educators who, in the fall of 2023, were working in nurseries. Due to the changes in the legal framework regarding the classification and occupation of the position of early childhood educator and the uncertainty caused by these changes, accessing the study sample proved to be rather challenging. Reaching and involving kindergarten teachers in the study posed a significant challenge. The current study focuses on the perspectives of early childhood educators. (Due to our access-based sampling we treat the generalization of our results with caution). Their mean age is 35.22 years (the youngest respondent being 20 years old, while the oldest is 58 years old).

Table 1 presents the main features of the sample, which are discussed in detail in the section focusing on data interpretation.

Table 1. The Sample of Early Childhood Educators (N=103)

Variable	Subdimensions of variables	Individuals	%
Gender	Male	1	1
	Female	102	99
Type of settlement	Urban	86	83.5
	Rural	17	16.5
Educational qualification in pedagogy	Yes	83	80.6
	No	20	19.4
Type of qualifications	None	12	11.7
	Teacher trainee	9	8.7
	Retraining/certification	44	42.7
	Pedagogical high school	2	1.9
	Higher education in pedagogy	35	34
	MA in pedagogy	1	1
Type of institution	Educational	92	89.3
	Social	0	0
	Undergoing changes	7	6.8
	Uncertain classification	4	3.9
Position	Tenure	24	23.3
	Substitute	79	76.7
Type of educational institution	Kindergarten	47	22.1
	Short program nursery	1	1
	Long program nursery	67	65
	Short program kindergarten, with nursery	1	1
	Day care, with nursery	34	33
	Short and long program nursery	1	1
Kindergarten groups	Mixed group	37	35.9
	Upper group (2-3 years)	30	29.1
	Middle group (1-2 years)	32	31.1
	Lower group (0-1 years)	4	3.9
Special qualifications for early childhood education	None	39	37.9
	Early childhood educator pedagogical high school	4	3.9
	Training course	58	56.3
	Other	2	1.9

### 3. Findings and discussion: Early childhood educators’ perspectives on the integration of nursery education into the national education system

Early childhood educators primarily associated the term "young child" with nursery education. The age group (0-3 years) and the concept of early childhood education appeared to the same extent in the perceptions of early childhood educators. Caregiving also emerged prominently among the associations, closely followed by education. Socialization, play, and nursery rhymes also stand out in the opinions of early childhood educators, along with subjective expressions (such as "toddler" or "cute," etc.).

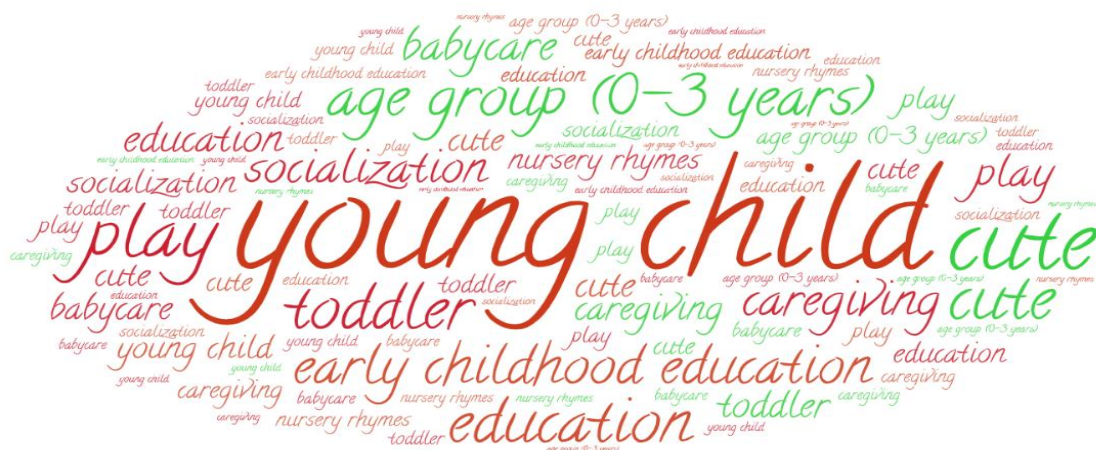


Fig. 1. Nursery education - early childhood educators’ associations

Respondents were happy with the profession they had chosen, as indicated by a very high mean of 5.67 (on a 6-point Likert scale), signifying their willingness to undertake the position of early childhood educator. This indicates a completely optimal attitude. A significant difference was observed along the variable of educational qualifications: respondents without pedagogical qualifications (5.95) were more willing to work as early childhood educators compared to respondents with pedagogical qualifications (5.60) (ANOVA < .041\*). However, a further question arises regarding the correlation between competences and this highly positive attitude. Respondents’ self-evaluation regarding their competences yielded a mean of 4.8. Fig. 2. illustrates the level of familiarity with the curriculum as part of the competences.

