

# **Change Doesn't Happen at the Top as Much as It Happens at the Bottom**

**Alexandra Anton**

Fondator Yuppy Koti Centre, Ploiești, Romania

[contact@yuppykoti.ro](mailto:contact@yuppykoti.ro)

## **Abstract**

The proceeding shows the fresh perspective that Yuppy Koti Centre brings into the classic Romanian school landscape, inspired by the Finnish education. It presents three key aspects that have already implemented and were of big success at this education centre. The author strongly believes that anyone in any context can use these as guidelines.

## **Change Doesn't Happen at the Top as Much as It Happens at the Bottom**

I managed to find that crack at the very roots of the system, where children and parents meet teachers and where teachers are autonomous, free to innovate and grow as professionals. This place, in my case, is called Yuppy Koti Centre.

I decided to work with very young children for two reasons: a scientific and an economic one. First, because **early childhood education and care (ECEC)** represents the foundation for future learning as it provides children with the cognitive and the non-cognitive skills that will benefit them throughout their life. But what does ECEC refer to more specifically? *ECEC refers to everything that happens socially, emotionally and from the cognitive perspective to a child from the day he/she is born until he/she goes to preschool, at the age of 6.*

Research shows that *qualitative early childhood education and care services have a huge impact on how the adult will succeed in life.* So, because my aim was to have an impact, the best way was to address the little ones. Finland, my inspiration, has invested in a solid foundation for years, which is why the PISA study results are no surprise. Second, the economic reason is that *every euro invested in ECEC generates 7 euros back to the community and the society as a whole.* So not just that education, in general, is a very good investment to make – probably some

of you know what Benjamin Franklin once said: “An investment in knowledge pays the best interest” –, but research nowadays might add that an investment in ECEC pays an incredibly good interest. To argue this I recommend you to watch the video of a Nobel laureate economist that reached the conclusion that the money invested in ECEC yields profits and what is to be done with the money for ECEC: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7zjm8dZr3Y>. So again, studies have found that ECEC is the proper direction for investments and so, in order to prevent later costs for the society, early intervention is a much better choice.

During our existence as an educational centre, we took into consideration the framework designed by the Finnish National Board of Education, by also thinking of the Romanian context. We haven't managed so far to cover in our practice the entire perspective of education and care inspired by Finland, first because there are quite many differences between the two and second because just recently, in 2016, the new National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care was put into national wide use in Finland.

Considering all these, I will refer today to **three key aspects** we have already implemented and were of big success. We strongly believe that anyone in any context can use these as guidelines.

1. First, **learning through play** is how we do things. A non-competitive environment, where play is the common language, makes a great context for learning. Our aim is to allow kids to learn from the state of curiosity, by fostering the joy of learning and develop self-confidence. Many parents and also teachers claim that only the traditional schooling teaches the kids to read and write, by asking kids to sit still at the table and fill in worksheets. We believe that everyone learns to read and write, but unfortunately, very few use these skills to improve their lives. Why? Because the joy of learning is far gone and, from very young ages, there was too much pressure to read the letters and learn how to read. *It is much easier to kill the joy of learning than to nurture the natural interest of the kid for the world around him.*

Kids need to be developmentally ready to read, and how they learn at this very young age is not by sitting but by moving. They learn through play, hands-on experiences with materials, interacting with the natural world and engaging with caring adults. Teachers often notice that kids ask questions naturally. During their role-playing games, kids feel most secure and ready to ask very complex questions. This way they develop their language and literacy skills, and that sets the foundation for becoming fluent readers later on.

Through play we can best measure how well a kid can focus or if he/she can easily make friends. *Children are designed to play. Play helps them develop their social skills, flexibility and impulse control, memory, creative problem-solving.* What happens when kids don't play enough? *Nowadays, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (shortly ADHD) is the new tonsillitis.* Many generations had their *tonsils removed after repeated throat infections.*

Kids are believed to be disturbed and ADHD is the diagnosis they get by the age of 7, and it is believed that the symptoms appear already when kids are between 3 and 6. What the modern medicine in most parts of the world is trying to do is to *treat children from childhood.* I'm not saying there isn't such a thing as the ADHD, but that we need to be more careful with considering kids disturbed.

