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Child-Centered Approach through Slow Education Principles: A View to Child Personality Development in Early Childhood

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Abstract: We are preoccupied with early childhood education policies at the international level in general, but in particular with early childhood education in Romania. Therefore, the research direction of our study focuses on how early education teachers can integrate the principles of slow education into the development of child-centered competence. The formation and development of the child's early ontogeny personality occur at the natural pace of development and learning rather than in an accelerated manner. While preparing for the research, we reviewed relevant articles circumscribed to the same topic: slow, child-centered education, deep learning, constructivism, and the enthusiasm of children and teachers. Most of them conclude that the use of child-centered competence in early childhood significantly contributes to slow education principles and characteristics. At the same time, the research aims to provide quantitatively and qualitatively validated arguments for verifying the incidence of child-centered competence from the perspective of sustainable education, in connection with the constructivist orientation of the teachers. Our research included a group of 376 teachers selected from early childhood education institutions in the North-West of Romania, all of them with initial preparation in the field. Using the focus group method, we identified differences in the perception of the two paradigms (child-centeredness and slow pedagogy), the link between these two, and the connection with the constructivist orientation. At the same time, we intended to identify the degree of continuous professional development training according to these paradigms that are not studied and practiced together in early education in Romania, because only the child-centeredness principle is mentioned in the initial teacher training. Therefore, in-service training activities were conducted and they were focused on facilitating and raising awareness of the value of using child-centered competence and the principles of slow education among training participants. At the end of the program, through the quantitative method—the survey—we concluded that the activities included in the training program led to a significant increase in the teachers' capacity to appreciate the natural pace of development and learning of children to such an extent that the participants themselves adopted the promotion of sustainable slow education in a dynamic society. The methods used helped us deduce that all teachers with a constructivist orientation improved their child-centered competence, and teachers who gave children the freedom to choose activities from the proposed educational offers, according to their needs, interests, and potential, identified the development of the ability to consider children's natural pace of development and learning as a result of the training. In conclusion, our research complements the literature, proposing a new and useful perspective to approach early childhood education practices by respecting the child's natural pace of development and learning, which provides a suitable context for promoting international sustainable educational policies. We encourage teachers around the world to reflect on an important issue in the holistic development of the child—if faster means better—in the race to performance.

Keywords: early education; child-centered; slow pedagogy; constructivist orientation



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1. Introduction

In a world of innovation, early education is continuously facing new challenges, and therefore, there is a constant need to restructure and rethink the educational process. The question that arises more and more often is: What is the role of education in a fast-paced, super-technologized society? Our research attempts to answer some important questions related to this century of speed in which adults tend to accelerate even the natural pace of childhood. Therefore, we aim to shed light on what slow pedagogy means and how its principles reflect upon child-centered education in early childhood.

According to Payne (2008), slow pedagogy can be seen as a response to the unheard call of John Dewey, the experiential philosopher, to create a philosophy of experience where experience and growth are valued, skills needed to promote secondary, deep reflection, and interaction with the environment and human nature [1].

In slow pedagogy, the teacher becomes a mentor and the children's learning is driven by their own efforts, the learning process being controlled by them. At the same time, educational methods adapted to children's natural pace are used to prepare them to become adults and to be able to adapt easily to the life contexts they are part of [2]. Thus, we believe that slow pedagogy should focus on two fundamental aspects: on slowing down the overall pace of the group in terms of academic skills development at the detriment of play, and also on how early education teachers manage to integrate the principles of slow education into an instructional-educational process based on child-centeredness.

Children in early education do not necessarily need more play time, they need deeper play. For the child, deeper play applies to both indoor and outdoor play, as well as intellectual and physical play, incorporating five main elements: self-direction, intrinsic motivation, use of imagination, process orientation and positive emotions. In deeper play, the child takes initiative and responsibility for what happens during the activity. Teachers provide children with support and guidance when needed, offering them a stimulating educational environment and giving them the opportunity to choose, manage, and reflect on play activities [3].

According to Campbell Barr's statement, early education and care models and training structures are internationally different due to multiple factors (cultural, economic, social, etc.) that significantly influence them. Consequently, interpretations of child-centered practices are different from country to country, and Romania needs clarification in this regard [4] due to the fact that a new curriculum was introduced in 2019. This document aimed to introduce a child-centered framework in early childhood education in Romania in order to provide children with a quality education from the perspective of international policies. Therefore, the curriculum was introduced across the country without providing teachers with a continuous professional development course in advance based on uniform information and new practices.

In order to increase access to quality education and to inform about its role in modern society, the European Union brings to our attention the 2030 Agenda [5], through which the United Nations (UN) representatives proposed a set of 17 goals, comprising of 169 universal, people-oriented targets and major changes. The Agenda recommends that member countries should develop their own national strategies for sustainable development to ensure a better life in a clean environment.

Taking into account the UN and EU recommendations, Romania aims, in its National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2030 [6], to provide quality education for all children, intending to help them acquire the necessary skills to successfully integrate into society. This document highlights the importance of early education to avoid problematic behavior throughout the educational pathway and reduce kindergarten drop-outs and low achievement, thus increasing its citizens' chances of labor market integration.

Firoiu et al. (2019) specify in the introduction of their study that Romania's educational policies attempt to provide child-centered teaching, triggering a decelerated learning style at the expense of the general tendency to accelerate the natural pace of each child. This approach is being implemented from early education onwards so as to provide a

framework conducive to development and learning at one's own pace, but still encouraging understanding of abstract notions and deep learning [7].

In early education, children learn in the context of play, in which they feel comfortable setting their own pace, which educators must take into account and avoid trying to accelerate. Through play, they interact with objects, with colleagues, with adults around them, developing their own system of knowledge about themselves, the world, and life, and about the relationships that exist between objects and people which can lead to deep learning [8]. At the same time, play serves as an immersive context in which children practice a variety of cognitive skills through active exploration and negotiation with others, including problem solving, critical thinking, flexibility, and self-control [9].