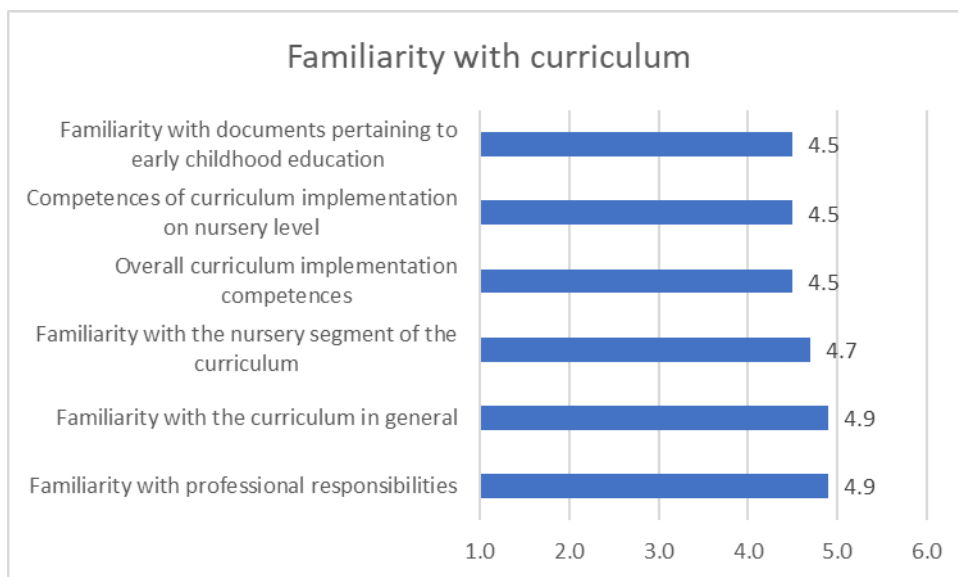


Fig. 2. Early childhood educators’ familiarity with the curriculum

Figure 2 confirms the findings resulting from the previous question, as it is evident that early childhood educators are familiar with the curriculum, even though their knowledge of the nursery segment slightly lags compared to their overall knowledge of the curriculum. This difference, however, cannot be considered significant. They also possess an adequate level of knowledge when it comes to professional responsibilities. Nonetheless, curriculum implementation, overall and at the nursery level, lags familiarity with the curriculum ( $t = -2.54617$ ;  $p = .005815$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and so does familiarity with documents pertaining to early childhood education. In-depth study of the curriculum is characteristic of early childhood educators, while superficial knowledge receives a low mean score.

The commitment of the respondents to the profession is reflected not only in their positive attitude towards the profession but also in their future aspirations, as three-quarters of them wish to stay on the career path. Approximately 20% plan to transition to a higher level within the educational system, while only 3.9% intend to leave the profession. No significant differences were made in terms of qualifications.

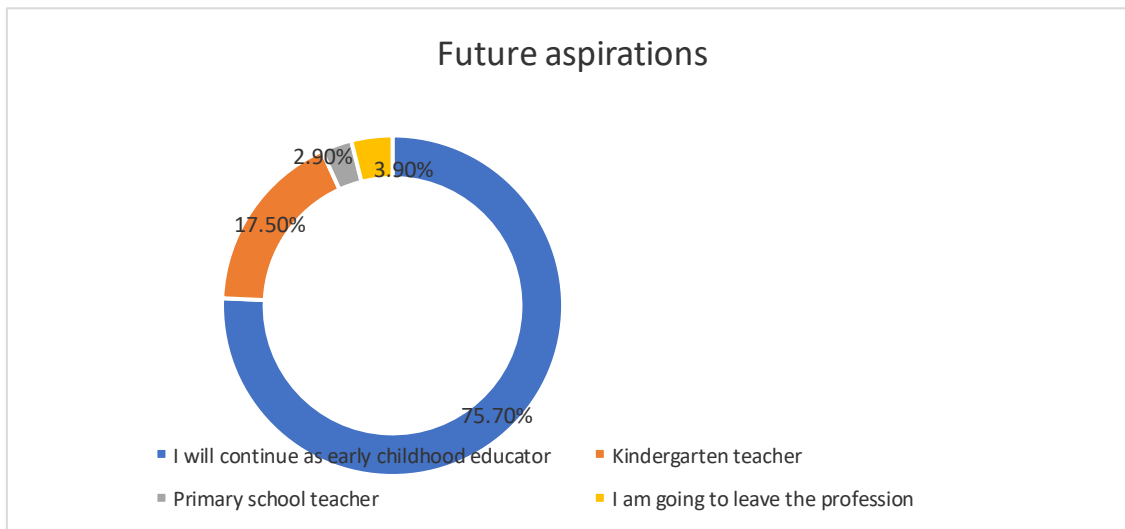


Fig. 3. Early childhood educators' future aspirations

Examining the underlying reasons for the strong commitment to the profession, we find that personal desires and attachment to the age group are the strongest motivating factors. Pragmatic reasons such as the nature of the job, proximity to home, or being in a "forced career" because of not obtaining another teaching positions significantly lag internal motivation ( $t = -8.2108$ ;  $p < .00001$ ). The level of motivation to stay in the profession due to the recommendation of authority figures is also very low.

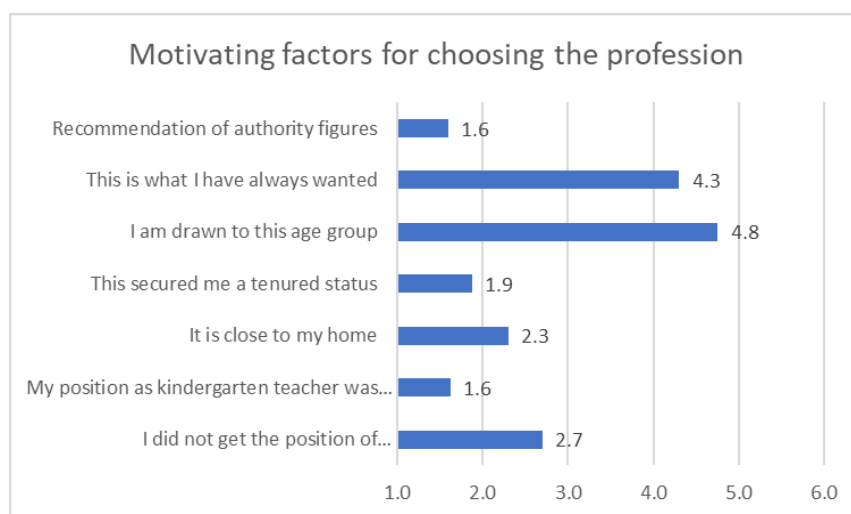


Fig. 4. Early childhood educators' underlying reasons for choosing the profession

The next survey block focused on early childhood educators' perspectives on the change in the structure of the institution in general, and its consequences, from the point of view of those concerned and in terms of efficiency.

The least favorable responses were provided by early childhood educators, who perceive the consequences of the change in a significantly less positive way ( $m=4.0$ ).

Investigating the correlation between the evaluation of the consequences and the respondents, we can observe how early childhood educators experience the change and how they judge it from their own perspective. According to the respondents, the strongest impact of the change is the enrolment in professional training courses for early childhood educators, with a mean of 4.8 (mean values indicate trend, although no statistical significance is detected:  $t=1.39386$ ;  $p=.082438$ ;  $p>.05$ ). This may be explained by the fact that retraining and/or further training is a prerequisite for securing the position of early childhood educator. With a high mean, the increased choice of career paths (4.5) is also perceived as a positive consequence, and there is a positive change in terms of the salary as well (4.5). Working time reduction (from 8 hours to 5 hours previously) is also perceived as a positive consequence. Figure 5. shows that early childhood educators tend to associate the possibility of job creation with the change, compared to significantly lower perceptions of possible job losses. Findings also reflect early childhood educators' expectation for an increased professional status and esteem as a result of the integration into the educational system (4.2).

