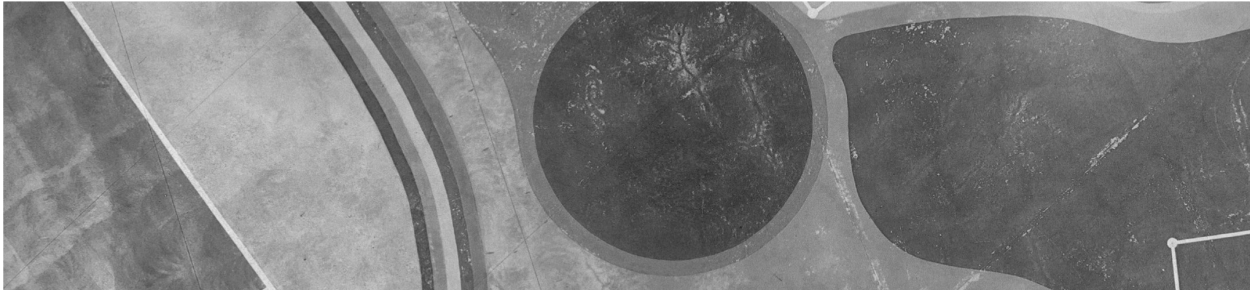# Pedagogies and Practice

Introduction

Nikki Fairchild

Education is both lifelong and life-wide. It occurs in a range of environments which are both formal and informal. In the early years, formal learning for young children takes place primarily in either Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings or in schools. Scholars have been questioning the effectiveness and inclusiveness of ECEC (Yelland & Bentley, 2018; Moss, 2014). This has been particularly apparent when early learning opportunities are conceptualized as an example of Human Capital Theory (HCT) where public money to fund ECEC is utilized (Moss, 2014). In these instances a justification for public spending demands some form of measurement and accountability of children's outcomes and educator's professional practice (Biesta, 2011). These more modernist viewpoints can binarize thinking and privilege certain visions of pedagogy and practice that normalize educational outcomes. The challenge is how to conceptualize and define pedagogy given the complexity of theoretical, social, cultural, and historical discourses that surround ECEC globally. It is also important to consider the 'image' of the child within these modernist discourses, and the impact this might have on how pedagogy is articulated in practice.

In the Global North ECEC, pedagogy has been play-based and child development theory has been influenced by developmental psychology (Burman, 2008). Although there is the argument that play is a 'natural' component of childhood providing rich learning experiences, postcolonial scholars have argued that this reifies a particular notion of development which marginalizes children who are not from a white Western background (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). There is a growing call for pedagogy to be reconceptualized to consider the situated and cultural nature of children's experiences and how this can provide equitable visions of pedagogy and anti-racist practice (Yelland & Bentley, 2018; Nxumalo, 2019; Pérez, 2020). To complement this view, the perception of the child, their learning and development possibilities,

and their agency are also part of wider discussions. This has resulted in a move to envisage the child as a competent and capable learner, brimming with potential and ready to engage with the wider world (Moss, 2014). These perspectives of the 'competent, capable child' also need to consider the different socio-cultural and economic conditions of children and take into consideration other conceptualizations of child development from a Global South perspective (Burman, 2019; Murris, 2019). Discussions of policy and teacher/educator responsibilities have also arisen, linked to caring pedagogies (Arndt & Tesar, 2019), quality practice (Reinke, Peters, & Castner, 2018), play and gender (Fairchild, 2019; Pizzorno, Benozzo, & Carey, 2015; Osgood & Mohandas, 2020), and relationships with nature (Duhn, Malone, & Tesar, 2019; Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020). What this wealth of literature suggests reveals the complexity of the debates on pedagogy and practice based on national and cultural priorities and all these positions can, and have been, critiqued and contested.

In this section chapter authors were given a free choice of the topics they wished to cover with the only proviso being a connection to pedagogy and practice. The result spans both the Global North and Global South and considers historical and contemporary aspects of pedagogy and practice. Authors take a critical perspective on both pedagogy and practice to consider global childhood experiences of ECEC which respect and reflect a multiplicity of local knowledges and imperatives, culture and situated perspectives of society. The authors aim to reconceptualize childhood experience to explore the diverse nature of pedagogy and curriculum, the impact of policy on professional practice and the different possibilities and contexts which support children's development. All chapters link to theory and how this is dovetailed with practice, and in some cases philosophical perspectives of childhoods are explored.