The Curriculum for Early Education 4.694/02.08.2019 [10] is considered the primary document aimed at aligning Romania's educational policies with European policies, and it is based on the argument of correlation with the changes initiated at the pre-university education levels. The main goal is building a unitary and coherent curricular concept, concerning the key competences that determine the child's training profile, defined at European level and set out in the National Education Law no. 1/2011. This is the official document that adjusts the organization, the functioning, and the educational approaches of the institutions involved in early education in Romania. Therefore, it brings an improved vision of education for this age segment (from birth to 6 years), addressing the holistic development of children in broad areas of development and supporting the achievement of an appropriate balance between learning and the harmonious evolution of children's personalities. The expected impact of this curriculum relates to child-centered pedagogical approaches that can support children's overall development in a more effective way, along with providing reinforcement for the formation of strategies that ensure cognitive, social, and emotional development through strategies such as targeted focus on hands-on learning, plays, and social interactions [10]. At the same time, the curriculum must be rich and broad enough to meet the developmental and learning needs of all children, relating to all domains [11]. This kind of approach encourages teachers to embrace a constructivist orientation.

According to Mills (2007), his research specifies that constructivism aims to focus on children's deep and elaborated comprehension, and that constructivist principles encourage children to explore ideas, phenomena, and artifacts of a subject before being exposed to formal explanations by educators [12].

Constructivist-oriented educators propose strategies such as problem-based learning, inquiry, and exploration activities, dialogues with colleagues, encouraging the comprehension of abstract concepts, exposure to multiple sources of information, and providing opportunities to give the child a chance to understand the concepts in different ways [13].

This idea is also supported by three other studies conducted by Shah (2019) [14], Bada and Olusegun (2015) [15], and Jones and Brader-Araje (2002) [16], showing that child-centered instructional strategies are emphasized in the constructivist learning approach, and early childhood teachers who choose such an approach need to design their instructional activities according to the experiences of the children they teach so that they can actively construct their knowledge. In other words, children learn by combining new information with what they already know.

Teachers with a constructivist vision play an important role in promoting a natural pace of child development and learning throughout the management of educational situations. At the same time, from a constructivist perspective, education is seen as a process which is constantly guided by knowledge, attitudes, and values, a process that promotes global development, human and sustainable development, a culture of solidarity, and a commitment to the fight against poverty and exclusion [17,18].

In fact, the child, who is an active participant of the learning process, develops according to the opportunities provided by his daily routine, by the interactions with the others, by the organization of the environment, and by the learning situations especially created

for him by the adult. In this context, playing is the child's fundamental activity for the development of personality and the formation of their first notions [19].

A child-centered education encourages children to discover in the kindergarten environment a place of development, a place where their creativity, their initiative, their desire for exploration, and their well-being are encouraged while respecting their individuality and the natural pace of development and learning. Well-being can be characterized as personal fulfillment, taking into account mind, body, spirit, moral, and social aspects [18,20].

Child-centered education is complex and requires good training of the early childhood teacher in the knowledge of the child's psychological profile. This training allows him to make important decisions about the organization of the educational space, the choice of topics, the materials used, and the most appropriate strategies, respecting the natural pace of the children's development and learning. Thus, the role of the teachers is not limited to observing and identifying individual learning needs, but they must personalize the teaching and learning process according to the educational objectives while respecting the individuality of each child so as to create a memorable experience for them. Children in early education need a safe environment in which they can express their curiosity as a natural impulse [8]. When children play, curiosity is also triggered [3].

1.1. Child-Centred Education—General Framework and Current Curricular Provisions in a National and International Context

Campbell-Barr (2017) [21] mentions in her paper that the origins of the concept of child-centeredness are identified in the works of Froebel, Rousseau, Dewey, Montessori, and Vygotsky. Bremner et al. (2022) argue that child-centered education is often associated with the constructivist theories advocated by Vygotsky and Piaget. They believe that this approach will better prepare children for the demands of this ever-changing world [22]. Due to their theory, we can talk today about the relationship between development, learning, and play [8].

Childhood can be seen as a global concept, and all life experiences are individualized according to the context, the family, the community, and the children's particularities. Therefore, it is important to think about childhood to predict and later recognize the different experiences and contexts that children will have [23] depending on their own needs, interests, potential, and pace of development and learning.

The way educators interact with children plays an important role in identifying the most important action steps for children and their experience of being autonomous in the educational environment, promoting a constructivist education.

The child-centered curriculum supports learning in a playful environment, with features such as exploration, experimentation, imagination, and creativity. The games designed in kindergarten develop important skills for children, such as problem-solving, coping, and social skills [24]. That is why we need to give children the freedom to have alternatives, to choose from various solutions whenever solving problems, or to engage in group efforts to address challenges proposed by the teacher.

Based on the above considerations, we believe that offering children a wide range of play-related activities is important. Three types of activities are fundamental in kindergarten: play, exploration, and experimentation. Children accumulate through play these three types of experienced activities, all meaningful to their development and learning, meeting their age-specific needs. They try to conquer the world around them by acting on the three paths shown above [25].

Therefore, the fundamental values underlining the development of the Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Romania are clearly expressed in a set of principles. The most relevant to our research include the principle of child-centered education which emphasizes the knowledge, the respect, and the appreciation of the uniqueness of the child, and of their needs and characteristics. Another principle is the one focusing on free choice, i.e., the ability of children to choose their favorite games according to their interests, needs, and potential [26].

The methodological choices of early education teachers are also guided by several principles derived from the implementation of the 2019 National Curriculum [10] for this level. The main principles extracted from this Curriculum and which underpin our study are:

- The principle of individualization—the organization of activities takes into account the child’s own pace of development and his requirements, ensuring that children are free to choose activities and tasks according to their needs;
- The principle of play-based learning—play is the child’s natural developmental activity, and therefore it should be the basis for the design of all types of learning activities;
- The principle of diversifying learning contexts and situations—providing an educational environment of diverse learning contexts and situations that require the child’s involvement in as many aspects as possible: cognitive, emotional, social, motor.