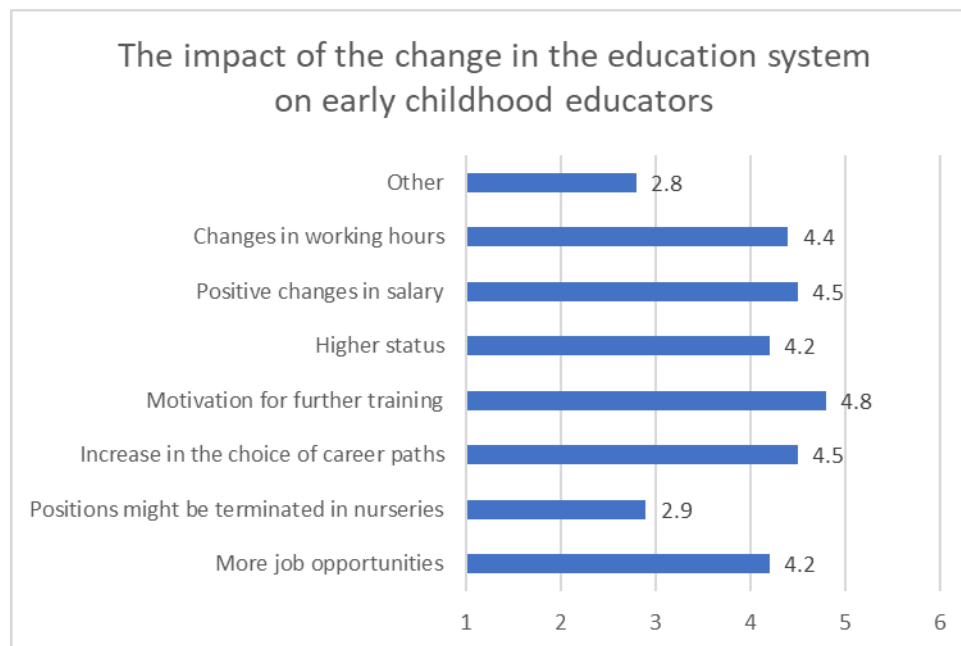


Fig. 5. The impact of the change in the education system on early childhood educators

Subjecting the data to factor analysis, 3 groups can be distinguished based on the direct impact of institutional changes on early childhood educators. One group feels threatened, emphasizing the imminent danger of losing their job. The second group sees an increase in professional opportunities (potential jobs, career paths, training), while the third group prioritizes personal benefits (higher status, higher salary, shorter working hours).

Table 2. Early Childhood Educator Groups Based on the Impact of the Institutional Change (Principal component analysis,  $KMO=.812$ , Varimax, 78,03%)

The impact of the institutional change in the nursery system on early childhood educators	FACTORS		
	1. Personal opportunities	2. Professional opportunities	3. Threat to position
Positions may be terminated in nurseries.	.006	-.144	.962

It creates more potential job opportunities in nurseries.		- .108	.755		-.315
It increases a range of choices regarding professional career paths		.407	.792		-.096
It motivates early childhood educators to pursue further training.		.535	.716		.124
Higher status.		.645	.570		.012
The salary undergoes a positive change.		.813	.259		.107
The duration of working hours changes.		.855	.020		-.068

The efficiency of early childhood educators is not solely determined by institutional organization. Since it is essential that the two pillars of early childhood education, caregiving and education, are proportionately represented, we asked participants to consider the conditions for the appropriate representation of these dimensions. Results indicate that many requirements need to be successfully met for efficient caregiving and education, as all response options yielded high means.

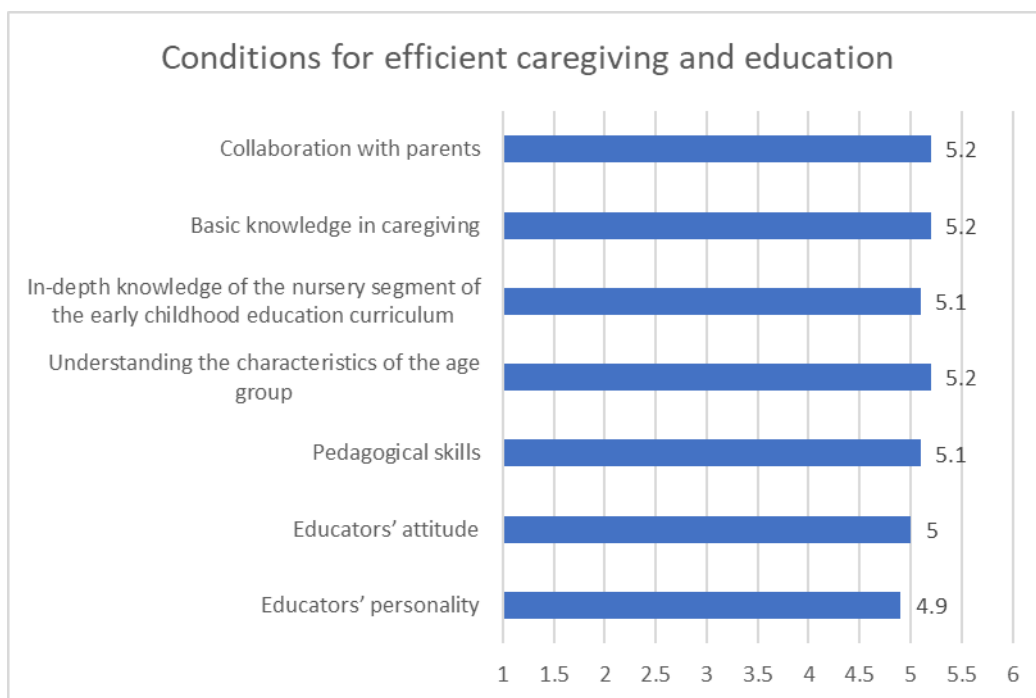


Fig. 6. Conditions for efficient caregiving and education in early childhood education

Basic knowledge in caregiving and understanding the age group stand out among the conditions, however, collaboration with parents is also considered important, having the same mean score (5.2). The experiences of early childhood educators confirm that the younger the child, the more successful development depends on the pedagogical partnership with the family. Knowledge of the curriculum was also deemed important, as well as the educators' attitude and pedagogical skills. A surprising finding is that, although it is only one tenth of a point behind, educators' personality was rated the least important, while it is a determining factor in the fulfilment of all the other conditions.

