

Socio-pedagogical Challenges and Prospects for Interdisciplinary and Integrated Support to Families and Children in the Early Years

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Abstract

The present report delves into the socio-pedagogical challenges and prospects for interdisciplinary support of education, social, and healthcare services to families and children in yearly years – from birth to first grade in Bulgaria. The analysis explores the adoption of related strategic documents in recent years in Bulgaria and examines indicators for the quality of ECEC in Bulgaria. A review of specialized literature, scientific studies, international reports, and analyses was conducted, with data spanning ten years, from 2014 to 2024. The study reveals that Bulgaria needs to place additional effort into a unified and consistent policy and regulatory framework for interdisciplinary educational, healthcare, and social services support for families and young children. However, our analysis showed that socio-pedagogical instruments must be implemented to improve the integration of the three service areas and to broaden the implementation of educational innovations to enhance the quality of ECEC in Bulgaria.

Keywords: early childhood development (ECEC), socio-pedagogical challenges and perspectives, Bulgaria.

1. Introduction

Social pedagogy supports individuals and communities in achieving successful joint social functioning. “The basic idea of social pedagogy is to promote people’s social functioning, inclusion, participation, social identity, and social competence as members of society” (Hämäläinen, 2003: 76). With its wide-ranging toolkit, social pedagogy fosters successful integration and interactions among individuals while facilitating their overall development within society. It empowers each person to find their place in the social environment. Conceptually, the socio-pedagogical perspective traditionally emphasizes those aspects of social support related to the goals and meanings of human development (Николаева, 2005: 162-163). As Caride (2004) notes, in social pedagogy, “much more emphasis was placed on the ‘social’ of education than on the ‘educational’ of the social” (p. 64).

“Social support” (Николаева, 2005) seeks to preserve the uniqueness of each individual while simultaneously promoting the inclusion of all who aspire to be active creators and innovators within their societies. “Social pedagogy aims to recreate society by producing citizens with a new vision of social justice and inclusion – learning to live together and influencing the social policies of their countries...” (Beazidou, 2023: 2). The motivation of those working with young children serves as an engine for social change, particularly when supported by early childhood development experts, the civil sector, and state administration – especially when they collaborate towards a common goal, as seen in Bulgaria. This unity among individual members of

society and institutions is essential for realizing interdisciplinary and integrated support for early years services.

- In Bulgaria, work is being done in the direction of interdisciplinary and integrated socio-pedagogical support by the three sectors that offer support to children and their families in the early years – health, social and education.
- The practices are considered, on the one hand, as the socio-pedagogical strategies themselves, related to the interdisciplinary and integrated support of services for children and their families from the three sectors – education, health and social services.
- On the other hand, they are considered as the process of coordination and collaboration between individual stakeholders through the excellent practice of uniting formal and informal civil organizations that work together to achieve a common goal.
- High-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) plays a crucial role in supporting children in their early years and, including their families. However, educational innovations must be further supported in Bulgaria to realize this potential fully.
- The analysis found that the country has taken the first steps. However, a unified, harmonized, consistent policy and regulatory framework for interdisciplinary and integrated support of early childhood educational, health, and social services still needs to continue developing.

In this article, we examine the socio-pedagogical challenges and perspectives related to integrated support for families in early childhood from two distinct angles. On one hand, we explore processes related to the integration of support services for children across the three sectors: education, health, and social services. On the other hand, we analyze the coordination and collaboration processes among individual stakeholders to achieve common goals for social change. Thus, strategies related to socio-pedagogical challenges and perspectives are employed “for the prevention and correction of social problems and for engaging in the regulation of social distress” (Николаева, 2005: 162-163).

2. Method

A comprehensive review of specialized literature, scientific studies, international reports, and analyses was conducted, with data spanning ten years, from 2014 to 2024.

3. Results

3.1 *National context of interdisciplinary and integrated socio-pedagogical support in early childhood in Bulgaria*

Bulgaria, located in the southeastern Balkans, has a thousand-year history. In 2007, the country joined the European Union and has since synchronized its national policies according to European recommendations. Analyses indicate that Bulgaria is the poorest country in the European Union (First Year’s First Priority, 2021), with the highest number of children living in poverty and at risk of social exclusion; one-third of children in Bulgaria face similar risks compared to fewer than 20% across the EU. Furthermore, nearly 10% of the children are of Roma origin (whereas the EU average is 3%), and about 25% have at least one parent who works abroad (European Commission, 2021). Preliminary data from the monitoring report “Notebook 2024: What Is the Average Success of the State in Childcare?” corroborates these trends, indicating that “nearly 61% of adults in Bulgaria believe that child poverty is increasing” (National Network of Children, 2024).