By approaching child-centered competence from a slow pedagogy perspective, early education can raise awareness about problem behaviors, and support ownership, curiosity, engagement, and deep learning—skills that will serve the child throughout life. This approach will reduce the desire of future children to achieve academic results the easy way, as quickly as possible, and without the need for in-depth learning, which takes time, is slower, and involves some sacrifice [27].

Tzuo et al., (2011) highlight through their study that pedagogical theory and practice has progressed over time from a teacher-centered to a child-centered teaching approach, recommending that early childhood teachers continually review their theories and practices. Therefore, the study underlines the importance of teachers’ participation in training courses for them to succeed in improving their child-centered practices from a slow pedagogy perspective [28]. Comparing the recommendation made by Tzuo and his colleagues to their Romanian counterpart, we mention that following discussions with teachers participating in the study and with various education specialists, we can state that in some institutions related to early education and not only, the teacher-centered approach is still present. In this context, we recommend all kindergartens to reconsider their approach in order to value each child, following each child’s development at their own pace. At pre-kindergarten age, children develop and learn when they are given the opportunity to explore and discover the world around them in their own way, without the adult interfering step by step in the exploration process, by giving children the opportunity to manipulate the objects they explore [8].

Early education teachers need to be able to skillfully manage the different situations they face in guided activities for them to always be geared to the needs, interests and experiences of the children they guide. In addition, they need to be enthusiastic educators, including being willing to extend their own knowledge and having the ability to reflect on teaching strategies through play, so as to maintain the balance between teaching through play and learning through play [29]. Being enthusiastic greatly promotes both children’s learning [30] and the kindergarten climate [31]. Children’s curiosity cannot be taught, but it manifests as a natural impulse, similar to the impulse to play [8].

1.2. Characteristics and Principles of Slow Pedagogy

Nobel Laureate Kahneman (2011) describes the dualism of the thinking system in which “fast” and “slow” appear as natural reactions. ‘Fast’ thinking refers to subconscious and automatic processes, as well as emotional reactions based on prejudice or intuition. ‘Slow’ thinking is defined as reflective [32]. Thus, slow pedagogy aims to raise awareness of the fact that faster is not necessarily better in the context of early education; children need play and tangible interactions in such a context for deep learning to occur [3].

We live in a century of speed in which people are increasingly in a hurry to get, to have, and to achieve, accelerating the normal pace of development. We want more and more to compress time, to achieve as much as possible in as little time as possible, without effort and real cost. This accelerates people’s pace of functioning, which has repercussions

for children too. There is a trend towards speeding up everyday life, which is also felt in education, especially in early childhood, with more and more play time being compressed in favor of study. Another consequence is crowding the curriculum [33]. Along with this speeding up of education, the relationship between educators, parents, children and the environment in which they work has also changed [34,35].

The global slow education movement was first introduced in the UK and Canada in the 2010s, but has since spread to many countries wanting to talk about the natural pace of children's development and how early education should encourage this. One consequence of living in a society where everything is immediately accessible is that we have lost the ability to wait for nature to take its course [36].

In children's process of discovery and learning, they need to experience the world at their own pace, because true search requires all the time in the world. True search is becoming a really important condition nowadays, especially in early education, encouraging children towards exploration, discovery, and free choice [37,38].

The pedagogical literature discusses many aspects of theoretical foundations, aims, and practical forms [39], which are important in the organization of early education. This approach not only calls for observation, documentation, and interpretation in a personal way by teachers, but also exploration, questioning, and involvement by children.

Our role as educators is to practice slow pedagogy, encouraging child-centered competence. Slow pedagogy is about deep learning, driven by curiosity, passion, and interest, giving children a meaningful experience that respects their natural pace of development and learning.

Using the principles of slow pedagogy, it aims to bring to early education an interactive teaching model based on cooperation and play, respecting each child's natural pace of development and learning, and offering them the freedom to choose and express themselves according to their own needs and interests. The goal is to cultivate both children's sense of responsibility for learning and their innovative spirit, as expressed in play activities. Slow pedagogy has the child in the middle of the activity, around whom the whole instructional-educational process is built. However, it is important to emphasize that educators should have the knowledge and skills to create a learning environment that is suitable for children's development and the world's knowledge, with less learning content and a slow pace of teaching, giving them the possibility to learn at their own natural pace [2].

Slow education theory is a sustainable one because it promotes teachers' deep involvement in instructional activities and gives them the rhythm and meaning of real life so that—by adhering to such a paradigm—we can reconnect with ourselves and others and cultivate the kinds of relationships that will help improve the quality of our lives and our profession [40]. As early as kindergarten, more and more children become overloaded due to extremely diverse and busy schedules, being involved in numerous activities imposed by their parents. All of these tasks steal their playtime, which has been considerably reduced over the last decade to make room for organized kindergarten activities [41]. In addition to the hours spent in kindergarten, parents are pushing their children into more and more extracurricular activities, giving them no time to rest, play, or simply let their imagination roam. They do not have time to be slow [42]. Adults around young children need to understand that they are not small adults, nor do they see the world in the same way they do [8,36].

According to Honore (2005) [43], understanding comes from focusing, comprehension, ruminating, and analyzing a problem in depth. Thinking and internalization involve time and space. It is regarded as a slow process. We can thus deduce that learning is a slow and personal process, which should capture and arouse children's curiosity and the desire to deepen.

Slow pedagogy is itself an approach that calls for sustainability, awareness, and engagement. The working atmosphere imposed by slow pedagogy is stress-free. Proponents of slow pedagogy highlight that this paradigm promotes a collaborative educational en-

vironment with a rich learning experience that leads to a deeper and more sustainable outcome, encouraging child-centered competence.

