

Preschool Education in an International Context: Findings of an Erasmus+ Higher Education Transatlantic Project

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Introduction

In the 21st century context, internationalization has become a vital issue concerning educational institutions as well; that is, sharing knowledge, good practices, and know-how are regarded as essential components to broaden our horizons. In Europe, the Erasmus+ mobility program advocates students' and teachers' participation in meaningful projects to enhance intercultural understanding and to increase opportunities in the labor market. More precisely, Erasmus+, a European Union (EU) program launched in 1987, aims to support education, training, youth and sports in an international context to contribute to the development of European citizens both on a personal and a professional level. In the field of higher education, international mobility programs for students, faculty and staff have proven to be fairly beneficial since the program commencement. A fundamental Erasmus+ goal is to develop participants' 21st-century skills and competences (Sá & Serpa, 2018) as well as intercultural communication in the changing world of increased mobility and interculturality (European Commission, 2023). In higher education, Erasmus+ provides opportunities for international studies, research, internship, sharing good practices, and professional development inside and outside of the EU.

In the 2014–2020 Erasmus+ period within the KA107 credit mobility program, European institutions of higher education with *Erasmus Charter for Higher Education* (ECHE) were eligible to submit their applications in collaboration with an institution from a non-ECHE partner country to the national Erasmus+ office, in Hungary to Tempus Foundation (Tempus Foundation, 2023). The length of the KA107 projects could range from 24–36 months and a valid bilateral agreement between the involved universities was a criterion. Applications had to contain a detailed project design, e.g., roles and responsibilities of the partners (sending and receiving institutions), arrangements, and participant selection. Furthermore, a thorough description of the relevance of the proposed international project was essential, such as how it could contribute to sharing professional experience and to internationalization on the institutional and regional levels. Also, applicants had to present the possible impacts of

the project and the designed means of dissemination of the findings and professional experience. The submitted applications were evaluated anonymously based on standardized evaluation criteria by independent judges.

This paper presents and discusses a segment of international collaboration between a Hungarian and a Southwest Florida University (USA) within an Erasmus+ KA107 project with a special focus on the international comparison of preschool programs and good practices, as well as preschool teacher training. The project proposal was submitted by the Hungarian University, and it was accepted by Tempus Foundation Hungary in 2019. Due to the outbreak of the Covid pandemic and the international travel restrictions, the project was implemented in the summer of 2022.

This study conducted in a qualitative approach reflects on two university professors' observations within the framework of the KA107 Erasmus+ project mentioned. This paper aims to find answers to the research question of what idiosyncratic similarities and differences can be detected in formal early childhood education program environments in Hungary and in Florida, USA. In the present research context, preschool covers institutionalized child-care from the ages of 3 to 6. In order to avoid ambiguity, it is essential to emphasize that in British English the terms “nursery school”, “preschool” or “kindergarten” are often used to refer to schools for children who are younger than 5 years old (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Conversely, in the USA, preschools serve children aged 3 and 4 while kindergartens primarily serve children aged 5 and 6. In contrast to the UK or the USA, in Hungary children commence school at the age of 6 or 7, and preschools have two sections: “bölcsőde” from the age of 20-months to 3 (or 4 if a child turns 3 after the 31 August) and “óvoda” from the age of 6 (or 7 if a child turns 6 after 31 August). All things considered, due to the different structures of early-childhood education institutions in Hungary, the UK, and the USA and also to the differences between British and American English, in the present context the term “preschool” refers to schools for children between the ages of 3 and 6 in the context of Hungary.

Method

To reveal the findings related to the present KA107 project, first, our method is a brief overview and contrast of preschool teacher training in Hungary and Florida based on reviewing the literature. Second, the method of observation data description, a qualitative research technique originally used in social sciences, but at present, applied in a wide range of fields (Geertz, 1973; Ponterotto, 2006). The study comprises narratives, which depict and discuss background

contexts and the situations related to them. Our aim is not merely to provide a description of a situation, but to reveal details to better understand the complex cultural and educational implications that support all observable schemes.