To address this situation, efforts should be directed toward providing supportive and attentive care in early childhood—nurturing care, the components of which are central to the global strategy aimed at achieving the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.). This can be realized by synchronizing policies and socio-pedagogical practices (health, education, and social services) aimed at children and families in their early years.

In a 2021 report, the European Commission provided a definition specifically for Bulgaria, stating that *early childhood development* “refers to the process of human development, which covers the period from birth to the mandatory age for starting primary school, includes all important phases of development, takes place in any environment, has a strong influence on the next phases of a person's life, and requires the greatest possible support for the child and their family from the entire society and every public institution” (Европейска комисия, 2021: 25). In contrast, Bulgarian pedagogical theory and practice typically define early childhood as a stage of development covering the age from birth to three years (Пенева, 2015; Даскалова, 2019). However, Article 6 of the *Law on Preschool and School Education* mentions that “the system of preschool and school education provides conditions for: 1. early childhood development and preparing children for school” (Закон за предучилищното и училищното образование, 2015). We consider it a positive development that the legislation acknowledges the importance of early education, specifically from three years until the first grade. However, there are few further references in legislation regarding preschool education.

In another strategic document adopted in 2021 – *the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training, and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030)* (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2021) – early childhood development is recognized for the first time as a separate priority area. This advancement is attributable to the collaborative efforts of professionals and organizations to address socio-pedagogical challenges and outline perspectives for interdisciplinary support in integrating social, health, and educational services. More than 50 parent organizations, civil sector organizations, experts in early childhood development, and others have united in an informal network called the Early Childhood Development Alliance, established in 2018 in Sofia, Bulgaria. This informal coalition exemplifies how the fundamental ideological paradigm of the civil movement is put into practice – “the implementation of socially significant innovations through the unification (coordination) of the voluntary efforts of various individuals and institutions” (Николаева, 2001: 27).

The first official statement of the Early Childhood Development Alliance from 2020 on integrating health, social, and educational services sent to government institutions states: “Our society needs a common national framework to support parents, better health and education for children, social support for all parents and children, secure housing and living environments, reducing inequalities, poverty, and violence against children. Because we all know that investing in children is the best investment for the prosperity of Bulgaria” (Алианс за ранно детско развитие, 2020). The Early Childhood Development Alliance has also submitted several statements with a similar message regarding the public discussion of national programs and strategies (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2021; Министерство на образованието и науката, 2020a). All of these emphasize the need for integrated services in the health, social, and educational sectors (Алианс за ранно детско развитие. Становища и позиции., n.d.).

Efforts toward establishing a constructive inter-institutional dialogue in Bulgaria aimed at integrating health, social, and educational services for children and families in the early years achieved significant success during one of the caretaker governments that ruled the country in recent years. In 2024, an *interdepartmental and interdisciplinary working group* was formed to plan and coordinate policies for early childhood development. This group includes representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Ministry of Health, other governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations

(including representatives from the Early Childhood Development Alliance), as well as professionals, experts, and researchers.

The interdisciplinary group developed the Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development for 2024, which was adopted by the Government of Bulgaria under Decision No. 260 of the Council of Ministers (Министерски съвет на Република България, 2024). The purpose of the plan is to provide “an opportunity to implement a complex and integrated approach in childcare and development of cross-sectoral services to support parents and children in the period of early childhood” (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2024). This plan is the first national document focused entirely on early childhood development, proposing measures organized into five areas of impact: (1) Health and nutrition; (2) Early learning, education, and early childhood care; (3) Child protection, safety, and security; (4) Social protection and parenting support; and (5) Early childhood intervention. Specific measures and activities for their implementation are detailed for each impact area (*Ibid.*). The plan is a vital document that lays the foundation for interdisciplinary and integrated policies and practices regarding health, social, and educational services for children and their families.

3.2 Socio-pedagogical challenges and prospects for services for children and their families in the health service area

In the health sector, the Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development outlines various socio-pedagogical strategies for the period before, during, and after pregnancy. These strategies aim to improve the *physical and mental health* of parents and children, promote *childhood nutrition*, and encourage *healthy screen usage* (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2024).

