Tuscan approach to Bulgaria

Towards innovation in ECEC services from

Institute of Early Childhood
Lifelong Learning Programme

TALE
Tuscan Approach Learning for Early childhood education and care
Summary

1. General presentation of the ECEC system in Bulgaria........ 4
   1.1 Legislation........................................................................................................ 4
   1.2 Types of services.................................................................................................. 4
   1.3 Early childhood education and care system coverage .............................. 5
   1.4 Fees....................................................................................................................... 5
   1.5 Governance .......................................................................................................... 6
   1.6 Qualification and in-service training................................................................. 7

2. Brief description of ECEC services......................................................... 9
   2.1 Curriculum ........................................................................................................... 9
   2.2 Learning environment ......................................................................................... 9
   2.3 Family involvement ............................................................................................ 11
   2.4 Professional development .................................................................................. 12
   2.5 Governance and management: the case of the municipality of Vratsa........ 12
       2.5.1 Brief information about the services involved ............................................. 13

3. Perspectives of development, innovation and experimentation .. 14

Bibliography .......................................................................................................... 15
1. General presentation of the ECEC system in Bulgaria

1.1 Legislation

The methodological guidance of the early years education services is carried out by the Ministry of Health through the Regional Healthcare Centre (RHC), the Regional Inspectorate for Protection and Control of Public Healthcare (RIPCPH) and municipalities. The Regulation № 26 of 18 November 2008 referring to the organization and activities in crèches, issued by the Ministry of Health, defines the structure and the activities in these services.

Crèches may be established by municipalities, by individuals and legal entities. The services for children and the activities in the crèches are funded by the respective municipal budget. For the services for children in the local crèches, parents and municipality pay fees in amounts determined by the municipal council, in accordance with the Law on local taxes.

The crèches are separate organizational structures in which medical, pedagogical and other specialists carry out care and education services for children aged from three months to three years. According to the Amended - SG. 36 of 2011, effective on 10.05.2011, when children turn three years of age, or at the request of parents before this period, from the 1st of September they should transit to another early childhood service.

Child care is provided mainly by nurses and caregivers. Due to the lack of qualifications and training in early childhood learning and development, their services do not meet entirely the requirements for a holistic approach to child’s development, for an inclusive socio-psychological environment, with meaningful interactions with children and close cooperation with their parents.

1.2 Early Childhood Education and Care system coverage

There are two types of crèches: regular and seasonal. The regular crèches are ongoing services provided throughout the entire year. They can be with a daily program, weekly program and mixed programs.

Day-crèches enroll children from the age of three months to three years for entire day
stay. The day stay is during the entire week except on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays.

Week crèches admit children from the age of ten months to three years of age for week stay. In the week crèches children are staying for the entire week and are provided with services from Monday until Friday when they go to stay with their parents/family. Parents may decide to take their children in any other day of the week, and the food for the afternoon snack and dinner is then given to parents.

In the mixed crèches children are divided into day-crèche groups and week-crèche groups.

Seasonal crèches are opened, if necessary, for a period of 4 to 6 months. They host children from the age of ten months to three years of age. Seasonal crèches are only day-crèches. In the crèches children are divided into crèche-groups, as follows:
- Breastfeeding crèche group, which includes children from three months to ten months of age. Breastfeeding crèche groups are only day-groups.
- Mixed crèche group, which includes children from ten months to three years old.

The number of children in one crèche group is:
- For breastfeeding group - 6 to 8 children;
- For mixed day group - 8 to 16 children;
- For mixed week group - 8 to 12 children;
- For groups with children with special needs or chronic illnesses - 6 to 8 children.

1.3 Types of services and funding

During 2013, in Bulgaria according to the statistics by regions and districts, the total number of crèches is 770 and the capacity for enrolment is 30,120 places. Crèches are public services provided to families for strengthening their crucial role in upbringing their children up to three years of age, in a healthy learning and care environment mindful to children’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. (See Statistic Form 1)

1.4 Fees

Crèches may be established by municipalities, by individuals and by legal entities. The funding differs from one municipality to another, and so does the parents fees which are determined by the municipal council in accordance with the Law on local taxes.