In the first chapter Eva Mikuska explores the historical development of ECEC practice in Eastern Europe. She traces the development of ECEC services for children who are part of a Hungarian minority in Romania, the Slovak Republic, and Serbia highlighting how national identity can be marginalized within Europe. The development of ECEC teachers in South Africa is a focus for Karin Murris, Rose-Anne Reynolds, Heloisa da Silva, and Luzia Aparecida de Souza. They engage with posthumanist philosophy and theory to explore how picture books can be employed to disrupt dominant narratives of young children's development. Britain is the focus for Nikki Fairchild and Vini Lander, where Black children's experiences in ECEC policy and practice are conceptualized using critical race theory. The overriding message in this chapter is that anti-racist practices need to be employed and positionality needs to be interrogated to ensure all children are supported. Arts-based pedagogies with young children in an outdoor atelier in Ireland are entangled with posthuman philosophies where Lucy Hill considers how art unfolds in relation with materials and children. She reveals that unplanned and emergent events with materials can provide new ways to rethink children's learning opportunities. The next chapter turns to China where Fengling Tang, Pan Yue-Juan, Niwen Wu consider how children connect their own developing identity with two popular picture books in China. The outcome of their chapter is that educators need to reflect on the complex ways in which children construct their identity in relation to cultural expectations and contemporary children's literature. The rise of neoliberal expectations in Norwegian kindergartens and the responses of ECEC educators to these revised policy expectations is unpicked by Ann Merete Otterstad and Constanse Elmenhorst. They return to a social media 'revolution' which followed proposed curriculum changes and enact posthuman theorizing to consider what was produced by the *#barnehageopprør2016/riot* and what possibilities there are for thinking differently about the ECEC curriculum.

The next chapter focuses on the image of the Singaporean child where Wu Pinhui Sandra traces the influences of socio-cultural history and policy development on the perception of children. She works with Bronfenbrenner's model of ecological development to highlight the influence of macro, meso, and micro force levels on the perception of children and on how leadership of ECEC settings is influenced by these wider systems. The development of ECEC in Nigeria is the focus of Hannah Olubunmi Ajayi, she connects the needs for Nigeria to meet the Sustainable Development Goals and how the challenges faced in ECEC, linked to quality and lack of equity, can either help, or hinder, Nigeria's global ambitions. The final chapter in this section traces the development of ECEC policy, pedagogy, and practice in India and how this has been impacted by the wide-ranging population and different requirements within States and Union Territories (UTs). Reetu Chandra highlights how policy development has been key in harmonizing practice expectations and how this focus needs to continue to ensure access to equitable quality ECEC for all children.

What all these chapters highlight are the differing global needs and expectations for young children. These are based on national priorities and a breadth of research evidence and philosophical theorizations which have been explored by the authors. The section is not about finding the 'right' way to enact pedagogy. What the chapters show is, although the child is at the center of pedagogy, the complexity found across national, historical, social, and theoretical perspectives needs to be considered when conceptualizing pedagogy and practice.

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The Importance of Early Childhood Education and Care for Hungarian Ethnic Minority Groups in Romania, Slovak Republic and Serbia

Eva Mikuska

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on early childhood education and care (ECEC) for three Hungarian minority groups of people in Romania, Slovak Republic, and Serbia. The primary focus is on kindergarten-age children; however, it is important to state that the early childhood provision in these countries is divided between *bölcsőde* (nursery), services from three or six months to three years old, and *óvoda* or *napközi* (kindergarten), from three to six or seven year-old children. This binary approach to the ECEC was introduced in the late 1940s, where both nurseries and kindergartens were financed either by the state or by the local authority except for the religious nurseries, which were financed by the church. Traditionally, children in the nursery were cared for and educated by the *kisgyermeknevelő* (infant and early childhood educator), while in the kindergartens this role has been undertaken by the *óvónő* (female pre-primary pedagogue or kindergarten teacher) (Korintus, 2017).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many European states are home to ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities whose fundamental freedoms and human rights are not always fully met. The formation of ethnic minority groups (often involuntary) in Europe was mainly a result of the often-changing state borders and local migrations. These fluctuations have influenced the changing nature of relationships between the Hungarian national minority groups and their motherland in Hungary (Pichler et al., 2011). This process has meant that the indigenous Hungarian population, who have lived in a particular region for centuries, became citizens of several newly formed and reclaimed countries (Kocsis & Kocsis-Hódosi, 1998). The widely

used term that encompasses the total ethnic Hungarian population located outside current-day Hungry is called 'Hungarian diaspora' (*Magyar diaszpóra*). The formation of the Hungarian national minority group is an important aspect in understanding the region's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and education system.