Specific socio-pedagogical measures are planned to increase awareness and provide access to digital programs and applications for parents. These measures also include conducting studies, developing and disseminating scientifically based recommendations and health information materials, training health professionals, facilitating expert dialogue and discussions on critical topics, preparing proposals for educational programs, and developing models for professional development. Additionally, the plan emphasizes the creation of mechanisms to promote interaction and collaboration among stakeholders and other relevant parties (*Ibid.*).

3.3 Socio-pedagogical challenges and prospects for services for children and their families in the social service area

The Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development also includes socio-pedagogical practices and policies aimed at enhancing support for children and their families within the social service sector. These practices are focused on three aspects: (1) child protection, security, and safety; (2) social protection for parenthood; and (3) early childhood intervention (*Ibid.*).

In the area of child protection, security, and safety, the report emphasizes the prevention of all forms of violence against children, including domestic violence. It also highlights the importance of child protection measures, increasing parents' capacity to provide responsive care, creating a secure and safe environment, and teaching children how to protect themselves and engage in safe interactions with others (*Ibid.*).

Regarding social protection and parenting support, the plan emphasizes assistance for families living in extreme poverty, reducing poverty and social exclusion, and facilitating coordinated action across various sectors and levels of government, both national and local. Early childhood intervention calls for an interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral, and coordinated system of

individualized and intensive services for parents and caregivers of young children who are at risk, have developmental difficulties, disabilities, behavioral problems, or mental health support needs.

In these three areas of the social service sector, the implementation of various socio-pedagogical measures is anticipated, contributing to interdisciplinary and integrated support, including the following: conducting an analysis of existing practices in social services; providing reliable data; discussing proposals; creating cross-sectoral teams; collecting data; developing programs; establishing a council; undertaking activities to overcome challenges; improving staff capacity through qualification programs; analyzing and measuring effectiveness and impact; discussing measures; presenting service models; and providing support, consultation, and information through the national telephone line for children, as well as preparing a roadmap and developing programs and mechanisms (*Ibid.*).

The plan is beginning to effect substantial changes in the early years of health and social services. It lays the foundation for a transformational process, underscoring the ongoing need to upgrade the plan to support continued efforts. Additionally, work is needed in the third area of impact – education and care in the early years.

3.4 Socio-pedagogical challenges and perspectives of services for children and their families in the field of early childhood education and care

The current article focuses on the socio-pedagogical challenges and prospects for early childhood education services in Bulgaria. We have chosen to explore this area because we believe that socio-pedagogical tools can significantly improve social inclusion, enabling children and their families to break the cycle of poverty, reduce inequality, and support social integration (Esping-Andersen & Palier, 2010: 85), which is crucial for the future of both children and society. Public sector support for early education is a social investment that yields multiple returns for individuals, society, and the economy (European Commission, 2022). This is especially significant for Bulgaria, as it is the only country in the European Union where “the percentage of students who have few educational opportunities in the family is so high – 18% (for comparison, no more than 7% of students in other European countries)” (Център за оценяване на предучилищното и училищно образование, 2020). Furthermore, the increase in “educational poverty” – defined as the inability of a 10-year-old child to read and understand a short text appropriate for their age – raises additional concerns. “The level of educational poverty in Bulgaria is 12 percent, which is almost double the EU average (6%) and four percentage points higher than the OECD average (8%)” (Европейска комисия, 2021: 68).

Active participation in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) can effectively provide socio-pedagogical support to children and their families in the early years. ECEC is one component of nurturing care in early childhood, primarily related to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4): “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (World Economic Forum, n.d.; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021), with a particular emphasis on education during the early years (UNESCO, 2023).

ECEC is defined as “any regulatory mechanism that provides children with education and care from birth to compulsory school age” (Европейска комисия, 2021; World Bank, 2020a; Национална мрежа на децата, 2014). The concept encompasses all regulated services supporting children from birth until they enter primary school. In Bulgaria, only licensed nurseries (for children aged 10 months to 3 years) and kindergartens (for children aged 2 years to 6 or 7 years—the start of primary school) are recognized as regulated services (Наредба 26 за устройството и дейността на детските ясли и детските кухни и здравните изисквания към тях; Закон за предучилищното и училищното образование, 2015). Many children’s centers, parent

cooperatives, and home-based playgroups remain outside the scope of ECEC and are not legally regulated.