When it comes to the developmental and educational activities in nurseries, it is self-evident that belonging to the educational sector influences the nature and quality of these activities. Overall, with a mean of 4.8, respondents consider that the change in the institutional structure enriches the educational system.

To explore some specific aspects of this improvement, a number of responses regarding learning organization are also presented. According to early childhood educators, there are, on average, 17.6 children in a group. This is a very high number given the age of the children and their care and

educational needs, even if the educator is assisted by an assistant, or cleaner (depending on the type of institution).

Figure 7 indicates that early childhood educators also find this number excessive. About two-thirds of the respondents consider that the size of their group is too large, while one-thirds consider it optimal. The optimal response was undoubtedly provided by respondents who work with a smaller group size. Significant differences were observed: respondents without pedagogical qualifications consider the group size much more optimal than their colleagues with pedagogical qualifications (Chi-square < .008\*\*).

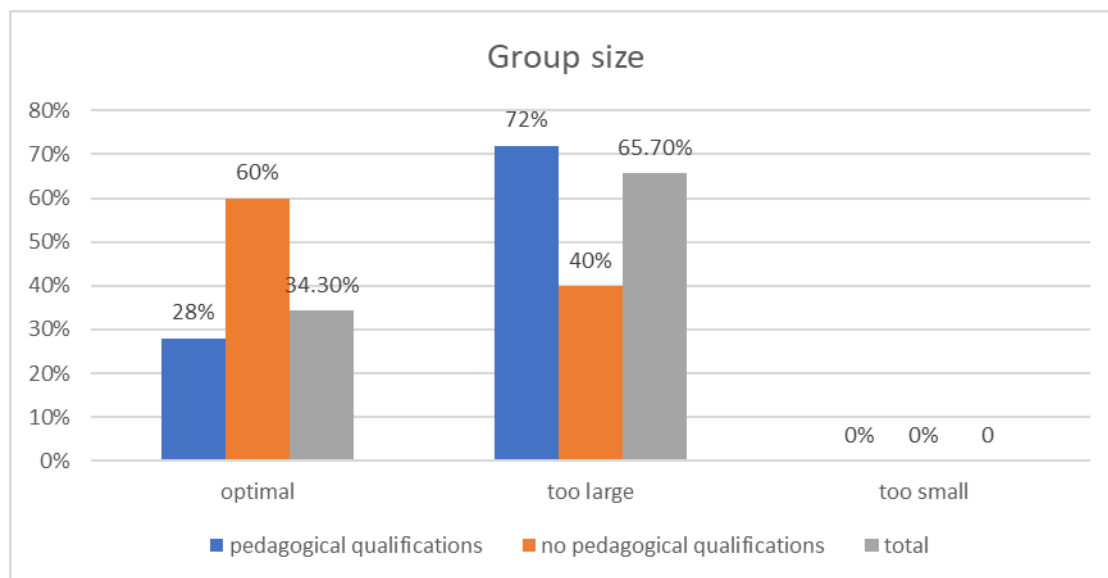


Fig. 7. The group sizes in nurseries from the perspective of early childhood educators

Regarding the type of the qualifications, early childhood educators who have retrained perceive the number of children to be much higher compared to teacher trainees or early childhood educators with higher education (Chi-square < .031). This phenomenon may be rooted in previous experiences regarding staff-child ratios, which may have been more favorable compared to the ratios following the integration of nursery education into the educational system.

The literature on early childhood education stresses the importance of the unity and proportionality of caregiving and educational tasks (Lajtai Zsoltné, 2022). Therefore, the present study also explores early childhood educators' perspectives on the balance between these two activities. Figure 8 below illustrates that more than a third of early childhood educators can find the appropriate balance between caregiving and education, 45.6% prioritize caregiving tasks, while approximately one-fifth put more emphasis on education. There are no significant differences based on pedagogical qualifications or the type of qualifications. The age of the children, of course, can have a strong influence on these ratios. Additionally, the previous system, where healthcare was the primary concern, can still exert an influence on a significant number of early childhood educators to prioritize caregiving tasks. There may also be pragmatic reasons for the predominance of caregiving tasks, such as lack of auxiliary staff, resulting in the educator performing caregiving tasks that would not otherwise fall within their professional responsibilities.

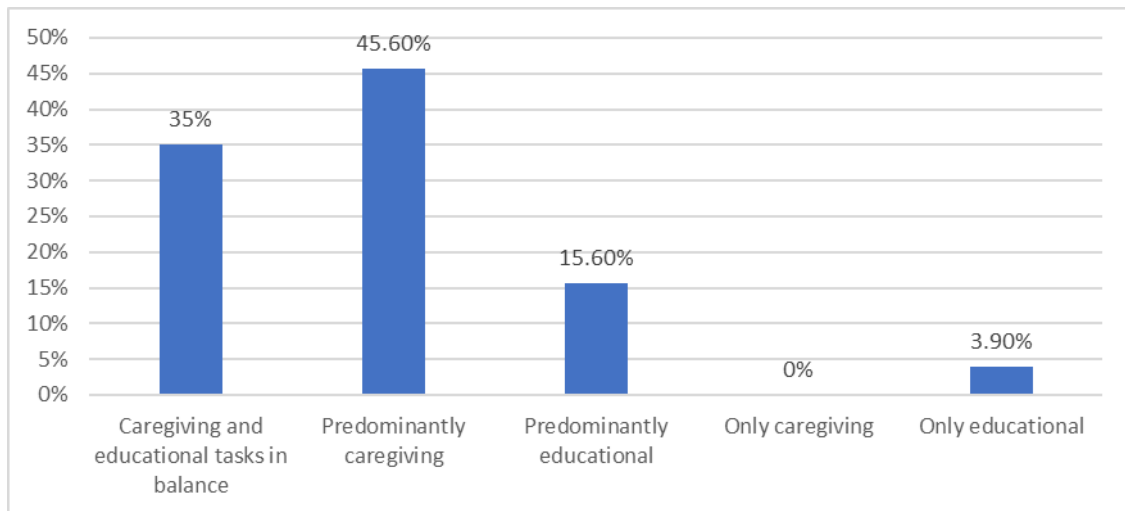


Fig. 8. Ratios of the two functions of nursery development in the daily activities of early childhood educators