Since the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and the early 1990s, there were numerous studies of minority groups across Eastern Europe. At the same time, the process of accommodating minority identities and the interface between majority and minority groups in political and educational decision-making have been granted far less attention by the scholars of the region. There appears to be a lack of consensus as to how these issues should be addressed, particularly as identity construction often stands in conflict with the state's vision and nation building. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the comments on the issue come from politicians addressing the differences in perceived relations between statehood, nation-hood, and ethnicity. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to raise awareness about this group of people, to explain why so many of them live outside of Hungary, and to clarify their rights for early education using their unique and native language. It also aims to provide a greater understanding as to why their native language is under threat even though it is a means through which they maintain their cultural identity.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology combined a review and analysis of secondary data (namely policy documents, literature, legislation, statistics as well as materials prepared by international and European organizations), and fieldwork (one focus group in each country with participants who identified themselves as ethnic Hungarians). This data formed part of a larger research study on the current provision of ECEC for Hungarian minority groups in Romania, Slovak Republic, and Serbia. Critical analysis of documents offered the context needed for a macro-level perspective of ECEC, while qualitative data offered a better understanding on a micro-level perspective of ECEC that focused on identifying barriers and obstacles to accessible and affordable quality preschool education for Hungarian minority children. An extensive internet search of relevant websites, documents, and reports in the English, Serbian, and Hungarian languages was conducted to get insight into the ECEC context in these countries with a specific focus on Hungarian minority children, as well as recent trends and developments in ECEC.

HUNGARIAN MINORITY GROUPS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Hungarian minority groups are among the largest minority groups in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). An estimated 2.7 million Hungarians live outside of the Hungarian state (motherland) according to the latest census (2011), which is 26.7 per cent of the whole Hungarian population. They can be identified by their culture, religion, and use of the Hungarian language which has been considered as a key factor in forming their national identity. They currently feature as prominent minority groups in two states – Romania and the Slovak Republic, and as smaller minority groups in other states such as Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Ukraine (Bárdi, Fedinec, & Szarka, 2011). Hungarians who live in Slovakia and Serbia are mainly concentrated near the border with Hungary, while in Romania, the Hungarian population are mainly concentrated in Transylvania. Figure 29.1 shows the Hungarian population outside of Hungary.

Hungarians are the largest ethnic minority group in Romania where their numbers
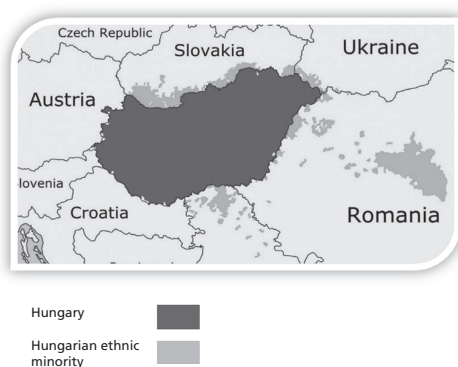
Figure 29.1 Hungarian ethnic minority group in surrounding countries

make up 6.1 per cent of all the population. In the Slovak Republic, 8.5 per cent declare themselves to be Hungarians while in Serbia this percentage is 3.91 per cent. Table 29.1 shows the number of Hungarians living in these countries.

WHY DO SO MANY HUNGARIANS LIVE OUTSIDE OF HUNGARY?

In order to understand the function of ECEC in the current territories of Romania, Slovak Republic, and Serbia, it is necessary to explain the history and the background of how Hungarians became an ethnic minority in so many countries. The evolution of Hungarian ethnic communities in Romania, Slovak Republic, and Serbia was the result of a series of historical events. After the First World War, Hungary lost part of its existing territory, and consequently 2.7 million Hungarians became national minorities in the bordering states.

Due to the change of the 1919 state borders and to the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which covered the former Czechoslovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Austria, and the former Yugoslavia, a Hungarian minority group was automatically created. Between the two world wars, the 'shock' of the Trianon Peace Treaty, signed in 1920, deeply influenced Hungarian domestic and foreign policy. Part of this influence saw the strengthening the irredentist drive which advocated for the redemption of the territories of the historical Kingdom of Hungary (Kántor, 2006). Although during the Second World War, Hungary managed to regain some of its territory, by the end of the war Hungary's borders were redrawn again. A sizeable Hungarian population became a national minority for the second time. In these newly formed countries, Hungarians' rights and situation were reinstated in terms of education to the pre-Second World War period (Mikuska & Raffai, 2018). Therefore, Hungarian minorities living outside of the state of Hungary are called *involuntary minorities* as they were separated from their motherland by border changes based on externally imposed political decisions (Bárdi et al., 2011).

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF HUNGARIAN ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS – IDENTITY ISSUES

The Hungarian ethnic minority group has three common significant characteristics:

- they were created forcibly by post-war territorial changes and became minorities in their native land against their will;

Table 29.1 Number of Hungarians in Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia

Country	Total number of Hungarians	Regions
Romania	1,227,623	Transylvania
Slovak Republic	458,467	Komárno, Dunajská Streda
Serbia	290,207	Vojvodina

- they live in culturally diverse communities; and
- they have developed a 'double' identity where one is based on cultural/traditional positioning, and one is based on the state vision in which this group of people are living (citizenship).