The abbreviations *P1* and *P2* are applied to refer to the two participants: an American (*P1*) and a Hungarian (*P2*) university professor with early childhood teacher training experience. The observations were conducted in central Hungary in June, 2022 and in Southwest Florida, USA, in July, 2022.

The qualitative data were recorded in self-reflection journals along with the use of the retrospection technique (Gläser-Zikuda, 2012) to conduct the narrative. No observation sheet was constructed since in the case of explorative descriptive investigations, it is a beneficial method to formulate research questions (as it was the case regarding this study) in order to have a scope that is relatively open to detect important findings during observation (Maykut & Morehouse, 2005). The data was analyzed through content analysis, and the emerging patterns were detected in both discourses.

What follows now is a brief introduction to preschool teacher training in the two countries involved. Also, the preschool core programs in Hungary and Florida will be shortly discussed.

Preschool teacher training in Hungary

In Hungary, preschool programs date back to 1828 when based on Anglo-Saxon influence (Wilderspin, 1840, 1852), Countess Therese von Brunszvik (Teréz Brunszvik) founded the first “infant care center” – which was similar to an elementary school – with exclusively male teachers who, in fact, taught very small children age-relevant basic knowledge, and trained them in skills and competences. In the mid-19th century, male teachers were employed in Hungarian schools. From 1837, the first 1-year preschool teacher training programs cooperating with lab infant care centers were offered for male applicants. The admission criteria consisted of a suitability test that required a healthily built body, good ears for music, as well as proper speech and eye-sight. The training became two years long in 1847, and the first female teachers entered the infant teacher training program only in the late 1850s, while female assistants worked in the care centers earlier, too. In the 1980-90s, the idea appeared that only female teachers should work with children under seven because they are more suitable for nurturing due to their gender. As a result, there was a gradual shift towards female teachers for infants, and by 1890, the gender distribution showed a 94% female to 6% male ratio. In 1926, the training time increased to 4 years: 3 years of theory and 1 year of practice in an infant care center, and at the

end, the trainees had to pass a theoretical and a practical exam (singing, violin, and infant care center practice). 1959 saw another milestone when two-year advanced level preschool teacher training institutions were introduced, and they required a secondary-school maturation diploma as an admission criterion into the program. In 1985, the preschool training program gained college (Bachelor) level accreditation with a three-year training program. In 2002, credit-based qualification criteria were introduced in coordination with EU standardizations (Baksa & Hegedűs, 2013).

Hungarian preschool teacher training programs have gone through an evolution while still reflecting the original Anglo-Saxon model, adapted to the 21st-century environment and Hungarian culture as well. Training at the Bachelor level constitutes six semesters, thirteen modules which on average contain 70% practice and 30% theory. There is a wide range of required courses, e.g., Communicative Skill Development at Preschool, Theoretical Basics of Mathematical Education, Methodology of Music Education, and Physical Education (P. E.) in Preschool – Gymnastics. There are also optional courses e.g. Language Acquisition or English-Speaking Cultures. The preschool Bachelor program at the Hungarian University contains 95 core credits, and the total number of program credits is 180, including specialization modules and preschool practice. To be able to obtain a preschool teacher degree, students are also required to conduct a small-scale empirical or classroom research (quantitative, qualitative or mixed-design) and write a (30–50-page) thesis on their investigations. The final phase of the preschool teacher training program is passing the final exam and defending their thesis in front of an examination board (Preschool Syllabus, 2022).

Preschool education national core program in Hungary

A Hungarian Government Decree (363/2012. [XII. 17.] Korm. rendelet, 2012) on the Hungarian preschool education national core program constitutes the following principles: 1) the child is a developing personality who needs and is entitled to special care and protection, 2) childcare and development are the responsibility of the family; preschools fulfil a complementary, assistant role, and 3) equality in education must ensure and enhance holistic child development. Furthermore, when designing a particular preschool program, the following principles are also required to be taken into consideration (if relevant): 1) the principles and needs of national minority preschools, and 2) the principles of special needs education. The national core program contains sections on the vision and mission of childcare and preschools, the tasks of preschool education, the principles of organizing preschool activities, the types of preschool

activities, the responsibilities of preschool teachers, and the characteristics of children's development-level by the end of preschool.