The importance of Early Childhood Education and Care has been increasing in Bulgaria in recent years, especially following the adoption of three national strategic documents: the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training, and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030) (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2021) and the Implementation of the National Framework for the Quality of Education and Early Childhood Care (Министерство на образованието, 2020a). Emphasis on early childhood development and care is also included in the Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2024). Additionally, several national and international analyses and reports have been considered concerning the quality of ECEC in Bulgaria (World Bank, 2020a; World Economic Forum, 2019; European Commission, 2022; Европейска комисия, 2021; Министерство на образованието и науката, 2020a; Национална мрежа на децата, 2023).

3.4.1 *Early childhood education and care for the ages 0 to 3 years*

According to Montessori early years researcher Dr. Silvana Montenaro, “the importance of education is greater the younger the child” (Монтенаро, 2018). Additionally, UNESCO defines the age from 0 to 3 years as “Level 0 – the basic level of the educational level” (Пенева, 2015: 19). However, there is not a single word related to education in the legislation governing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children under three years in Bulgaria (Наредба 26 за Устройството и дейността на детските ясли и детските кухни и здравните изисквания към тях, 2008). In a report, the European Commission emphasized that “nurseries do not follow any standard protocol that is coordinated with preschool curricula and existing programs” (Европейска комисия, 2021: 65-66).

3.4.2 *Early childhood education and care for the age of 3 years to entering primary school*

Bulgaria has significantly more legal and by-law regulations governing preschool education compared to the limited regulations under which nurseries operate. The Preschool and School Education Act is the principal legal framework (Закон за предучилищното и училищното образование, 2015), setting goals for both preschool and school education that align with international recommendations (European Union, 2006), emphasizing the holistic development of the child and the achievement of competencies necessary for life (*Ibid.*).

The state educational standard for preschool education outlines the educational goals, which are achieved through “pedagogical interaction” between teachers and children. This interaction is intended to facilitate the compilation of results from preschool education (Наредба № 5 от 3 юни 2016 г. за предучилищното образование). Furthermore, “pedagogical interaction” aims to support “the overall development of the child” and the “acquisition of competencies – knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (*Ibid.*). This interaction occurs through “pedagogical situations” across seven educational areas: Bulgarian Language and Literature, The Surrounding World, Mathematics, Visual Arts, Music, Physical Education, and Construction and Technology (*Ibid.*).

A report from the European Commission asserts that the Law on Preschool and School Education only “hints at the competencies... and there are no further references in the legislation determining the content of preschool programs in Bulgaria.” Additionally, there is a lack of “assessment tools to measure whether and how competencies are acquired” (Европейска

комисия, 2021: 77-78). The competencies are “defined as expected results... in educational fields” (*Ibid.*), which, in reality, “represent educational subjects traditionally associated with the system (for example, Bulgarian language, Mathematics, etc.)” (*Ibid.*).

Despite the good intentions of the Law on Preschool and School Education (Закон за предучилищното и училищното образование, 2015), the actual achievement of the educational goals is partial, primarily focusing on “the child’s successful transition to school education” (*Ibid.*). In reality, the Ministry of Education and Science acknowledges shortcomings in the preschool education standard concerning the expected results of children (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2020b). The discussion thus far is closely related to the quality of early childhood education and care.

3.4.3 *Challenges and prospects to the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Bulgaria*

3.4.3.1 *Challenges to the quality of ECEC*

The quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) faces significant hurdles that must be addressed for the benefit of future generations. In September 2020, the World Bank published the 2020 Human Capital Index, which states that “the human capital index measures the amount of human capital that a child born today can expect to have by age eighteen. It conveys the productivity of the next generation of workers against a benchmark of complete education and total health” (World Bank, 2020b). In Bulgaria, “a child born ... immediately before the pandemic will be 61 percent as productive when they grow up as they could be if they enjoyed complete education and total health” (*Ibid.*). According to the report, students in Bulgaria scored 441 points on harmonized tests, where 625 represents advanced proficiency and 300 indicates minimum achievements (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, the Global Competitiveness Report 2017-2018 from the World Economic Forum ranks Bulgaria 83rd in the world and 26th in the European Union regarding the quality of its education system, placing it at the bottom compared to other EU member states (World Economic Forum, 2019).

3.4.3.2 *Prospects for improving the quality of ECEC*

We examined the understanding of quality within the legal framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Bulgaria, specifically concerning preschool education, as this topic is not addressed in the legislation regulating nurseries. Our findings indicate that the quality of preschool education is primarily linked to the state’s overall policy for quality improvement, the continued professional development of pedagogical specialists, the responsibilities of the public council, and mechanisms for school development. Additionally, there is a vision for comprehensive quality management and a kindergarten strategy (Закон за предучилищното и училищното образование, 2015). Unfortunately, the legislation does not provide any documents related to assessment criteria or indicators for measuring the quality of ECEC.