Kontra (cited in Fenyvesi, 2005) defined national identity on the basis of citizenship, while the cultural nation is defined on the basis of language and culture. For 'outsiders' it is hard to understand the complex interaction between the multicultural environments in which the Hungarian minority groups found themselves. It is not only language, but the society in which they live and the educational institutions they attend which forms their ethnic and cultural identity. However, the main signifier of this minority group is the use of the Hungarian language. Due to the environment in which they live, minority Hungarians have gradually become bilingual. Their language has been increasingly affected by the majority languages and in many cases the Hungarian language has lost its dominant role in the community they have been living (Nádor, 2011). Nádor argued that this process was notable especially in Romania and in the Slovak Republic, where ECEC provision for Hungarian children was not designed to protect the use of the Hungarian language.

It is not surprising that the situation of the Hungarian minorities abroad has been a permanent concern for the current Hungarian government (Orbán administration) (Bozóki, 2012; Tóth, 2018). Current Hungarian nationality politics is based on the assumption that the Hungarian state is responsible for Hungarians living abroad; therefore, Hungarian foreign politics has been characterized by a strong support for the Hungarian minorities (Tóth, 2018). Thus, minority protection has become an important goal for the EU and Council of Europe (CoE) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019), and to achieve this goal part of their role was to support the minorities as a means of enabling

them to raise the problems they face in peaceful ways. This includes their rights to be educated in their native language. It was the collaborative efforts of several European organizations that provided an opportunity for the development of common European standards about minority inclusion and these are the CoE, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the EU.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MINORITY LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

Education authorities for the Romanian, Slovak Republic, and Serbian countries have an important role to play in protecting and promoting the Hungarian diaspora language. This is an important factor as language is one of the most significant markers of national identification, especially in a minority environment where the sense of identity and language retention are closely connected (Vukov Raffai, 2012). Through the Hungarian language this minority population maintains their ethnic and cultural identity (Fenyvesi, 2005). Therefore, for the Hungarian minority population, providing ECEC in the Hungarian language is of great importance as children's cultural and language awareness increases (European Commission et al., 2019). Fenyvesi (2005) argued that Hungarians in Romania, the Slovak Republic, and Serbia are not just ethnic minorities but also linguistic minorities whose language has almost no linguistic similarity to their host nation's language. One aspect of life in which linguistic minority issues arise most frequently is that of education. This raises the question as to whether minority linguistic groups should be forced to learn the national language in order to attend school or participate in official functions, or whether the government should provide or allow for education in their native language. Different countries around the world have approached this dilemma

differently. In the United States, for example, despite vast numbers of non-English-speaking citizens, English is the only official language and is the predominant language of instruction at all levels of schooling.

In Central and Eastern Europe when the communist regime collapsed in 1989, the Romanian, Slovak Republic, and Serbian education authorities re-visited their educational policies. Education in native languages was regulated by the central government up until 2004, when the Slovak Republic joined the EU followed by Romania in 2007 (Serbia still operates outside of the EU). On joining the EU, the protection of minority rights was enforced, as one of the main EU membership criteria adopted by the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 was to guarantee respect for and protection of minorities (Csergő, Vangelov, & Vizi, 2017). For the members of the EU, the legislative framework relevant to the use of minority language ensures that minority languages have official status (European Commission et al., 2019) which is monitored by The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) (Council of Europe, 1992). Although Serbia is a non-EU country, due to the lack of clear guidance and principles about the rights of minorities in this country (Várady, 1997; Beretka & Széke, 2016), the Hungarian national minority enjoy cultural autonomy by being able to educate their children in their native language. This means that in all three countries, the use of the Hungarian language is legal for public, administrative, and educational purposes. The main aim was to increase children's cultural and language awareness. Through funding programmes such as Erasmus+ or Creative Europe, the EU supports language learning and linguistic diversity particularly through mobility programmes and cooperation projects. Under these programmes, many successful projects promote learning and the visibility of regional or minority languages in Europe.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE FOR HUNGARIAN CHILDREN IN ROMANIA

In Romania, the Ministry of National Education reviewed and approved a new framework for ECEC in 2019 called 'The Methodology for the Organisation and Functioning of Nurseries and other Early Childhood Education for 0–3 Year Olds' and 'The Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (Children aged 0–6)' (European Commission et al., 2019). The ECEC structure involves:

- 3 months–3 years old, children attend nurseries (*crèches*). Nurseries are further divided into 'small group' (*grupa mică*) for children aged 0–1, 'middle group' (*grupa mijlocie*), for children aged 1–2, and 'big group' (*grupa mare*) for children aged 2–3.
- 3 years–6 years old, children attend kindergartens. Kindergartens are further divided into 'small group' (*grupa mică*) for children aged 3–4, 'middle group' (*grupa mijlocie*), for children aged 4–5, and 'big group' (*grupa mare*) for children aged 5–6 (Matei and Ghența, 2017).