Each municipality has different rules for determining the fees which parents have to cover. The crèches are separate organizational structures in which medical, pedagogical and other specialists provide care and education services for children aged from three months to three years of age.
No fees are requested for:
- Children whose parent/parents has 71% or more permanent disability; children who are complete orphans; children of parents who have died in industrial accidents, natural disasters or while performing their duty;
- Children with medical expertise and over 50 percent reduced opportunities for social adaptation, issued under the medical expert, approved by Decree № 87/05.05.2010, the third and subsequent children of parents with many children.

A 50% discount fee is allowed for:
- Children with one parent;
- Children whose one parent is a student or a PhD;
- Children of parents with many children - the fee get 50% discount for the first and 75% for the second child;
- The second child, when two of the children are admitted to one or another childcare institution

1.5 Governance

The management and coordination of the crèche is provided by a principal. The principal of a municipal crèche is appointed and dismissed by the Mayor. A principal of a crèche can be a person with higher education in “medicine” or a person with „Nurse” or “Midwife” specialization, holding a “Bachelor” degree with not less than one year work experience.

The main responsibilities of the principal of the Crèche:
- Management control and responsibility for the overall activity of the Crèche;
- Representation before all state and municipal authorities, organizations, physical persons and legal entities;
- Responsibility for the organization and implementation of hygiene and anti-epidemic regimen;
- Finalization of labour contracts;
- Approval of the pay-roll plan;
- Approval of the interior regulations;
- Responsibility for the lawful and advisable expenditure of the budget.

Children are enrolled in the crèches by the principal of the crèche. The parents submit an application accompanied by the following documents:
- Copy of the child’s birth certificate;
- Health and prophylactic card, filled in by the family physician;
- One-time negative test for pathogenic bacteria (Shigella, Salmonella, E. coli) and intestinal parasites conducted not earlier than 15 days before the child's admission to the crèche;
- Blood and urine tests made within one month before the child’s admission to the Crèche;
- Test with a negative Wassermann reaction of one of the parents made within 6 months before the child's admission to the Crèche;
- Information from the General Practitioner (GP) about the immunization status of the child as required by Regulations № 15 of 2005 on immunizations in the Republic of Bulgaria (SG. No 45 of 2005);
– Medical certificate about a lack of contact with infectious diseases issued by the GP of the child.

Children, who have not been given mandatory immunizations for their age, may be enrolled in the crèche, when there are permanent contraindications for their immunization and are exempt from them with a written statement from RIPCPH.

Children may be absent from the crèche:
– Due to parents’ annual leaves or personal reasons about which the parents notify the principal of the crèche in writing within three days.
– Due to illness of the child, about which the parents notify the crèche within three days;
– If the child has been absent from the Crèche for more than 10 days, their parents provide a note from the family doctor that the child is healthy and has not been in contact with infectious diseases;
– If a child has been absent from the crèche for more than one month, one-time bacteriological test for pathogenic intestinal microorganisms with negative result only in epidemic indications is required;
– If a child has been absent for more than two months – one-time negative result for intestinal parasites under Regulations № 5 of 2006 for the diagnostics, prevention and control of local infestations (SG. No 40 of 2006).

1.6 Qualification and in-service training

It is mandatory for the crèche to have the following specialists on the pay-roll:
– Nurse or midwife;
– Pedagogue;
– Caregiver.