Slow pedagogy aims to satisfy natural curiosity, enjoy personal discoveries in the learning process, and develop at a natural learning speed. This type of education has allowed children to be constantly and intrinsically motivated: students learn because they want to reach a higher level of knowledge, and teachers have to adapt the learning strategies and process to the needs of the children. In such an environment, children feel relaxed and free to choose what they like to do under the tactful guidance of a teacher, feel curious, and enjoy the process. They can ask questions, express their ideas, and discuss [44].

Tanti (2018) [45] wants to highlight the most important aspects that slow pedagogy brings. A slow state of mind is associated with the idea of awareness. Awareness promotes openness and receptivity, encouraging children to actively engage in everyday life more attentively and meaningfully to satisfy their curiosity. The slow mind acts as a catalyst for questions and inquiries that lead to exploration of the world. This is particularly important at a time when there are no clear answers or solutions. It is important to discover the children's own and natural time because the idea of slowness is associated in literature with deep thinking time.

In this way, learning takes place naturally and according to one's inner rhythm. In terms of the instructional-educational process, it is important to focus our attention on the process itself, not necessarily on the goals to be achieved. Participants in the learning process become more active, not just passive recipients in terms of child-centered competence. Everyone is encouraged to engage in continuous thinking, exploration, and discovery. Slow pedagogy is based on the idea of connecting and asking questions to gain clarity, insight, and knowledge. It also involves collaboration to generate new ideas and initiatives.

Focusing on quick answers and solutions usually lead to a way of thinking based on what is already known. Analyzing the ideas of slow pedagogy, we can state that every educator needs to give children time to delve deeper into the problem, to think more creatively, and to prepare answers. The learning and development process should focus on positive relationships, the needs and interests of the learner, and the need for teaching-learning-assessment strategies to be play-based.

1.3. The Theoretical and Practical Consequences of Child-Centredness from the Perspective of Slow Pedagogy and Constructivist Orientation

Slow pedagogy can be seen as a process that provides children with the opportunity to analyze, assimilate, and then internalize information at their own pace—effective instruction requires time to think, write, read by pictures, research, analyze, and collaborate. An essential criterion of slow pedagogy is reflective learning. Children should be aware of the contents they are learning and how those contents meet what they have already acquired. This leads to conscious learning from early ages. In this way, children will focus their attention and energy on the learning process, not just on the final objectives and products, thus learning will be achieved through child-centered competence.

Recent research shows that the child-centered approach in early education plays a vital role in social-emotional development. This socio-emotional skill is the sine-qua-non for kindergarten performance, with effects and extensions into adult life. It is also recommended that early education teachers participate in in-service training to improve both their pedagogical knowledge and skills, and their attitudes and beliefs about how to teach young children while respecting the natural developmental rhythm of each child [24]. Adapting pedagogical practices according to the developmental level is based on the idea that each child develops at a different pace, and the success of children depends directly on the attitude and preparation of the teacher [36].

According to the Ministerial Order no. 3239/2021 [46], early education in Romania aims to develop the child's personality in a free, integral, and harmonious way by his/her own pace of development and needs. In this context, the goals of early education are

based on a set of statements reflecting expectations of what children should know and be able to do when entering primary education, and furthermore, throughout their entire life, respecting their natural pace of development and learning.

In the current context of behaviors targeted by today's early education, kindergartens need to reconsider their approach to teaching strategies—first and foremost to play—so as to enhance the value of each child, following the development of each and every one at his or her own pace. This increases the child's freedom of expression and exponentially raises the possibility of making discoveries through both the manipulation of various materials, and through exploration and experimentation, with the notable consequence of reaching increasingly abstract levels of the child's thinking.

Slow learning can be seen as a process that takes its time, giving children a chance to analyze, assimilate, and then internalize information at their own pace. In this sense, we can speak of conscious and active learning, in which the learner connects to the learning process, being aware of the personal skills he or she possesses, and is also aware of the information that comes to him or her. According to Carlsen (2022) [39], effective instruction requires time: time to think, write, read, research, analyze, edit, and collaborate. Quality instruction also requires time: time to engage, innovate, experiment, organize, evaluate, and inspire. To encourage effective instruction in early education, educators not only need to be attentive to the particularities of each child and to their individual instructional needs, but they also need to develop action plans that take into account the educational goals pursued, while respecting the individual child's personality and pace. Constructivist teachers prepare daily activities according to the needs, interests, potential, and pace of each individual child. They use play-based strategies from a child-centered perspective that lead to self-directed play, supporting children's abilities to learn and understand their learning. Intrinsically motivated children play because they enjoy it. Intrinsic motivation is rooted in three fundamental psychological needs in children's development (autonomy, task competence, and relating to others during play). Intrinsic motivation often manifests itself as a real interest in doing something, and is closely related to curiosity. Curiosity stimulates children's engagement in kindergarten activities and improves self-directed learning, thus empowering and fostering deep learning, and helps children discover their talents and passions, which should be the central goals of child-centered education from a slow pedagogy perspective [3]. Thus, it is important to stress that a child-centered approach from the perspective of slow pedagogy supports and develops natural curiosity, encourages deep learning, and pushes children to feel intrinsically motivated. Teachers take into account children's interests and comfortable learning speed, stimulating emotional development and cooperation. Learning becomes enjoyable, and children spend more time exploring, investigating, and learning through play.