Though primary schooling is mandatory, admittance into schools for children who were not born in Romania is difficult as, since 1992, Romanian birth certificates are required for entrance (Cahn & Petrova, 2001). Ciolan, Iucu, Petrescu, and Bucur (2017) stated that in Romania, there are no statistics available at the national level regarding the composition of the ECEC workforce. It is estimated that 99 per cent of the staff in nurseries and kindergartens are women. They also claim that there is no national data available on minority ethnic groups.

In order to influence the central government decisions affecting the minority communities' identity and education rights, the Hungarian National Council of Transylvania was established in 2003. As a civic organization, it intends to empower, present, and

represent the Hungarian minority group in Transylvania, Romania.

QUALIFICATION REQUIREMENTS FOR WORKING WITH 0–6 YEARS-OLD CHILDREN

The reform of ECEC in Romania started in 2006. By 2008, an early childhood education reform project was implemented and included integrated programme targets for all staff working in kindergartens. The integrated professional development programmes' main aim is to promote a new educational culture in ECEC, enabling all staff working with children to use coherent educational practices based on the same understanding of the importance of ECEC for supporting children's learning and development. The education requirements for ECEC staff are regulated by legal provision. Qualifications in preschool education range from graduates of pedagogical high schools to staff with university degrees in pedagogical studies, and specializations in primary or preschool education. In the kindergartens, the structure of staff consists of teaching staff and non-teaching staff. The non-teaching staff are required to complete a subject-specific training module lasting for at least 30 hours. The training module should cover at least one of the following topics: the principles of early education; the global approach of the child and teamwork; and activities to develop parenting skills.

According to regional data at the local/county level – the case of Bucharest, 177 kindergarten principals (96.2%) have a higher education degree, and 7 (3.8%) have a Pedagogical High School upper secondary vocational qualification. The average age of staff working in kindergartens is 39 years and 4 months. An estimated 91 posts in kindergartens are filled by non-qualified staff.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE FOR HUNGARIAN CHILDREN IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

In the Slovak Republic, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic is the central body of the state administration for ECEC. There are no obligatory curricular regulations for nurseries in Slovakia (Vančíková, Balážová, Kosová, Vaněk, & Rafael, 2017). However, a handbook for ECEC staff that provides implementation support has been developed, entitled the *Manual for the Design of School Educational Programmes* (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012). The government has also developed the Methodology for Pre-Primary Education, which includes methodological advice and recommendations for kindergarten teachers on how to develop key competencies of children.

The notion of 'early childhood education and care' (ECEC) in the Slovak Republic includes all types of establishments offering care and education to children of preschool age (before compulsory school admission). The ECEC in Slovakia is applicable to children aged 0 to 6/7 years with compulsory education starting at age of 6/7. Institutional care for children up to 3 years old is generally provided by nurseries through day-long care, half-day care, or care for a few hours a day/week. Pre-primary education is provided at institutions called kindergartens (*materská škola*). Kindergartens admit children from 3 to 6 years of age. If the kindergartens have capacity, children who have reached the age of 2 years are admitted as well (European Commission et al., 2019).

Kindergartens combine care with education; the education process naturally also includes upbringing in the widest sense of the word. Kindergartens foster children's personal development of the social, emotional, intellectual, physical, moral, and aesthetic aspects; they develop abilities and skills, and create a foundation for future education.

They prepare for life in society with respect to individual and age characteristics of children. Kindergartens provide education through school education programmes. Children who complete the last year of pre-primary education at a kindergarten prior to their compulsory school attendance in primary school will obtain pre-primary education.

In 1993, nurseries were removed from the Ministry of Health's authority and remained unregulated until 2017. Numerous acts of legislation were passed to promote the official use of the Slovak language in all aspects of public life and the Slovakization of people and place names. These laws reduced the number of Hungarian nurseries and schools as well as requiring that all teachers of Slovak be ethnic Slovaks. While Slovakia has signed and ratified European Frameworks and Charters regarding minority rights and education, the official government policy outlined in the Education Act of the Slovak Republic states: Education is conducted in the state language, however, Czech, Hungarian, German, Polish, and Ukrainian (Ruthenian) national minorities have the right to education in their own language. Currently, for ethnic Hungarians this takes the form of schools with instruction primarily in Hungarian with Slovak taught as a subject and a few other practical subjects with specific terminology taught in Slovak. There are other schools with more of a bilingual approach and some in which Hungarian is only offered as a subject. The number of schools offering instruction in Hungarian is greatest in the kindergarten/nursery schools.