Preschool educational tasks focus on the age-relevant development of a healthy lifestyle, emotional and social education, native language, and cognitive skills development. Preschool activities are centered around the child; the stakeholders and "models" are preschool teachers collaborating with other non-teacher staff. Preschool development must be suitable for special needs, minority language, and non-native children as well. It is also a basic requirement that the preschool premises; that is, the building/s/, the yard, and the garden must be sufficiently spacious, and equipped using natural materials. The preschool environment must be comfortable and meet the safety criteria. There must be a fixed daily and weekly routine for the children providing them with a safe emotional environment. There must be different activities offered for children that run parallelly to enhance the development of children's collaboration skills taking individual differences into consideration. The duration of the activities ranges between 5–35 minutes, and they focus on games and playing including a lot of free play that allows free associations, fantasy, imagination, and creativity and provides a flow experience (Csikszentmihályi, 1997). Learning Hungarian children's rhymes and poems with playful movements and listening to folk tales can be a significant contribution to children's emotional development. In addition, the creation of the child's own poems and tales accompanied by movements or visual illustrations, as well as singing, listening to folk music, dance, arts, and P.E. are also vital activities in the Hungarian preschool environments. Young children must also learn about their environment through chores such as taking care of plants and animals. All these activities and development processes follow the "learning by doing" (Dewey, 1938) principle. Emulation is also an essential method to form children's behavior patterns with a special focus on gaining experience. Such activities include spontaneous playful ways, answering children's questions, explorations guided by the teacher, and problem-solving. Preschool teachers are responsible for these procedures and development. Finally, upon leaving preschool, children must be physically, psychologically, and socially mature enough to be able to start elementary school (363/2012. [XII. 17.] Korm. rendelet, 2012).

Preschool Teacher Training in Florida, USA

In the state of Florida, students seeking to become public preschool teachers for children ages 3–4, are required to hold an undergraduate or higher degree with specific focus and/or coursework. Administrative Rule 6A-4.0142 under

the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE, 2023a) identifies specialization requirements for certification in the area of Prekindergarten/Primary Education (Age Three through Grade 3), and identifies five certification paths to be chosen from. For example, the first plan offered specifies “a bachelor’s or higher degree with an undergraduate or graduate major in pre-kindergarten/primary education (age 3[3] through grade [3]”, whereas the second plan states, “a bachelor’s or higher degree with forty-five semester hours in pre-kindergarten/primary education to include” specific areas such as child development, historical perspectives of early childhood education, and classroom management among various other areas (FLDOE, 2023a, para. 1).

Initial Teacher Preparation (ITP) programs are offered by Florida colleges and universities to prepare pre-service teachers to qualify for an initial Florida Professional Educator’s Certificate and begin teaching in the state (FLDOE, 2023b). The courses in this program include Child Development, Children’s Literature, Early Literacy, and Play Development, in addition to various other courses that are specific to early learning. Several universities in the state offer degrees in early childhood education, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. At the American university discussed in this paper, the Bachelor’s Degree in Early Childhood Education typically requires 120 credit hours with 57 of those hours being specific to the early childhood major. The early childhood program includes integrated field experience opportunities and a nine-credit internship. In the state of Florida, alternative pathways to teacher certification exist, such as educator preparation institutes and professional development certification programs.

Early learning centers or preschools outside of the public-school settings have different requirements for their teachers and staff and are governed under the Division of Early Learning (DEL) through the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE, 2023c) and the Department of Children and Families. The Voluntary Pre-kindergarten (VPK) program, “a free educational program that prepares 4-year-olds for success in kindergarten and beyond” (FLDOE, 2023c, para. 1). The school-year program is a total of 540 instructional hours (approximately three hours a day). Instructors of VPK programs must have a minimum of a Florida Child Care Professional Credential (FCCPC). This credential can be obtained at various accredited institutions, and it includes a minimum of 120 hours of early childhood instruction and 480 contact hours with children ages birth through 8 (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2023).

Preschool Education State Core Program, Florida

For the period from birth through kindergarten, DEL provides the developmental standards and professional competencies for children in the state of Florida. In 2017, these standards were revised and published, and they focus on eight learning and developmental domains which include (DEL, 2023):

1. physical development,
2. approaches to learning,
3. social and emotional development,
4. language and literacy,
5. mathematical thinking,
6. scientific inquiry,
7. social studies,
8. creative expression through the arts.