Our research links two very important paradigms, child-centeredness and slow pedagogy, trying to send a warning signal to all adults involved in the education of children in early education (parents, teachers, managers), making them aware of the danger they might be leading their children into in relation to their future if they try to put more pressure on academic skills from early years when learning through play is essential for language, physical, emotional, social, motor, exploratory, and cognitive development. This idea is also supported by Sahlberg and Doyle [3], who tell us about a study conducted in America on a sample of 343 children who attended three kindergartens with different guidelines: some went to a kindergarten focused on academic skills, others to a kindergarten that encouraged child-initiated learning, and others to a kindergarten with an approach between the two of them. The results of the study demonstrated that those children who were integrated into a play-based program had better academic performance in all areas compared to children who were in more academic programs or situated at the intersection of the two. According to this study, we can agree that faster does not necessarily mean better; children need more play opportunities in and out of kindergarten, play should be based on the child's initiative and intrinsic motivation, and it should take place in a pleasant stress-free environment.

The child-centered approach from the perspective of slow pedagogy gives children the opportunity to choose their own activities, initiate their own play, and self-direct it according to their own interests, needs, and pace. It gives the freedom to explore, investigate, think, find solutions, and communicate without the intervention of the educators, who need to observe the child's intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm during play. The two paradigms, child-centeredness and slow pedagogy, become meaningful through the constructivist orientation, which is the link between them. Therefore, the theoretical and practical implications of child-centeredness from the perspective of slow pedagogy and constructivist orientation are reflected in the groups of children through the teachers' mastery of designing daily activities according to the interests, needs, performance, and pace of each child. Therefore, it is essential to develop continuous professional development programs for educators to understand the principles of the child-centered approach from the perspective of slow pedagogy in order to understand its value. In this process, educators will become mentors for children, empowering them to take control of their learning and become autonomous in their process of discovering the world. Educators need to keep investing in their professional development if they want to adapt to a changing world that needs more and more people equipped with critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills.

We hope that our research will make practitioners aware of the importance of their own development to create a more creative and rewarding learning environment.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

Our research aims to shed light on what slow pedagogy means concerning child-centered education, and to clarify the synergy between the two paradigms through the constructivist orientation, which is the connecting link between the two. Introducing variables in an exploratory way (constructivist orientation, freedom of choice, and situation management in groups of children) indicated to us the relations between the two paradigms and the constructivist orientation. In order to put theoretical notions in a new light, our research aims to demonstrate that the professional competence of child-centeredness, from the perspective of slow pedagogy, respects children's natural pace of development and learning, giving them the chance to discover, explore, be curious, and be enthusiastic and intrinsically motivated. The investigative approach is qualitative and quantitative, and seeks to determine the level of teachers' training in child-centered professional competence from the perspective of slow pedagogy; to discover the degree of difficulty in managing situations in the educational environment, and to identify the characteristics of child-centered professional competence about slow pedagogy.

Our research starts from a set of concrete questions, focused on a purpose and a hypothesis, on which we want to shed light for the benefit of early childhood teachers.

2.1.1. Research Questions

- What effects will the training activities, based on child-centered competence from the perspective of slow pedagogy and constructivist orientation, have on early education teachers?
- To what extent does the degree of knowledge of child-centered competence increase its applicability to slow pedagogy in early education?
- How does child-centered competence influence practices in early education, in respect to children's natural pace of development and learning?

2.1.2. Purpose

This research aimed to assess the incidence of compliance with the principles of slow education from the perspective of the use of child-centered competence in practice through a qualitative, as well as quantitative investigative approach.

2.1.3. Research Objectives

- O1.** *To determine the level of training of teachers involved in the research, from the perspective of child-centered professional competence;*
- O2.** *To determine the degree of difficulty of the participating teachers in managing situations in the educational environment concerning the professional competence of child-centeredness regarding slow pedagogy and constructivist orientation;*
- O3.** *To identify the principles of child-centered competence from the perspective of slow pedagogy and constructivist orientation to improve early childhood practices of the teachers.*

2.1.4. Research Hypothesis

The implementation of training activities based on the development of child-centered and constructivist-oriented professional competence—taking into account the characteristics of slow pedagogy—contributes significantly to increasing the interest of early childhood teachers in reorganizing their teaching activities following the natural pace of development and learning, as well as the interests, needs, and intellectual potential of children.

2.1.5. Variables

Independent variable—in-service education activities based on child-centered competence from the perspective of slow education.

Dependent variables

- Improving, in early childhood teachers, the child-centered professional competence from the perspective of slow education and constructivist orientation.
- Increasing the interest of teachers in early childhood education to reorganize teaching activities according to the natural pace of development and learning, as well as the interests, needs, and intellectual potential of children.

2.2. Participants, Methods and Tools

The target group involved in our endeavor consisted of 376 teachers employed in kindergarten institutions providing early childhood education services in the northwest part of Romania. We used a convenience sampling design based on volunteers because this design involves the inclusion of accessible and available cases in the sample [47]. Another reason for choosing this sampling mode was the fact that the ‘availability of subjects’ was not affected by an aspect that could significantly influence the research objective.

All 376 teachers participating in the empirical study were female, but of different ages, backgrounds, and levels of education; a mandatory criterion was to have a qualification in early childhood education. Before starting the study, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) aspects were taken into account, the teachers were informed about the purpose and duration of the study, and they gave their written consent. The GDPR agreement, according to the EU regulations, law 679/2016 [48], ensures a consistent and high level of protection of individuals, and removes obstacles related to the flow of personal data within the Union, making sure that the level of protection of the rights and freedoms of individuals concerning the processing of such data is equivalent in all member states.

Both qualitative methods (focus group method) and quantitative methods (survey analysis) were used in the research. To map out a coherent approach, we initiated a series of professional collegial discussions with decision makers in early education (inspectors, principals, and methodological teachers who carry out inspections). Discussions were based on a semi-structured interview using child-centeredness and slow pedagogy as the starting point of the research. The purpose of the discussions was to use the results of the research to encourage the practicing of professional competence of child-centeredness from the perspective of slow education in early education. Child-centered competence involves both empirical research and addressing existing literature from the perspective of slow pedagogy and child-centeredness professional competence as well as constructivist orientation.