From March 2017, the amended Law No 448/2008 on social services regulates conditions for the establishment of nurseries as institutions of social service. There are still no obligatory curricular regulations for nurseries. Nurseries are used mainly by families in which the mother or father has not used the 3-year parental leave scheme due to her/his return to employment. Another possibility for families is informal 'mothers' centers' and 'family centers', typically established by civic associations or churches. These centers offer a stimulating learning environment, enabling parents and their children to spend quality time in contact with other adults and children. However, unlike formal educational establishments, they are not regulated by national legislation.

In Slovakia, ECEC has been high on the government's agenda. The Society for Preschool Education (*Spoločnos' pre predškolskú výchovu*) is actively involved in developing an early years' curriculum (Vančíková et al., 2017). While a comprehensive quality framework is not yet in place, the country expert from the Ministry of Education reports that the process of preparing such a quality framework – the National Programme of Education entitled *Learning Slovakia* – is currently being finalized (European Commission et al., 2019). In addition, *Learning Slovakia* will be explicitly focusing on the areas of:

- accessibility – initiatives to increase the availability of from birth to age three settings and to create inclusive teams in ECEC settings, which will encourage participation among all minorities living in the state;
- workforce professionalization – reassessing the qualification requirements for teachers (at BA level) and for assistants.

Qualification Requirements for Working with 0–6 Years-old Children

In the Slovak Republic ECEC teachers currently enter the profession with varying levels of training and qualifications. Although, currently, the government is considering making it mandatory that ECEC staff pursue a higher education qualification (to at least Level 5[1]) it is still not the case. This is due to the fact that kindergartens have not always been part of the school system, as children's attendance in kindergartens is not mandatory (Taguma et al., 2012). In order to retain the workforce, the government decided

to give pay parity to kindergarten teachers with teachers in other levels of education.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE FOR HUNGARIAN CHILDREN IN SERBIA

In 1996, a new ECEC curriculum was introduced which is still in use, called '*Osnove programa predškolskog vaspitanja 1996*' (Early Years Curriculum for Preschool children 1996). This was altered later to 'Правилник о општим основама редшколског програма 2006' (Rules of the General Principles of Preschool Curriculum 2006). This curriculum had two approaches, entitled 'A' and 'B'. It was up to the pre-primary pedagogue's discretion which one to use. Approach 'A' is flexible and entrusts the teacher with creative control, while approach 'B' is based on positive reinforcement of children, highlighting their cognitive development. This second approach reinforces the holistic development of children with clear aims and carefully planned daily and weekly activities that focus on certain areas of development in order to enable children to achieve their full potential. With both approaches, the kindergarten itself has the freedom to develop an additional child-centered approach which targets further needs. However, this curriculum disregarded the language variation of many Hungarian children who are brought up and live in rural areas and who acquire and use the dialect spoken in the family.

In 2018, The Preschool Curriculum Framework was updated by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Department with the proposal for a phased and regional introduction starting from 2019 to 2022 (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). The new framework draws on the previous one, incorporating positive impacts of various programmes of preschool education and care such as the

Kindergartens without Borders (2013–2014), Impress – improvement of preschool education in Serbia (2011–2014), and Kindergartens without Borders 2 (2014–2016). Specific attention was given using play for learning and communication in the mother tongue. It is in line with the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, which highlights the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Mandić and Buljanović Simonović (2017) also report that they are entitled to the official use of their languages and they are also guaranteed the right to education in their native languages in state institutions.

The early childhood provision in Serbia is divided between *bölcsőde* (nursery), services from six months to three years old, and *óvoda* or *napközi* (kindergarten), from three to six or seven year-old children (Kamenov, 1987). This binary approach to ECEC was introduced in the late 1940s in Serbia, where both institutions were financed either by the Serbian state or by the local authority except for the religious nurseries, which were financed by the church. Beside the division between *bölcsőde* and *óvoda*, children were further divided by their age, within the kindergarten into 'small' groups: 3–5 years old, 'middle' groups: 5–6 years old, and 'big' groups: 6–7 years old (Mikuska & Raffai, 2018). Children attending the middle and big groups follow the 'school readiness' programme (Kopas-Vukašinović, 2004: 59–60). Since 2004, it is a statutory requirement for children to attend nursery from the age of five for a minimum of four hours a day for a minimum of six months. This rule reflects the official record of attendance specified by The National Council of the Hungarian National Minority (2015) claims that in 2014–15 there were 71 Hungarian-language groups in the nurseries with 1369 children attending full-day care, and 121 groups with 2041 children attending half-day care settings. Only 176 Hungarian children attended *bölcsőde*. These data clearly indicate that half-day care settings were more popular among Hungarian parents/carers. Data also showed that those

children who live outside the cities attend half-day care as it suits the lifestyle of their families.