A nurse or midwife can be a person with higher education holding a Bachelor degree in “Nurse” or “midwife” specialty respectively. The nurse or midwife has the following responsibilities:
– Management and responsibility for the overall work in the group entrusted to her;
– Acceptance of the children and daily check-ups regarding their health, collection of information from their parents;
– Monitoring the state of health of the children and provides first aid, if necessary;
– Structured activities with the children in the group following written guidance from the crèche pedagogue;
– Approach to each individual child and special care of the newly enrolled children during their transition period;
– Responsibility for children’s feeding and involvement in the preparation of daily and weekly menu;
– Organization of general strengthening as well as special strengthening procedures prescribed by a doctor;
– Application of massages and gymnastics to breast-fed children;
– Anthropometric measurements of children;
- Monitoring the implementation of immunizations according to immunization calendar;
- Microbiological analysis and monitoring of results;
- Observation of the hygiene regime and supervision of the work of the caregiver;
- Monitoring the observance of the requirements to the environmental factors.

The pedagogue in the crèche can be a person with higher education with a specialization in “Preschool Education”. Her/his main responsibilities are:
- Management, organization, planning and control of the overall educational work with children;
- Provision of appropriate materials for play and education of children;
- Creation and preparation of didactic materials for activities and games;
- Organization of newly-admitted children’s adaptation to the Crèche life according to their age and individual characteristics;
- Periodically development of plans for educational work;
- Written and oral instructions on a daily basis to the nurse in organizing daily regime, individual and group activities, games, rides, entertainments and observations, and participation in them;
- Monitoring consistently children’s mental development and records it in their health and prophylactic cards.

The caregiver in a crèche can be a person with secondary school education having the following main responsibilities:
- Care of children’s personal hygiene;
- Care of general hygiene of the premises of the group;
- Actively involvement in all activities related to the regime.

A crèche with up to 60 children enrolled shall appoint at least one pedagogue, and for every subsequent 20 children another one. One crèche group shall have at least two nurses and two caregivers. Services are carried out by at least one nurse and one caregiver in a shift. Weekly crèches shall have at least two additional nurses. Breastfeeding groups shall have at least one additional nurse and one additional caregiver. Crèche staff can include other people to take care of the technical and physical maintenance of the crèche.

The professional development of the staff working in crèches is a combination of knowledge - general professional knowledge and special cross-professional skills which in many cases are very theoretical and less practical.

The trainings for the crèches’ staff happen very seldom under projects, it is not guided by an education policy. The qualification trainings are too short in duration to cover all the knowledge and skills required for working in crèches.
2. Brief presentation of the ECEC services

2.1 Curriculum

In the early childhood education and care services, the learning activities with children from an early age and the methodological guidance need focus on the in depth study of the psycho-physiological characteristics of the child at this specific age in general, and the individual characteristics of each child in particular. The proper orientation of the pedagogical approaches, methods and interactions with children are also considered as crucial.

In Bulgaria, there is no national curriculum guiding the learning activities to be carried out in early childhood centres. Most of the activities are focused on assuring the safe, hygienic and providing an age-appropriate physical environment for the youngest children, but limited structured activities that stimulate child’s development holistically.

Some early childhood programs worked on implementing child centered practices valuing child’s individual needs and interests, the role of play and meaningful interactions with peers and adults, and the importance of building child’s autonomy and independence through daily routines.

2.2 Learning environment

Crèches are located in buildings protected by the influence of environmental factors - noise, dust, moisture, air flow, away from infectious hospitals, cemeteries, gas stations, highways, and avenues with heavy traffic. Crèches are located in buildings specially built for the purpose or in those accommodated for caring children aged from three months to three years, and providing at least 20 m² of surface area of the entire property (built-up and not built-up area) for each child.

Walls, floor and ceiling of the premises shall be constructed of non-flammable and non-toxic materials with good thermal insulation properties, easy to clean and disinfect, with walls and ceiling painted in bright colors. Partitions between rooms shall be constructed of materials that provide visibility and good insulation. The premises provide hot and cold water that meets the requirements of Regulations № 9 of 2001, on the quality of water intended for drinking purposes (SG. 30 of 2001).