The change in the institutional structure has also brought about a change in the working hours of early childhood educators. The 8-hour workday has been replaced by a schedule similar to that of kindergarten teachers: 5 hours of direct interaction with the children, accompanied by indirect activities (planning, methodological activities, etc.). However, this change has not yet been implemented in educational practice, as early childhood educators have chosen various options, and significant differences were also found in the light of pedagogical qualifications:

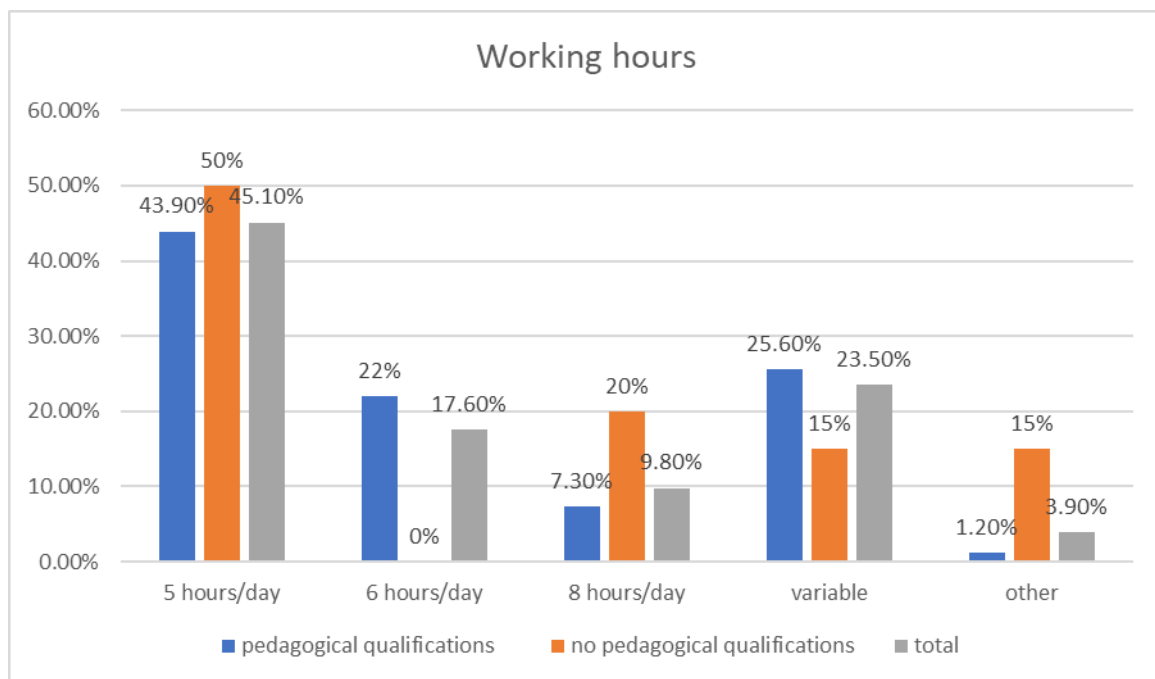


Fig. 9. Working hours of early childhood educators

As illustrated in Figure 9, almost half of the early childhood educators surveyed spend 5 hours a day in the institution. Nearly a quarter of them work in a variable schedule. The 'other' category featured mostly 7 hours a day, as such an option was not available. Significant differences were observed along the pedagogical qualifications' variable: early childhood educators without pedagogical qualifications continued to work 8 hours a day. The type of qualifications variable also highlights these significant differences, showing that early childhood educators with higher education spend the most hours per day in the nursery compared to their colleagues (Chi-square < .014\*).

Regarding the representation of developmental areas set out in the curriculum, findings show that early childhood educators strive to ensure that each area is adequately addressed and integrated into

the activities in an exceptionally balanced manner. Social-emotional and language-communication areas receive the most attention (with a 5.5 mean), which is highly appropriate given the sensitive period of language acquisition and so is the emphasis on the social-emotional area which promotes development within the community (and not only!). The areas of physical development and cognitive development are also given appropriate recognition (with a 5.2 mean score). The lowest mean score was found in learning skills and attitudes, which significantly falls behind the language and emotional areas ( $t= 3.28479$ ;  $p=.0006$ ;  $p < .05$ ). This attests to the early childhood educators' awareness and experiences that there are far fewer instances/less time devoted to learning situations which allow for the development of these areas, which are prioritized in routine activities, optional activities, and play.

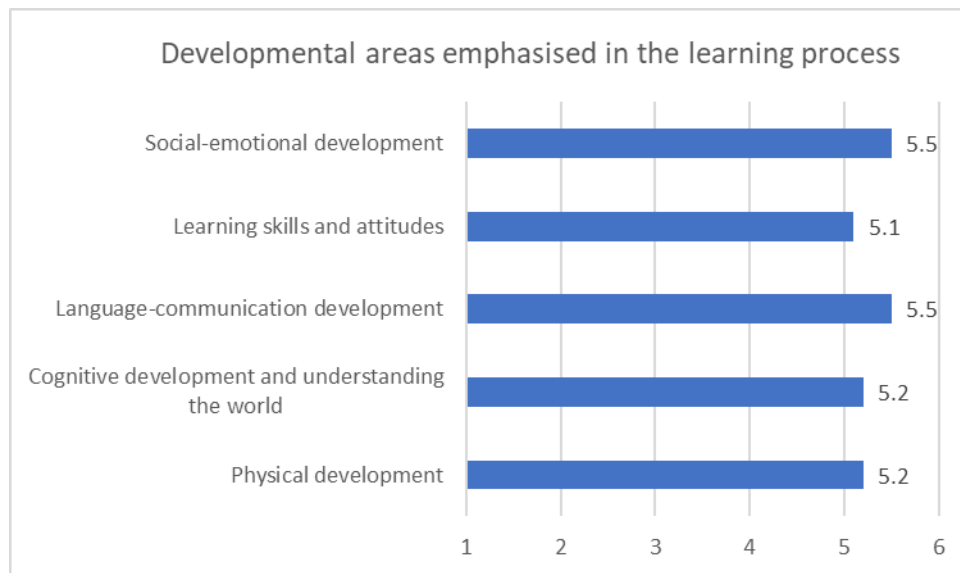


Fig. 10. Early childhood educators' emphasis on developmental areas set out in the curriculum