Qualification Requirements for Working with 0–6 Years-old Children

From the 1970s, to work with kindergarten-age children, a childcare certificate (upper secondary vocational level, Level 3[2]) was required which changed in 1993 to a foundation degree (Level 5). Since 2008, to become a pre-primary pedagogue the minimum qualification requirement is a BA (bachelor degree) level course (Pálinkás, 1984), which is the same as in Hungary (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010). In Serbia, until 1993, there was only one institution in Ùjvidék (Novi Sad – current capital of Vojvodina) where students were able to complete their degree in the Hungarian language. From 1993, a new institution opened in Szabadka (Subotica – a town in north Vojvodina), where the foundation degree programme was taught, and from 2008 at the University of Novi Sad (Hungarian-Language Teacher Training Faculty) in Subotica, a new degree was introduced at BA and MA (masters) level in the Hungarian language. This was an important factor for employability purposes as only those graduates who spoke the Hungarian language were employed to work with children of the Hungarian national minority. The academic programme in these two institutions was very similar to the equivalent course in the Serbian language, with the addition of subjects such as Hungarian grammar, Hungarian literature, and Hungarian history.

THE ASSIMILATION PROCESS AND DEPOPULATION

Research on the process of assimilation is underrepresented in the literature; however, there was some localized small-scale research on the birth and mortality rate, and the average life expectancy of the Hungarian national minority groups in these countries. In Serbia, for example, Badis (2012) claimed the group would be unable to maintain its numbers as these were decreasing by 1.5 per cent annually. Additionally, in the last two decades, due to economic and political turbulence, these regions' population has been in sharp decline (Stojšin, 2015). In recent years, Romania, the Slovak Republic, and Serbia have witnessed increased levels of migration from their countries mainly to Western European states. The reasons for this exodus are multifaceted and vary for each individual country. However, there are underlying trends which can offer macro-level explanations for the decline of the population which is a combination of:

- extremely low birth rates;
- mass migration and high mortality figures, combined with access to free movement to other EU countries, and;
- mixed marriages.

All these factors have contributed towards the large-scale depopulation which had a greater effect on the ethnic minority groups as the assimilation process has been faster than in previous years. In all three countries the number of Hungarian minority groups is in rapid decline. Mcintosh, Iver, Abele, and Nolle (1995) claimed that from the Hungarian minorities' point of view, their right to be cared for and educated in their native language is seen as the central means to restore and perpetuate a minority group's cultural identity.

Evidence from the field showed that, due to the fast decrease of the Hungarian minority population, Hungarian ECEC groups and school classes became smaller. Qualitative data was collected using focus group conversations in each country with participants who identified themselves as ethnic Hungarians. The micro-level perspectives of ECEC were

highlighted as participants identified through their experiences barriers to attending quality preschool education for their children. There were cases when educational institutions were forced to close or to merge thus causing anxiety and uncertainty as to which nursery and schools to choose. While participants talked about regional education policy in securing their rights to have formal and informal education provided in their native language, empty nurseries and schools have become a real threat.

The following extracts from qualitative data revealed the extent of the problem:

> In the village I am from, the nursery had less Hungarian children than last year. Lots of families left the village, among them were my friends and my children's friends. So many empty houses. (Romania – parent of two children)

> I am a nursery teacher. Last year we had about 16 children in each age groups. In September (2019) only four children returned to the 4–5 years old group, and the other groups were very small too. We will lose our jobs as it is not financially viable to keep the nursery open. If this trend continues, I will not have a job to return to next year. (Serbia – nursery teacher)

> My plan is to stay in Slovakia. I don't want to follow my brother who is already in Germany. I just hope we will be able to access education in the Hungarian language, because so many our friend have left. (Slovak Republic – father)

The above extracts clearly indicate the exposure of the Hungarian national minority to linguistic and cultural assimilation which is rapid. This issue is especially a characteristic for those who live in settlements where they are in the minority. Such decline is affecting the identity consciousness of the Hungarian national minority, as their numbers have fallen faster than the Romanians, Slovakians, and Serbs. This tendency was highlighted by the research of Kocsis and Kocsis-Hòdosi (1998) and Badis (2012) more than a decade ago, stating that 44 per cent of Hungarian nationals live in small settlements, where assimilation and depopulation is more rapid than in larger settlements.