The FLDOE (2023d) acknowledges how the “extensive research on infant brain development shows that a child’s first five years are the most important time for learning” (para.1) and the DEL website provides evidence promoting the importance of early learning. However, it is important to note that according to Florida Law, children are only required to attend school regularly once they have reached the age of 6 by February 1st of any school year.

Results and discussion

The descriptions will be presented in a chronological order to provide a natural flow of narrative. Accordingly, P1’s detailed report will be followed by P2’s, prior to the discussion of a comparative analysis with the emerging patterns.

P1’s preschool observations in Hungary

P1 travelled to Hungary in June 2022 and was able to visit and observe the Central Preschool, a public and university lab school in a town in the Northern Great Plain region of Hungary. The new facility of this preschool has operated since 2012, and it can house eight groups and a total of 200 children (aged 3–6 or 7). P1 visited this school with P2 and another Hungarian colleague. At the time of the visit, the students were participating in a summer program. P1 revealed that she had never seen a school like this before in person, and how this was the kind of school she had dreamt about for all small children in her

community and beyond for many years. “Complete awe” was felt when she first walked into the modern school-building with 21st-century conveniences when she was observing the young children frolicking in the swimming pool. There was a beautiful library area, large classrooms with open spaces, wooden furniture, reading nooks and play areas. There is a special reading corner, where the preschool children can play librarian, which is a particular method called Mantle of Expert (MoE) (Bernhardt et al., 2022; Bernhardt & Magyar, 2023). Students were working with teachers and peers in both small and large groups, completing engaging activities and demonstrating their creativity. There were gorgeous outside areas that included gardens with sand-pits, playground equipment, and large areas for the children to run and explore. She had the opportunity to sit and listen to a presentation made by two children (aged 5) about a project they had been working on in their group. This project focused on insects, and the children explained the different concepts they had learned and the activities they completed. There was a sense of peacefulness, freedom, and joy. As a former kindergarten teacher and someone whose work is primarily in early childhood education, this was an example of what P1 strongly believed all children deserve to experience in their early school years. This school was clearly built with young children’s development and curiosities in mind and to provide countless opportunities for them to explore, be creative, and learn through authentic learning opportunities.

P2’s preschool observations in Southwest Florida

The mobility of P2 was implemented at the beginning of July, 2022. She observed a Little Eagles Learning Center (LELC) which is an educational research center for child development (ERCCD) funded by tuition. She visited this institution within the framework of a foundation summer camp organized for secondary-school students with different cultural backgrounds. These students participated in a career orientation program held by P1. The special aim of this program for the secondary school students was to immerse themselves in education, in particular in preschool and kindergarten teaching. On the first day of the camp, there was the first visit to a university early learning center, which is available for 58 children aged 6 weeks to 5 years and which is located on a university campus among many other university buildings. The basic aim of LELC is to provide the children of the local multicultural community with high quality early care, and it also functions as a university lab school for teaching practice where students can get part-time employment, conduct research, classroom observations, and work on educational projects. The preschool premises

are neat and cozy, and they ensure a safe environment for the children. The rooms are equipped with various toys and equipment, e.g. a great variety of paints and crayons, developmental tools to enhance the children's cognitive development and creativity. Strollers are also available for the youngest ones for various explorations in nature outside the building. The preschool teachers are affectionate and kind to the children.

Summary of observations

The main emerging patterns of similarities and difference in terms of the observed Hungarian and American early child care institutions are revealed in Table 1. When interpreting the findings, it is essential to draw attention to the fact that the Hungarian preschool is a public school without tuition while the American one is mainly funded by tuition.