No significant differences were observed between the pedagogical qualifications' variable or the special qualifications for early childhood education. However, significant differences were found between the type of qualifications variable.

Table 3. The Impact of Qualifications on the Implementation of Developmental Areas

Type of qualifications		PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	LANGUAGE-COMMUNICATION	LEARNING SKILLS	SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
none	Mean	5.25	5.17	5.67	5.17	5.75
	N	12	12	12	12	12
	Standard deviation	1.215	1.030	.651	1.267	.452
Teacher trainee	Mean	5.22	5.11	5.56	4.22	5.67
	N	9	9	9	9	9
	Standard deviation	.972	.782	.527	1.856	.500
Retraining /certification	Mean	5.32	5.34	5.55	5.16	5.52
	N	44	44	44	43	44
	Standard deviation	.959	.888	.761	.998	.821
Pedagogical high school	Mean	1.50	2.00	3.00	2.00	3.00
	N	2	2	2	2	2
	Standard deviation	2.121	2.828	4.243	2.828	4.243
Higher education in pedagogy	Mean	4.91	5.24	5.31	5.00	5.29
	N	35	34	35	34	35
	Standard deviation	1.380	.987	.993	.953	.987

MA in pedagogy	Mean	6.00	5.00	6.00	5.00	6.00
	N	1	1	1	1	1
	Standard deviation	.	.	.	.	.
Total	Mean	5.10	5.20	5.44	4.96	5.44
	N	103	102	103	101	103
	Standard deviation	1.264	1.053	.977	1.224	.987
Significance Anova		.001**	.001**	.009**	.004**	.007**

Early childhood educators who have undergone retraining place significantly more emphasis on developmental areas compared to their peers with pedagogical qualifications. This can be attributed to the fact that during retraining, they managed to grasp the true essence of the curriculum, the importance of focusing on developmental areas, especially those respondents who encountered these for the first time and did not view the new early childhood education curriculum through the lens of the former kindergarten curriculum.

As for the emphasis of activity types, subjects report the same mean value for routines, habits and transitions on the one hand, and optional activities and games on the other (5.6). The emphasis (5.1) on thematic activities is significantly lower ( $t=3.84272$ ;  $p=.000081$ ;  $p<.05$ ), which can be explained by the fact that the time ratios associated with each activity in the curriculum significantly favor the other two types of activities. Thematic activities are devoted 10-15/ 20-25 minutes, optional activities are devoted 2-2.5 hours, while the time frame for routines and habits is 2.5 hours per day, within one shift. However, the high mean scores also indicate that early childhood educators are fully aware of the significance and role of each type of activity. Thematic activities are even overemphasized, as habit formation and optional activities are overrepresented in nursery education. No significant differences were found for any of the indicators of educational qualifications.

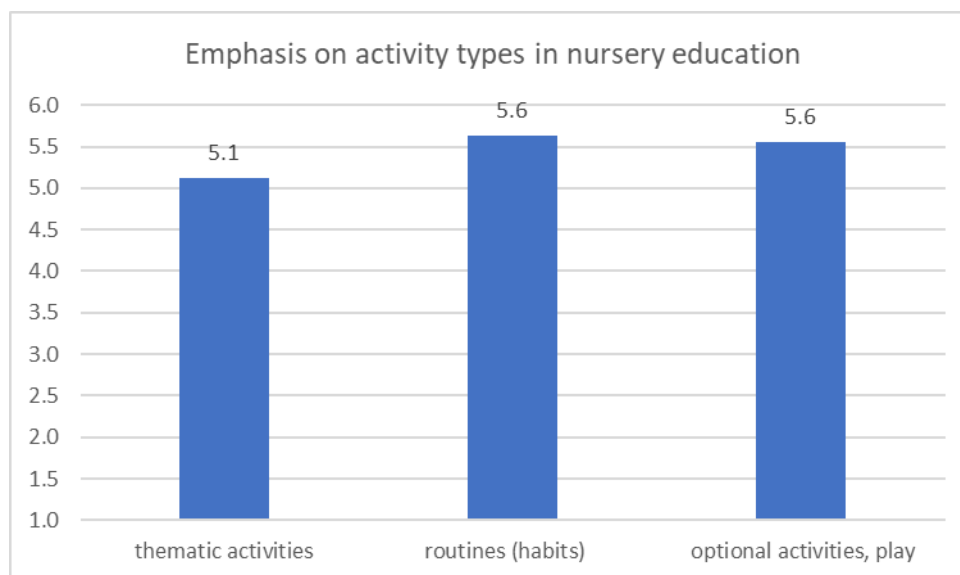


Fig. 11. Emphasis on activity types in nursery education

Regarding the ratios of thematic activities, games and musical activities have the highest mean score. Experiences show that young children engage most easily in these activities, which are not only developmental but also soothing and age appropriate. Responses to open-ended questions also confirmed that respondents view musical playful activities and nursery rhymes as the most appropriate types of activity for young children. The latter type leads to communication-creative activities, which are also marked as highly utilized within weekly thematic activities. Cognitive activities and arts and crafts receive a very similar emphasis. However, compared to music and movement activities and

play, every other thematic activity has a significantly lower emphasis in terms of weekly activity ratio ( $t= 3.47574$ ;  $p= .000311$ ;  $p<.05$ ). While the mean score for outdoor activities is not low, the fact that it has received the lowest rating among thematic activities indicates that it might not be as readily available for educators, it can be weather-dependent and dressing tasks can be time-consuming, especially with a deficiency in auxiliary staff. The pedagogical qualifications variable yielded significant differences only in the case of outdoor activities: early childhood educators without pedagogical qualifications place much less emphasis on outdoor activities compared to their professionally qualified colleagues (Anova $<.05^*$ ). This finding suggests that pedagogical qualifications offer a more holistic approach than a specialized course, thereby advocating the need to reconsider the early childhood education system.