As described by Gibbs (1997) in her article, we believe that the focus group method is a relevant method to our research, as it was used to obtain useful information about the views and experiences of the participating teachers about their professional competence in child-centeredness from a slow pedagogy perspective [49]. We also aimed to identify the degree of preparation of the educators in the use of child-centeredness competence from the perspective of slow pedagogy, and also to inventory the practices used in Romanian group classrooms in order to improve them by preparing in-service training activities. The working group was part of the total sample of 376 teachers participating in the study. It was further divided into groups of a maximum of 20 people for the efficiency of both the method and the program. The length of the discussions averaged 60 min, with 5–10 min reserved at the end for a questions and answers (Q and A) section and additional clarifications. The main discussion focused on the question: What does child-centered competence mean from the perspective of slow pedagogy in early education? Thus, it was based on the nominal group technique, whereby participants were asked to answer the question individually before sharing their answers and seeking common responses. The focus group was provided with the opportunity to sum up opinions in an unbiased way. Moreover, they participated afterwards in a continuous professional development workshop meant to improve their practice.

The training activities spanned a period of 24 weeks, divided into 38 training activities, two per week in an online format, with the remaining five weeks allocated to data analysis and interpretation. The activities aimed to improve professional competence in child-centeredness from a slow pedagogy perspective, in connection with the constructivist orientation, providing participants with a set of informational and practical resources to clarify what child-centeredness means from a slow pedagogy perspective and what practice should look like from this perspective. The structure of the training workshops included:

- open-ended activities to stimulate ideas through self-directed learning;
- examples of good practice to clarify what child-centeredness means from a slow pedagogy perspective, in connection with the constructivist orientation, by looking at concrete examples;
- videos that included further explanation of the synergy between the two paradigms and the constructivist orientation;
- various supplementary materials (booklets, flyers, ppt, etc.) dedicated to individual study.

Data collected in the research were optimized following this training workshop and participants had the opportunity to clarify their theoretical framework and the implementation of the two associated paradigms.

The survey was used to identify the changes experienced by teachers participating in the training activities, a method which—as Marshall (2005) [50] points out—is useful in data collection even if the target group is geographically dispersed, because the data obtained can be clearly defined and identified. According to Cohen et al. (2017), a survey has several characteristics and is used to scan a broad domain of issues, populations, programs, people, etc. in order to measure or describe generalized characteristics. This method gathers standardized information using the same instruments and questions for all participants, sustains or rejects hypotheses about the target population, gathers data that can be statistically processed, and uses large-scale data that can allow generalizations about given factors or variables [51]. This tool is significant for the purpose, objectives, questions, and hypothesis of our research.

2.3. Instrument

In this study, the survey was used as a valid tool for quantitative research with qualitative implications. According to Patten (2016) [52], survey answers are easy to collect, and the resulting data are easy to analyze, especially if the surveys contain mainly multiple-choice items, as was in our case. At the same time, knowing that responses are anonymous encourages respondents to be honest.

Our research instrument was used and validated on a Romanian sample within an Erasmus+ K2 project with the theme “Child-Centered Competencies for Early Childhood Education and Care”, and the reliability of the scales was checked with Cronbach’s reliability coefficient, each significant scale for our study obtaining high values [53].

We also note that we received the agreement of the project coordinators to use the instrument for our research, which involved a sample of 376 early childhood teachers. The survey consisted of three categories of questions: demographic data of the teachers participating in the study, questions related to both the professional competence framework of child-centeredness from the perspective of slow pedagogy in concordance with the constructivist orientation, and also the importance of continuous professional development. A descriptive question was added to collect qualitative data regarding the degree of applicability of the professional competence of child-centeredness from the perspective of slow pedagogy. The survey was engineered in Google Forms, whereas the empirical data collection comprised of 28 online items. The complexity of the questions was also reflected in the time allocated for completion, with each respondent taking 30–35 min. The survey was designed to fulfil two conditions: avoid inaccurate answers unrelated to the content of the question, and decrease the inefficiency of the administration.

2.4. Demographic Data

The demographics of the 376 teachers participating in the survey are the following: As described in Table 1, the participants in the study ranged in age from 18 years to over 51 years: 0.8% of the teachers were between 18–19 years; 18.4% were between 20–30 years; 30.5% were between 30–41 years; 31.3% were between 41–50, and 19% were over 51 years, the mean age being $M = 3.49$ and $SD = 1.02$. A total of 35.1% of the participants worked in regular-day kindergarten (the group is led by a single teacher with a teaching schedule of 5 h/day), while 64.6% were employed in extended-day kindergarten (the kindergarten is led by two educators who work in alternating shifts, with the 8.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m. time slot being split into 5 h/day each). In terms of the last level of education completed, 6.4% were graduates of the pedagogical high school, 56.7% had a bachelor’s level; 36.4% were at a master’s level, and 0.3% were at a doctoral level.

Table 1. Teachers’ willingness to participate in training activities $N = 376$.

		Sample $n = 376$	Percentage
The importance of professional development	important enough	14	3.7
	important	70	18.6
	very important	292	77.7
Frequency of participation in training courses	once a year	209	55.6
	twice a year	74	19.7
	several times a year	92	24.5
	did not answer	1	0.3

The participants’ desire for training was also investigated, as well as the frequency with which they participate in courses or continuing training activities with the aim of professional development. These aspects were measured with Likert scales, which, according to Joshi et al. (2015) [54], entirely cover a unidimensional trait. Consequently, the importance of professional development was measured with a Likert scale from 1 to 3, where 1 means quite important and 3 means very important. Furthermore, the frequency of attending training courses was measured with a Likert scale from 1 to 3, where 1 means once a year, 2 means twice a year, and 3 means several times a year (Table 1).

To identify the extent of teachers’ participation in forms of in-service training based on the development of child-centered competence from the perspective of slow pedagogy in

the last 5 years, we applied a dual response scale, as shown in Table 2. The majority (69%) of the respondents did not participate in training in the last 5 years.