In 2020, Bulgaria introduced a document in line with an initiative from the European Union – the “Implementation of a National Framework for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care” – which establishes goals for quality ECEC in five areas: access, staff, educational content, and monitoring and evaluation (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2020a). This project will continue, as an interdepartmental working group is set to be established in the winter of 2024, focusing on “improving the quality of early childhood education and care by strengthening governance, monitoring, and evaluation,” funded through the European

Commission Technical Support Instrument (DG REFORM) (Национален инспекторат по образованието, 2024). This document aims to further enhance the quality of ECEC.

Another important document for ECEC quality is the “Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development” (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2024). The quality of ECEC is considered within the impact area of “early learning, education, and early childhood care,” which includes measures such as: providing support to improve early learning and care; ensuring a sufficient number of qualified specialists in ECEC services; offering general and additional support for personal development in the ECEC system; implementing effective early education programs for children from small towns and marginalized communities; assisting parents in providing early learning opportunities and creating a stimulating home environment; introducing modern requirements for the physical environment in ECEC services; and, most significantly, expanding the scope of ECEC by fostering improved interaction between health, educational, social, and other systems (*Ibid.*).

The implementation of various socio-pedagogical measures is planned within these areas of ECEC, contributing to interdisciplinary and integrated support for services aimed at young children and their families. These measures include: the qualification of pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff; conducting discussions with the deans of pedagogical and medical faculties; planning and organizing ongoing qualification for non-pedagogical specialists in ECEC services; performing analyses and evaluations; increasing access to education and participation for children with special educational needs through complementary and alternative communication methods; providing professional development by creating supportive professional communities for mutual learning; establishing a National Team of Trainers; preparing to create early childhood development resource centers; mapping small communities; launching programs within social services to support children’s early learning at home; and promoting partnerships with parents to change attitudes towards education (*Ibid.*).

The existing legal and strategic documents suggest that Bulgaria is making efforts to enhance the quality of ECEC. However, the lack of assessment tools provides only a partial picture of the outcomes resulting from the implementation of these measures. Educational innovations represent another crucial aspect to consider for improving the quality of ECEC.

3.4.3.3 *Innovations as a powerful tool to elevate the quality of ECEC*

Embracing innovations as a powerful tool to elevate the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), we can envision a future in which ECEC in Bulgaria reaches new heights of excellence. One possible direction for improving the quality of early childhood education is to introduce policies that support innovations in ECEC. Considering the components of nurturing care, which are central to the global strategy aimed at achieving the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNICEF et al., 2018), five strategic steps related to ECEC and Goal 4 are as follows: (1) Lead and invest; (2) Focus on families and their communities; (3) Strengthen services; (4) Monitor progress; and (5) Use data and innovate (UNICEF et al., 2018: 27).

The European Commission also emphasizes the importance of supporting innovations in Bulgaria, specifically referring to the “introduction of innovative forms of management, educational environments, and learning, as well as the use of innovative teaching methods, development of innovative educational content, curricula, and educational plans” (Европейска комисия, 2021: 134). The implementation of educational innovations in ECEC is further supported by official statements from non-governmental organizations, including the Early Childhood Development Alliance (Алианс за ранно детско развитие, 2021).

While Bulgaria's regulatory framework encourages the implementation of innovations, it also presents significant obstacles. This contradiction underscores the need for more precise policies to facilitate the integration of innovative practices in early childhood education.

Aspects of the legal framework promoting the implementation of educational innovation

The act regulating preschool education emphasizes, in Article 3 (1) 8, the importance of “innovativeness and effectiveness in pedagogical practices and in the organization of the educational process based on scientific validity and the forecasting of the results of innovations” (Закон за предучилищното и училищното образование, 2015). This can be realized, according to Article 69 (3), through the development of “innovative educational programs” (*Ibid.*). Support for educational innovations is also outlined in the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training, and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030), which includes the sub-goal of “creating regulatory conditions for the functioning of innovative kindergartens” and advocating for the “application of an individual approach to the child in all early childhood education services” (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2021). Furthermore, the Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development for 2024 states the goal of “supporting the implementation and sharing of experiences related to innovative practices in kindergartens” (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2024).

Despite these provisions, numerous legal aspects continue to hinder the implementation of educational innovations in the country.