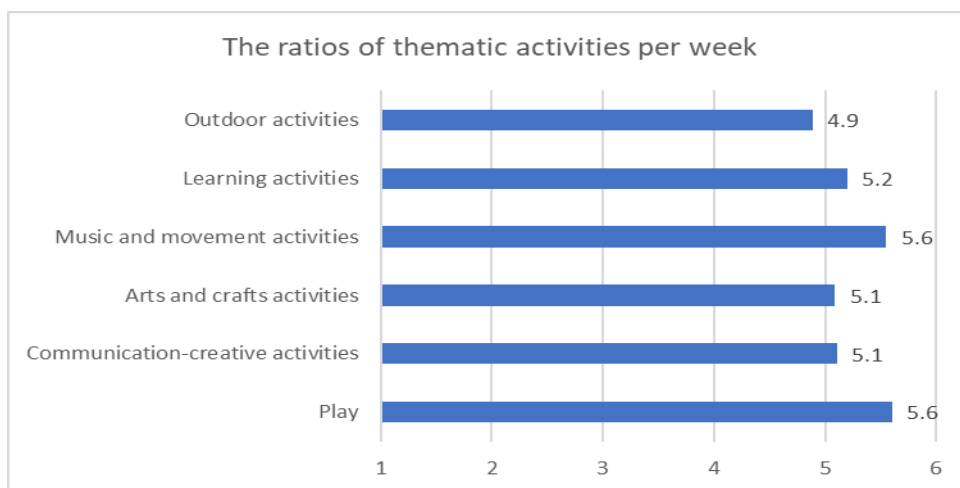


Fig. 12. Early childhood educators’ perspective on the ratios of thematic activities in the course of a week

When it comes to the duration of thematic activities, early childhood educators mainly prefer 5-10-minute activities or 10-15 -minute activities, mostly in line with the curriculum requirements.

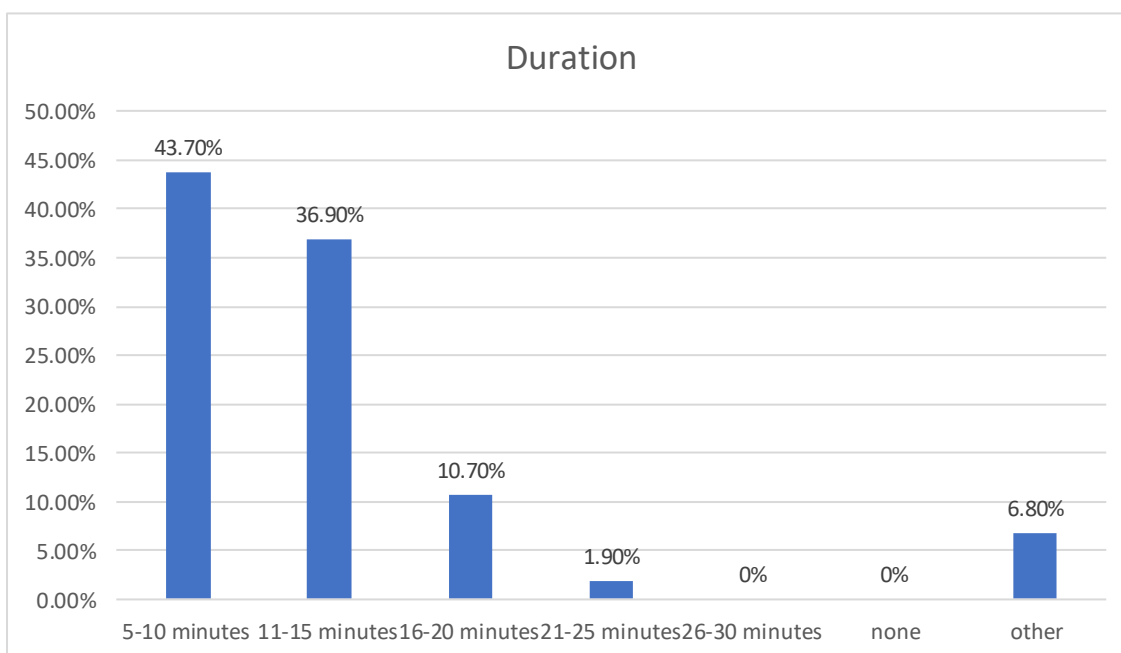


Fig. 13. Duration of thematic activities at nursery (%)

Only 1 out of 10 early childhood educators use 16-20- minute activities that are appropriate for kindergarten children, reinforcing the recurring risk of "preschoolification." The responses in the

'other' category highlight flexible adaptation: early childhood educators vary the duration of activities between 5-10 and 10-15 minutes depending on the children's mood and the topic.

Optional activities and plays take place in activity centers. The curriculum recommends using at least 2 thematic centers daily. Two-thirds of early childhood educators propose two activity centers daily, in line with the developmental needs of young children, however, nearly 10% of respondents do not propose any activity centers at all (raising the question of whether they always use guided play and activities?!), while around 6% offer only one center, providing no opportunity for free choice. About one-fifth of the sample implement developmental and educational activities by 'opening up' three activity centers. There are no significant differences among the variable of pedagogical qualifications.