*But childhood is a common condition in children. We all had it and it is not a disease!* Back to research, the director of the Research Centre on Play in Education, Development and Learning at the University of Cambridge, Professor David Whitebread talks about the importance of the play-based environment in the early years, why the self-regulatory abilities built through play are so meaningful for the development of the child and why educators need to be properly prepared, esteemed and paid according to their role on the path of the child and for their role in society. I suggest that you watch this short interview with him regarding the anterior statement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-Y0O0GQ1KQ>.

2. Second, **outdoor learning**. The outdoors is the best classroom that was ever invented! Rain or shine, fog or snow, we go outside, we play and learn a lot! Children learn best about the physics of falling when they use the slide on a rainy day. *We have no problem checking young children for ADHD, but we forget to understand why they act wildly.* Kids in Yuppy Koti and in all Finnish kindergartens go outside every single day. And this is not all. They can ride the bike, climb, slide, swing, jump, run, draw on the blackboard, hop in the hopscotch, crack walnuts, have a picnic, dig a hole in the ground, create traps in the forest, climb a tree, play games, explore nature, feel the wind, the snow, the rain, the sun. Besides these all, kids are calmer, healthier and more positive. *Kids are very busy when they go out, they learn through all senses. It's the adults that see nothing interesting outside, not the children.*

Teaching outdoors gets children feeling **challenged and excited** by learning. Adult students in the University of Turku may experience having their seminars outdoors. For 90 minutes, they

walk around the campus, they stop by a statue and discuss a topic and maybe change their study pal and after this time they feel much better, they learn better and they are happier. If this is the effect on the adults who can sit still without fidgeting, imagine how difficult it is for the kids to sit still, to be indoors for hours and hours. It is a nightmare! Try it once if you are a teacher, and you'll see that outdoor learning provides more opportunities for the children to think independently, to be aware of the environment and to create lasting memories.

Teachers in Romanian kindergarten have too many children in their classes, we know that – just imagine one teacher dressing up 30 kids and tying 30 pairs of shoes only for getting out! But we need to have faith because kids learn fast and are highly motivated to go out, so this must be seen as being just another opportunity for learning! Therefore, even before kids go out they have the chance to build their autonomy. What is very disturbing, I think, is what studies show - today's children spend less time outdoor than prison inmates. This result is underlined even in a dramatic (but smart) commercial with the slogan *Free the kids - dirt is good* (you can watch it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Q2WnCbT0>). In defence of the children, many experts like Sir Ken Robinson and Dr. Stuart Brown talk about the need for kids to learn essential skills that will set them up for the future.

3. Thirdly, **children have a voice** and they deserve to be listened by **highly qualified teachers**. No learning can occur if social and emotional needs are not met. Kids often want to express themselves and have interesting ways in which they communicate their needs. Crying, pushing others, running around and other similar signals need to be properly understood by the adults before taking any actions. Children can have very good arguments when listened to. Last winter, for instance, we let all parents know that below 10 we won't take the kids outside and that day was, by the best, below 18. Children in Yuppy Koti were presented this fact, we showed them the thermometer, but their argument was stronger: “we”, the children said, “can come in if we feel cold”. It made perfect sense, so we took them out that day. Needless to say, nobody felt cold, everyone moved and played in the snow, and they were very happy. Luckily, also the parents were happy! This happened because teachers took the time to listen to the kids, to make them feel important for their own education. Teachers teach kids not just facts, but they teach kids to learn how to learn. *Taking the time to listen to them and thinking how every circumstance can turn into a possibility for learning is something that highly trained teachers do every single day.*

In order for the Romanian teachers to get in contact with the Finnish way of seeing things, we read quite a lot, we go to conferences; we also organize *FIEdu, the International Festival of Education*, and so we learn together and we learn along with the children. *Teachers never stop learning*. Teachers in early years don't believe that learning is only happening in the classroom. Learning happens when feelings are well understood, when kids feel they are important, when they sense they are part of a community, and when they feel their opinion is important, when they can move and play, when they go out. Valuable teachers know that playing is learning too and that they need to involve parents in educating kids in this direction. *FIEdu* is an event that brings hope back to our souls. We have everything we need to successfully educate our children and make the future bright. We now have ideas, we have research and what's left is for us to open our minds and give it a try. I'll end up by inviting you to this lovely festival and by saying that *highly qualified teachers put the child first*.