Comparison criteria	Florida Context	Hungarian Context
Preschool premises and facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One-story-building with several classrooms where students are separated by age (infants, toddlers, preschool) - Outdoor play area with two playgrounds and garden area - Natural building materials - Safe and clean 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spacious three-story-building (downstairs, upstairs, attic) downtown - Group-rooms with restrooms - Suitable for persons with reduced mobility - 5000 m garden and yards - Natural building materials - 21st-century modern (e.g., swimming-pool) - Natural, safe and clean
“School year”	All year round	All year round (fewer children during the summer break)
Financial aspects	Tuition, VPK offers 3 hours of state funded care	State funded
Preschool groups	One PreK class with children ages 4 and 5, toddler and infant classrooms in building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eight groups - Mixed-age groups as well

Table 1a

Patterns of similarities and differences of the observed Florida and Hungarian early childhood institutions

Comparison criteria	Florida Context	Hungarian Context
Preschool daily and weekly routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fixed daily routines to provide a sense of security - Focus on various topics (e.g., arts, children’s literature) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fixed daily routine to provide stability and a sense of security for the children - Age-appropriate theme Project weeks. E.g., Insects, holidays (Christmas etc.), special days, like World Water Day
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Centre-type activities where students moved freely - Centers included block play, art activities, dress-up and dramatic play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Various playful activities using drama pedagogy and learning by doing with a lot of free play opportunities inside and outside - Playschool Library run by children
Focus on culture (monocultural, multicultural, intercultural, cross-cultural etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multicultural context - Focus on multicultural topics (music, food etc.) 	Mostly monocultural context with focus on multicultural events and aspects (e.g., related to special World Days)

Table 1b

Patterns of similarities and differences of the observed Florida and Hungarian early childhood institutions

As Table 1 shows and reinforces, despite the vast geographical difference, the different time zones and cultural patterns, the needs and development of small children are universal. An ultimate finding seems to be that both good practices in the observed preschools can be beneficial and motivating. Also, the Hungarian preschool seems to be more play-focus, while the Florida preschool is more learning-focused. Finally, although preschool teacher training and qualifications show different structures, their fundamental aim is to protect, educate, develop, and “entertain” small children in a holistic way.

Conclusions

Our study revealed the observation findings of an intercultural, professional mobility of an American and a Hungarian university professor within the framework of a transatlantic Erasmus+ KA107 project. Accordingly, the proj-

ect focused on preschool educational programs and good practices in an international context. The observations were discussed by detecting and presenting the emerging patterns of the main similarities and differences regarding the characteristics and practices in early childhood care. The most fundamental findings along with their pedagogical implications show that there is a universal need for children to feel secure in a safe environment with a lot of age-appropriate and well-designed stimuli, to aid and motivate their cognitive and psychological development and creativity and also to enhance their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The main differences are rooted in the differences in the early education systems and cultural settings of Florida (USA) and Hungary and also in the different types of funding in the observed institutions. It must be also emphasized that present study is meant to be a descriptive one and generalizations cannot be drawn from the observation data.

This study sets the foundation for future research and collaboration opportunities between students and professors in both the United States and Hungary. One of the professors is now residing and working in New York State, as an Early Childhood faculty member. This may allow the research team to expand the scope of any future projects by reviewing and comparing preschool settings, requirements, and teacher preparation in a different state in the USA. Additionally, this current project also included site visits with pre-kindergarten and kindergarten aged children in Montessori settings which can provide further insight into private primary programs in Florida, USA.

Furthermore, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) integration is another approach for future research and collaborations. Students in both countries can research early childhood programs, have discussions, and possibly even visit “virtually” or in-person primary schools in their local areas. These collaborations may support students’ intercultural knowledge while providing additional insight into early childhood programs and schools across various locations.

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Abstract

Internationalization in higher education has become a priority worldwide. Accordingly, the European Union Erasmus+ program has become fairly successful as it offers a great opportunity for the stakeholders of higher education to participate in various mobility and international collaboration programs. The present study is aimed to focus on a part of KA107 Erasmus+ transatlantic project, during which two early childhood care facilities were observed: a Little Eagles Learning Center (Florida, USA) and a Central Preschool in the Northern Great Plain region of Hungary. The observation data were collected by an American and a Hungarian professor in the summer of 2022. One of the main results of the content analyses to detect similarities and differences in the observed institutions is a universal need for children to feel safe. It was also found that a wide range of age-relevant, well-designed activities are essential to enhance and motivate preschool children's cognitive and psychological development as well as their creativity.