Table 2. Teachers' participation in training courses in the last 5 years, N = 376.

		Sample n = 376	Percentage
Teachers' participation in training courses in the last 5 years	They did not participate.	261	69.4
	They participated.	115	30.6

According to Table 3, the participants in the study considered online training courses to be effective. This opinion was measured with a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means ineffective and 5 means very effective. As can be seen below, effective, was the most.

Table 3. The opinion of teachers who participated in online training courses N = 376.

		Sample n = 376	Percentage
The effectiveness of courses in the online environment	ineffective	3	0.8
	marginally effective	45	12
	quite effective	115	30.6
	effective	168	44.7
	very effective	43	11.4
	did not answer	2	0.5

The third part of the survey was designed to measure the level of child-centeredness competence, and how this competence can influence early childhood education practices in Romania, respecting the natural developmental rhythm of children in connection with the constructivist orientation. Thus, we chose 3 Likert scales relevant to our study. To measure the first independent variable, we used a survey that approximates the difficulty of teachers in managing situations in the educational environment. This is rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very important, and 5 means not important, with 4 items comprised. An example of an item is "Managing resources". Cronbach's reliability coefficient = 0.85, which indicates a high reliability of the four items' scores [53].

The second independent variable (constructivist orientation) was measured with a survey consisting of 4 items, and rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very important, and 5 means not important at all. An example of an item is "Supporting children in exploration, play and investigation activities". The reliability coefficient of the four items' scores is Cronbach's = 0.98, which is an excellent score [53].

The dependent variable (the freedom of children to choose activities according to their needs and interests) was measured with a 7-item survey, rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means total agreement, and 7 means total disagreement. An example of an item is "I see children as unique individuals." The coefficient of score fidelity, Cronbach's = 0.76, indicates a fairly high score of fidelity for the seven item score [53].

3. Results

The data were analyzed with SPSS 29. To test the hypothesis (Conducting training activities based on the development of child-centered professional competence—taking into account the characteristics of slow pedagogy—contributes significantly to an increased interest of early childhood teachers in reorganizing teaching activities by the natural developmental pace, as well as the interests, needs and intellectual potential of children), we used both Spearman correlations that assessed all associations between the variables of the research hypothesis, and multiple hierarchical regressions which pointed out that the constructivist orientation is the link between the two paradigms, child-centeredness and slow pedagogy.

Statistical analysis, described in Table 4, demonstrates that there was a moderate positive correlation between the child-centeredness skill level variables and the importance of professional development, $r = 0.21, p < 0.001$, and that there was a marginally significant correlation between the child-centeredness skill level variables and the effectiveness of online training workshops, $r = 0.14, p < 0.005$. Additionally, the two variables mentioned below were in a moderate positive correlation: the importance of professional development correlated with both the level of child-centered competence ($r = 0.21, p < 0.001$) and the effectiveness of online workshops ($r = 0.22, p < 0.001$); the frequency of training participation correlated significantly and moderately with the effectiveness of online training ($r = 0.20, p < 0.001$); effectiveness of online training correlated significantly and moderately with both the importance of professional development ($r = 0.22, p < 0.001$) and the frequency of training participation ($r = 0.20, p < 0.001$).

Table 4. Spearman correlations between increasing the level of child-centered competence and teachers' attitude towards professional development—the significant correlations are presented.

Variables		1	2	3	4
1	The level of child-centered competence	1			
2	The importance of professional development	0.226 ***	1		
3	The frequency of participation in training courses	0.092 ***	0.176 ***	1	
4	The efficiency of online courses	0.147 ***	0.229 ***	0.204 ***	1

*** level $p < 0.001$.

In the second part of the analysis, we used multiple linear regressions to highlight the predictions emerging from the statistical data, described in Tables 5 and 6. Below, it describes the data in Table 5. According to the results, the first model—in which we introduced the importance of professional development as an independent variable—explains 29% of the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.29, F(1371) = 20.008, p < 0.001$). Thus, the importance of professional development positively and significantly predicts the level of child-centeredness competence from the perspective of slow pedagogy ($R^2 = 0.29, p < 0.001$). The variable frequency of participation in continuous professional development training is not a significant predictor of child-centeredness frequency level.

The third model, in which we also added the effectiveness of online training courses as an independent variable, explains 8% of the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.08, F(3369) = 8.131, p < 0.001$), which means that the effectiveness of online training courses positively and marginally significantly predicts the level of child-centeredness competence ($R^2 = 0.08, p < 0.07$). All variables together predict 24.9% of the variation in the dependent variable, $\beta = 0.08, p = 0.07$.

Table 5. Multiple linear regression.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.41 (0.35)	0.35 (0.35)	0.23 (0.36)
The importance of professional development	0.22 (0.07)	0.21 *** (0.07)	0.19 *** (0.07)
The frequency of participation in training courses		0.05 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
The efficiency of online courses			0.09 (0.04)
N	376	376	376
R^2	0.05	0.05	0.06
Adj R^2	0.04	0.04	0.05
Resid. Sd	0.73	0.73	0.73

*** level $p < 0.001$.

Table 6. Multiple linear regression.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	2.01 (0.07)	2.23 (0.09)	2.19 (0.16)
Constructivist orientation	−0.02 *** (0.04)	0.12 *** (0.05)	0.11 *** (0.06)
The difficulty of teaching staff to manage different situations		−0.22 (0.06)	−0.22 (0.06)
The freedom offered to children to choose their activities			0.01 (0.07)
N	376	376	376
R ²	0.00	0.02	0.03
Adj R ²	−0.00	0.02	0.02
Resid. Sd.	0.75	0.74	0.74