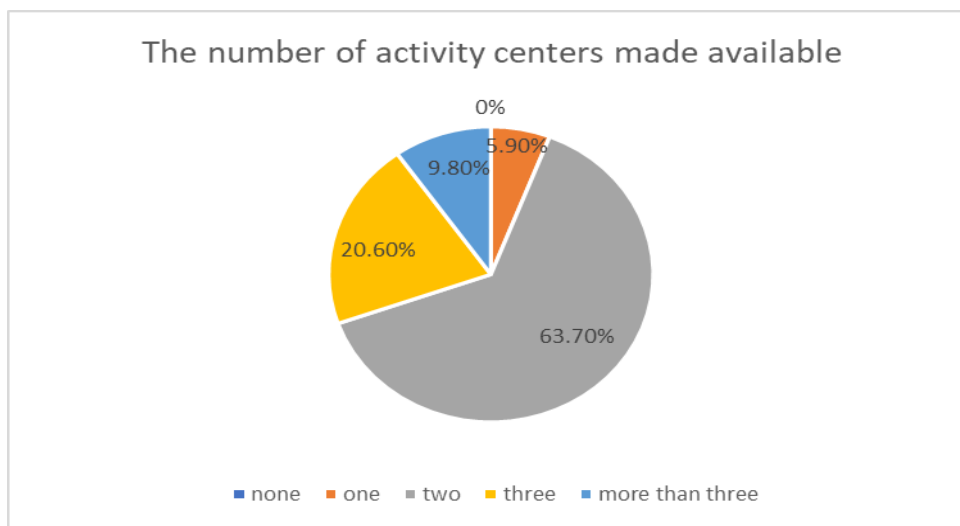


Fig. 14. The number of activity centres made available daily for the implementation of optional activities and play

We have also investigated the emphasis placed on various routines in everyday activities in nursery education.

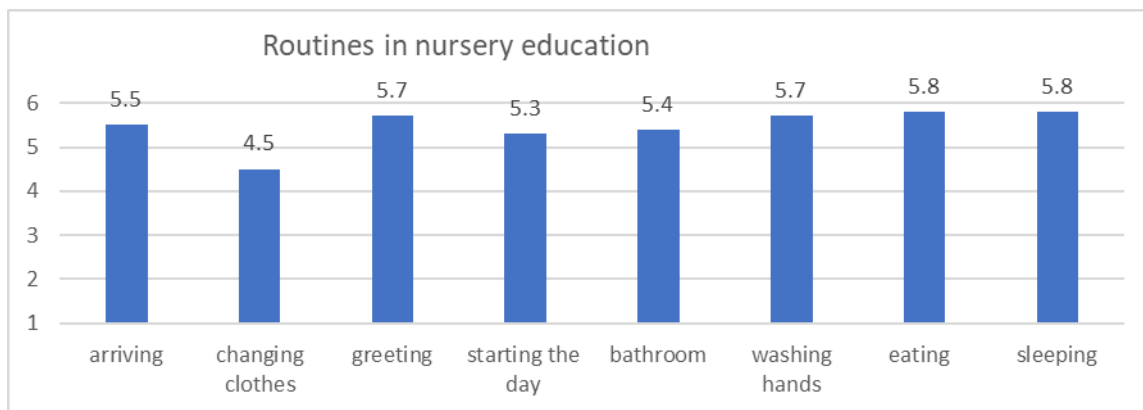


Fig. 15. Routines in nursery education

Figure 15 shows that early childhood educators pay particular attention to shaping routines/habits, as indicated by the high mean scores. It also illustrates that changing clothes is the activity early childhood educators are the least involved in (presumably, parents and assistants play a greater role in this), and it significantly lags other areas ( $t = -4.97489$ ;  $p < .00001$ ). On the other hand, most educators consider shaping eating habits (5.8), sleep/naptime routines (5.8), personal hygiene habits (handwashing) (5.7), and greeting habits (5.7) as their primary tasks. Compared to these, there is significantly less emphasis ( $t = -3.80679$ ;  $p = .000093$ ;  $p < .05$ ) on the morning conversation circle (5.3), which should be part of everyday activities according to the curriculum. No significant correlations were found regarding routines as regards the pedagogical qualifications variable.

Overall, research findings show that early childhood educators are familiar with the nursery segment of the early childhood education curriculum, and they make efforts to implement it, even though there is a perceived need for further optimization, particularly regarding the duration of thematic activities, the significance of outdoor activities, etc.

#### 4. Conclusions

The findings of our research show that early childhood educators are committed to the age group and to their profession despite the challenges and uncertainties brought about by the changes in this sector. One of their future aspirations is to remain in the field, even though they recognize that their work is generally undervalued both socially and within the educational community compared to other pedagogical roles. Contrary to our hypothesis, the motivating factors for taking on the job are not so much the pragmatic aspects such as the nature of the job, stability, or proximity to home, but rather a commitment to the age group. Besides their enthusiasm, it is evident that there is a need for a more in-depth understanding of the curriculum (which they do acknowledge), and perhaps more experience in the practical implementation of the curriculum. This is supported by the challenges highlighted in the responses, among which, one of the most critical points would be the development of guidelines and models applicable in the educational process, which would clarify the curricular expectations placed upon early childhood educators in their daily activities.

Overall, the institutional change is perceived as positive and early childhood educators believe that nursery education has gained a worthy place in the social system through its integration into the education sector. In assessing the consequences of the change in general, and its impacts on early childhood educators in particular, we found that they tend to focus on the benefits (higher status, more diverse career opportunities, etc.) and the opportunities (more potential jobs, favorable working hours and salary).

From an institutional perspective, they are aware that the educational function is more prominent in the new system than before, and they consider the integration into the education sector can serve as a motivating factor for parents to make use of the institution. They also emphasize the role of the educator's personality and attitude in balancing the functions of developmental activities. Regarding institutional organizational models, respondents tend to prefer autonomous institutions.

One of the survey blocks in the empirical study allows for the depiction of the current situation of nursery education through the lens of early childhood educators. It can be observed that the early childhood education curriculum plays a crucial role in organizing activities. Educators strive to ensure proportional implementation of each developmental area outlined in the curriculum. All types of activities are fully represented, sometimes with a seemingly forced emphasis on thematic activities. Regarding thematic activities, different variations emerge with an emphasis on play and musical-movement activities. Concerning activity time frames, about half of educators use the most age-appropriate intervals as set out in the curriculum. Educational and caregiving tasks are relatively balanced, although about half of the educators indicated that caregiving tasks are more prominent. There is also a visible effort for diversity in routines among the surveyed individuals, with preferences for routines that can be more naturally shaped through community development, such as meals, greetings, arrival and meeting in the morning.

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