The premises of the Crèche provide microclimate with the following parameters:
- Air temperature of 21 to 23 ° C; for monitoring the temperature every room is equipped with a thermometer;
- Relative humidity of air in the range of 45 to 60%; the premises are equipped with gauges for measuring humidity;
- Speed of the airflow from 0.15 to 0.25 m/s, with a rate frequency of air exchange of 1 1/2 times per hour; for ensuring a constant flow of fresh air in the room regular airing is provided;
- The maximum admissible noise level on the premises is:
  - Bedroom - 35 dB;
  - Study room - 60 dB;
  - Kitchens and laundries - 80 dB.
- The premises provide natural and artificial lighting as follows:
  - The ratio between the glass of the windows to floor area should be 1:4 for study rooms and bedrooms and 1:3 for toilets and corridors;
  - Artificial lighting should be sufficient in strength and evenly distributed; illumination for study-rooms should be 300 Lx for fluorescent and 150 Lx for ordinary lighting and for the bedroom - 150 Lx for fluorescent and 75 Lx for ordinary lighting;
  - Lighting fixtures shall be secured.

The crèche provides accessible and permanent telephone connection.

Large, bright and airy premises for children are built in the crèches. The windows are fitted with nets to prevent insects from getting in and terraces are secured and equipped with canopies. A playroom, bedroom, dining area, bathroom shall be set apart in the crèche.

The play-room is equipped with approx. 20 tables, chairs and toys tailored to age specific characteristics of the children. The floor is covered with a carpet or other fabric cover, allowing easy cleaning and disinfection. The toys for the children shall meet the requirements of the Regulations on essential requirements and assessment of toys conformity, approved by Decree № 177 of 2001 (SG. 62 of 2001).

For infants a separate play area with spaces for staying awake and play is organized. The spaces are constructed of suitable, easy to clean and disinfect materials, and their side-partitions are 50 cm high. A table combined with a cupboard and an upholstered table-top is provided for the infants to be used for toilet, massage and gymnastics.

The bedroom is equipped with beds, which are consistent with the anthropological characteristics and age of children. For infants beds are provided with a length of not less than 95 cm and width of not less than 55 cm. Bed pads should be firm, a flat mattress 8-10 cm thick and a sheet should be used. Additionally, a waterproof and cloth pad can be put on the bed. The beds should be of sufficient height from the floor, comfortable for servicing, with removable side boards whose openings will not allow inserting a child's head. Individual lockers for each child are provided in the bedroom.

The dining area is equipped with age appropriate tables and chairs; for infants there is a table with two removable seats for simultaneous feeding of two children.
A kitchen equipped with a sink with hot and cold running water, cupboard and sterilizer is set up in the dining area. The bathroom is equipped with a sink and mirror that are the right height for the age of the children, a bathtub and shower, toilet and individual pots, covered container for dirty laundry, dry sterilizer, scales, height-meter and wall thermometer.

The crèche provides also conditions for the healthy holistic development of children through:
- Organizing and observing an age appropriate daily routine, consistent with the physiological requirements of the respective age group;
- Providing healthy meals consistent with the physiological requirements for the respective age group;
- Organizing and conducting activities focused on children’s holistic development;
- Providing conditions that limit diseases in children and the occurrence of accidents.

For children from one to three years of age a comprehensive promotion of children’s health is carried out. The following activities are organized and conducted in the crèche:
- Daily check-up of children’s state of health;
- Registration of health and immunization status of children in a health and prophylactic card based on data received from the General Practitioner (GP) of the child;
- Preventive and anti-epidemic activities for preventing and limiting the spread of infectious and parasitic diseases;
- Prevention activities for minimizing and reducing the risk factors in crèches (measures for avoiding injuries, poisoning and burns, etc.);
- Participation in regional, national and international programs related to prevention and health promotion of children;
- Organizing and participating in health education programs for the staff and parents of the children.