Limited data were available to determine why the parents of Hungarian children chose to enroll their children in the state language educational institutions. The Magyar Nemzeti Tanacs (MNT) (2015) recorded that about 80 per cent of Hungarian children were attending Hungarian provisions. The assumption about the remaining 20 per cent was that they chose provisions where ECEC was in the country national language either as there were no Hungarian kindergartens available, or because parents believed that learning the state language would expand their children's future career opportunities (Badis, 2012). Badis (2012), furthermore, reported that the number of Hungarian children attending bilingual kindergartens was considerably higher. Due to this phenomenon local psycholinguistics researchers, such as Göncz (2004) and Vukov Raffai (2012), noted that children who attend a kindergarten where the teaching is not in their native language could experience a negative impact on their language, communication, and emotional development. Göncz (2004) further stated that

> if we were to examine the language from the minority's perspective and if the spoken or dominant language is not the minority language the child might swap the mother tongue for the dominant language. The aim is to maintain the dominance of the native language and therefore it is highly recommended for education to start with the language that is dominant for the child. (Göncz, 2004: 277)

Therefore, if the child only spoke Hungarian before preschool then the child's education should continue in the Hungarian language. Children would learn the state language anyway, due to the legal requirements that compulsory preschool activities had to be provided in the official language. These examples and recommendations unfortunately have not been followed throughout the history of ECEC in the region. ECEC provisions have been used as an educational mechanism through which the state enforces its preferred language. The child's needs have been neglected as their education has

been delivered solely through the language promoted by the state.

ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE HUNGARIAN STATE GOVERNMENT

Despite the Hungarian state government which 'has undertaken an ambitious effort in drafting a form of model legislation on the protection of minorities' (Council of Europe, 2001: 10), migration continues even today. Unfortunately, there is no valid statistical data to report the exact number of Hungarian migrants, but the social impact is felt throughout Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia, mostly in the field of education as the size of kindergarten groups has continued to fall. Therefore, the Hungarian government designed a strategic plan to support the children of the Hungarian diaspora in these countries. For example, one of the most significant projects called '*Szülőföldön magyarul projekt*' (Hungarian in Homeland Project) was introduced in 2010/11 by the Hungarian State Secretariat for National Policy (HSSNP). In this project, with the assistance of the Bethlen Gábor Fund Management Company, the Hungarian national minority groups were provided with financial and education support. The main aim was to sustain free ECEC to those children who attend a Hungarian-language educational institution in their native country (Pusztai & Márkus, 2017).

Another initiative was the '*Diakbusz projekt*' (School Bus Project) which offered free transportation for Hungarian children who lived in segregated areas or in isolation from other Hungarian children in scattered villages, where a Hungarian-language group did not exist. Furthermore, the Hungarian government agreed to finance the Hungarian speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, and other early years' professionals for early interventions. With the help of the HSSNP government department, the generous support has continued for ECEC

to the current date. In Romania and Serbia, the ECEC curriculum was amended with specialized activities that focused on Hungarian culture, language, and heritage including further education of the pre-primary pedagogue. Between 2017 and 2018 the state of Hungary made further announcements to finance the building of new nurseries in addition to refurbishing and furnishing existing ECEC provisions with new resources (mainly to maintain the heritage of the Hungarian minority). In Serbia for example, 63 kindergartens will receive new playgrounds, thus fulfilling EU requirements and regulations, which was an interesting move as the Serbian province of Vojvodina is not yet part of the EU.

All these initiatives were welcomed by the Hungarian national minority groups in Romania, Slovak Republic, and Serbia, as all these actions target the Hungarian national minority with the aim of stimulating and encouraging parents to enroll their children in Hungarian-language provisions. However, the political and economic climate that currently operates in these countries leaves the population with little employment prospects. This creates a major incentive, especially for ethnic minorities, to continue to migrate to Western countries, leaving the remaining Hungarian minority population of ECEC uncertain.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has summarized the history of the Hungarian ECEC in Romania, Slovak Republic, and Serbia from 1989 when the Communist regime collapsed. What is evident is that currently the main purpose of the kindergartens for Hungarian children is to maintain Hungarian identity through knowledge of the Hungarian language. However, there has been no formal recognition of the use of different dialects, or the historical and cultural impact of shaping this identity. Moreover, if the depopulation of the region is

not reduced, the rich cultural and educational legacy of ECEC in these regions may be lost.

It is hard to predict any inequalities that the interventions of Hungary may cause among other ethnic nationalities living in Romania, Slovak Republic, and Serbia who are perhaps not in the same position as the Hungarians. Since these investments are targeted to strengthen Hungarian national identity, Romania, Slovak Republic, and Serbia may need to re-visit their strategies on minorities to include the development of ECEC. Further study is needed to investigate the impact of these projects on children, their families, the workforce, and the population in general.

Notes

1   The EU in 2018 published The European Qualifications Framework (EQF), with its eight levels, which serves as a translation grid between qualifications acquired in different European countries.
2   Please see the European Qualification Framework 2018.

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