Aspects of the legal framework limiting the implementation of educational innovations

In Bulgaria, kindergartens face legal restrictions that hinder the implementation of educational innovations. Although they are theoretically granted the right to pursue innovative approaches (Art. 72 (3)), practical obstacles arise from the requirement that all innovative programs must align with the state educational standard known as the DOS for preschool education (Закон за предучилищното и училищното образование, 2015). This presents a significant barrier to adopting comprehensive, internationally recognized alternative approaches, such as Montessori pedagogy, Waldorf pedagogy, Reggio Emilia, as well as some Bulgarian pedagogical systems like Solar Pedagogy (founded by Petar Danov) and Sugesto Pedagogy (founded by Dr. Lozanov).

The need for reform is urgent, especially as the number of kindergartens implementing these approaches, particularly Montessori education, is on the rise—especially in state-funded kindergartens located in Sofia, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Vratsa, and other regions (Азбуки, 2024). In Montessori education, work with children predominantly occurs in individual or small group settings (Стоева, 2020: 202) rather than in whole groups, as mandated by Ordinance 5 (Наредба 5 за предучилищното образование, 2016). The duration of individual presentations in Montessori varies according to each child's specific needs and interests (Стоева, 2020: 202). Conversely, the legal framework for preschool education sets fixed durations and numbers for group pedagogical situations (Наредба 5 за предучилищното образование, 2016). In a Montessori kindergarten that adheres to high professional standards, children are provided with approximately three hours of continuous work and play in a supportive educational environment using multi-sensory, didactic materials, including those specially developed by the teachers (Стоева, 2020: 200-202). In contrast, within the traditional preschool system, engagement

typically occurs through educational books and less frequently with teaching aids (Наредба 5 за предучилищното образование, 2016).

There is still much work to be done to establish a legal framework conducive to comprehensive educational innovations and to elevate the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC). In 2021, the European Commission's report highlighted that Bulgaria was not prioritizing early learning sufficiently (Европейска комисия, 2021: 68). Nevertheless, significant efforts have been made in the country. Our analysis of strategic and legal documents indicates that support for children and their families in their early years can be achieved through engagement in high-quality ECEC. We believe that fostering educational innovations, which still require further support, could transform the educational landscape, inspiring and motivating policymakers and educators in Bulgaria.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The Annual Plan for Promoting Early Childhood Development (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2024) enhances integrated and interdisciplinary support for young children and their families during the early years. This plan outlines activities categorized according to internationally recognized standards in early childhood development. It establishes an initial framework for data collection to track outcomes across the three service areas: health, education, and social services. Additionally, it introduces a minimum package of activities aimed at transforming the approach, management, and decision-making concerning policies that promote early childhood development. The integration of these policies with national strategic planning guidelines is also described (*Ibid.*).

As the Plan is annual, the proposed interdisciplinary socio-pedagogical measures must still demonstrate their effectiveness in yielding sustainable results for the integration of educational, health, and social services. Potential enhancements could include adopting modern approaches, such as establishing a Ministry for Children and Families or creating local structures that provide integrated services for children and families.

These efforts depend on the collective actions and collaboration of engaged communities, such as the informal Early Childhood Development Alliance in Bulgaria. As noted, “the protection and support of families and those who care for them depend on the resilience of communities and systems, which, in turn, result from coordinated action among different sectors and levels of government – both national and local” (Министерство на образованието и науката, 2024). Although initial steps have been taken, our analysis underscores the need for a more unified, harmonized, and consistent policy and regulatory framework to support interdisciplinary and integrated early childhood education, health, and social services in Bulgaria.

Some countries in the Balkans are making significant strides toward service integration. For example, programs in North Macedonia often involve collaboration between local health clinics and kindergartens or community centers to support families in their regions (OpenAI ChatGPT, November 3, 2024). Similarly, Montenegro is working on implementing shared data systems to monitor the well-being of children and families (*Ibid.*).

Research emphasizes the need to address various aspects of integration among education, health, and social services, particularly focusing on integrated services for Roma children in Europe and early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Klaus & Marsh, 2014), which is a pertinent issue in Bulgaria as well. Other researchers have expressed particular interest in social policy in the Balkans (Angelaki, 2024). Additionally, some articles highlight the importance of ECEC for lifelong learning and social inclusion, especially for migrant families and their children (Messetti & Dusi, 2015). We believe it is essential to conduct more in-depth research on

the integration of social, health, and educational service areas, not only in Bulgaria and the Balkans but worldwide.

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