Crèches are allowed to prepare lunches for children from ten months to three years old. Food for lunch, ordered in advance by the parents, is paid at prices determined by the crèche. The municipal Crèches provide food at prices determined by the municipal council in accordance with the Law on local taxes.

2.3 Family involvement

In terms of parents’ involvement, the staff in the crèche promotes:
- Parental positive interaction with children, stimulating their holistic development and following their individual needs;
- Parents’ participation in the life of the crèche for sharing successes, problems, and responsibilities, by participating in the different type of activities;
- Regular an ongoing communication with parents;
- Parents as partners;
- Child’s health and education assistance for parents.

As services addressing children and families, the crèches aim at creating for children a smooth transition from home environment to crèche, at providing an appropriate environment for stimulating child’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive development, and also at building a close connection between the crèches staff and the parents.

2.4 Professional development of staff

The professional development of the staff is carried out with the main purpose of improving the quality of the services delivered to children and their families, by strongly considering their specific needs.

There are trainings that are organized internally by the services and trainings that are organized by external providers.

The trainings organized on the level of the crèche focuses on improving the quality of the activities in the crèches aiming at increasing staff’s professional competences.

The trainings by external providers are attended by the staff depending on their professional development needs and interest. Usually these trainings provide exposure to new knowledge in the field of early childhood, new theories and practices and also contribute to the consolidation of the early childhood practitioner’s status.

2.5 Governance and management: the case of the municipality of Vratsa

Vratsa Municipality develops a Municipal Program for improving the quality of the services provided to children through creating a network schools, establishing model centers for quality services and transforming the small independent kindergartens from small towns in centers affiliated to kindergartens in Vratsa. Also, the Municipality is developing a Municipal Program for the modernization of buildings and of the existing facilities in schools, kindergartens and service units.

In 2014 Vratsa municipality provides education and care services to:

- 401 children enrolled in 15 crèches groups within 12 preschools;
- 188 children enrolled in three crèches.

At the same time Vratsa Municipality is committed to supporting the access to education and care services for children from vulnerable groups. During the past four years the Vratsa Municipality has guaranteed access of Roma children to kindergartens as follows:

- 2010 - 29 Roma children;
- 2011 - 34 Roma children;
- 2012 - 47 Roma children;
2.5.1 Brief information about the crèches in Vratsa involved in the project

“Zvanche” preschool was opened on 15.09.1988. Today the kindergarten has 4 preschool groups and 1 crèche groups. 119 children aged 1 to 7 years old are attending the kindergarten.

The staff includes 9 senior teachers, one pedagogue, 10 caregivers and 3 crèche nurses.

“Zname na mira” preschool was opened in 1983. Today it has 6 kindergarten groups and 2 crèche groups with a total of 211 children enrolled. The staff includes: 14 senior teachers, one pedagogue, 14 caregivers and 7 crèche nurses.

The crèche groups are actively embracing innovative approaches in working with families focusing on raising the awareness of the importance of child’s holistic development, on creating a welcoming and rich of information environment for families towards building a strong partnership between the crèche and the family. A “Crèche–Family” Charter on cooperation with families stays at the foundation for building a learning community between staff and families. Meetings and individual consultations are held with parents in the “Family room”.

![Image of children in a crèche setting]
3. Perspectives of Development, Innovation and Experimentation

Under the present project, within the two services there is an opportunity to create an innovative model of practices combining management, organizational, professional and methodological aspects geared towards:

- Increasing the focus on stimulating the youngest child’s development and learning, by providing the staff with professional guidance and support on:
  - increasing the play opportunities for children
  - increasing positive and meaningful interaction of children with their peers and adults
  - organizing diverse and stimulating activities with children that are responsive to their specific individual needs and interests, and support their transition to and from home, as well as stimulate their learning, autonomy and independence.
- Higher and more active involvement of children’s families in crèches’ life and activities.
- Building communication and planning mechanisms amongst the staff members reinforcing the work in a cross sectorial team
- Monitoring the quality of daily practices.
I. Bibliography

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