*** level $p < 0.001$.

In Table 6, we investigated the three variables for exploratory purposes in order to discover whether there are connections between constructivist orientation, freedom given to children in choosing activities and difficulty in managing situations in the educational environment, and what the interrelation is with child-centeredness. We introduced in the regression analysis as independent variables the constructivist orientation, the difficulty of teachers in managing situations in the educational environment, and the freedom offered to children in terms of choosing activities. As a dependent variable, we took into consideration the level of child-centered competence. According to the results, as reflected in the theoretical foundation, constructivist orientation positively and marginally significantly predicts the level of child-centered competence, $Beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.10$; the difficulty in managing educational situations negatively and significantly predicts the level of child-centered competence $Beta = -0.22$, $p < 0.001$. The freedom offered to children to choose their activities is a positive but insignificant predictor of the level of child-centered competence. According to the results of the analysis, we can deduce that all educators with a constructivist orientation give children the possibility to choose their activities, and prepare the educational activities in accordance with the interests, needs, performance, and natural pace of development and learning of children. Furthermore, as can be observed in the analysis, these constructivist teachers do not have problems in managing situations in the educational environment; the use of child-centeredness from the perspective of slow pedagogy is successfully implemented.

The correlations described in Table 6 highlight the fact that the level of child-centered competence from the perspective of slow pedagogy increases with the importance of professional development for each teacher, which is reflected in the frequency of participation in training courses, even online. Significant to our research is the fact that teachers appreciated the quality of the activities carried out online, noting that they realized the value of child-centered competence from the perspective of slow pedagogy for children's development and learning. The investigation of these three variables: constructivist orientation, freedom given to children in the choice of activities, and difficulty in managing situations in the educational environment, for exploratory purposes, revealed that the constructivist orientation is closely related to the two paradigms, child-centeredness and slow pedagogy, this being the connector between the two. Moreover, the constructivist orientation and the freedom of children to choose their activities make the two paradigms of child-centeredness and slow pedagogy function along the direction given by Piaget and Vigotski, the fathers of cognitive and social constructivism.

This aspect is very important for future investigations, and we recommend further research in this regard to identify other important aspects for the synergy of the two paradigms: child-centeredness and slow pedagogy.

According to these results, we can conclude that the training workshop, based on the action plan for the child-centered approach, can positively influence the improvement of the

professional competence of child-centeredness from the perspective of slow pedagogy, and increase the capacity of teachers to individualize children's learning at their natural pace of development and learning, in connection with the constructivist orientation of educators. It can also be deduced that all the educators with a constructivist orientation have improved their child-centered competence, and that teachers give children the freedom to choose activities from the educational offers according to their needs, suggesting that they have increased their ability to respect the natural developmental pace of children as a result of the training.

4. Discussion

The results show that the participants consider professional development essential, realizing that only by increasing the frequency of participation in training activities—even online—will they experience a significant increase in child-centered competence from a slow pedagogy perspective, in connection with the constructivist orientation. Furthermore, our research highlights that only teachers with a constructivist orientation will be able to enrich the educational offers and individualize learning, giving children the freedom to choose activities according to their needs, interests, and potential, an idea also supported by other researchers such as Mills (2007), Edwards (2005), and Hedges (2000) [12,29,55].

Thus, we want to raise the alarm to all decision-makers involved in early education to see the positive effects on children if we give them the chance to respect their natural pace of development and learning while pointing out the possible risks that will exist if we do not choose to slow down the accelerated pace, in relation to the development and learning of children in early education.

During the research, there was a growing interest among the participants to better understand not only what child-centered professional competence means from a slow pedagogy perspective, in connection with the constructivist orientation, but also what educational practices based on such competence look like.

The educators who participated in the study started to introduce this approach in their groups—child-centeredness from the perspective of slow pedagogy in connection with the constructivist orientation in order to transform the educational environment into a more rewarding setting that facilitates play-based activities and encourages active learning according to Hedge (2000) [29]. In this study, the researcher notes that educators need to be aware of their role in facilitating and extending children's learning in early education; to be well-informed about new pedagogical practices. Additionally, they must be enthusiastic teachers willing to extend their own knowledge and have the ability to reflect on the organization of the instructional process, managing to maintain a balance between learning through play and teaching through play [29]. From the perspective of self-determination theory, it is important to underline that adopting teaching styles that support autonomy has a beneficial effect on both teachers [56] and children [57].

This opens a new direction for action, laying the groundwork for future training courses in the case of early childhood teachers that will bring strategies and examples of good practice for implementing the principles advocated. We hope that in the future, existing curriculum policies will consider our findings that the pace should be slowed down and more emphasis should be placed on teaching and learning through play, in all its forms.

We aim for the results of our study to gain momentum, and in the future to have more and more kindergartens in which pedagogical practices are mirrored in these two paradigms, in connection with the constructivist orientation.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study may bring major changes in educational practices in early childhood education. Participating teachers are aware of the child-centered educational environment's role in developing the child's personality, especially when considering the child's natural growth rate.

The results of our research are also confirmed by Brayfield et al., (2011) who argue that the harmonious development of young children requires a holistic approach that incorporates developmental domains and educational practices based on play, the latter being proposed according to the natural pace of development and learning, as well as the interests, needs, and potential of children, giving them the freedom to choose independently and autonomously [58]. It can also be inferred that all teachers who have a constructivist orientation have improved their child-centered competence, and teachers who offer children the freedom to choose activities from the proposed educational offers according to their needs suggest that they have increased their ability to respect children's natural pace of development learning.

When the approach to instruction is based on the principles of slow pedagogy, the teachers' attention, thoughtfulness, and responsiveness increase so that instructional decision-making will be based on a rational approach that will support children in gradually adhering to those values that will enable them to live a happy life [59].

Our research stands out for the synergy of the two paradigms, child-centeredness and slow pedagogy, which become functional in connection with the constructivist orientation. The professional competence of child-centeredness from the perspective of slow pedagogy emphasizes the importance of respecting the natural rhythm of each child, and focuses on their needs, aspirations, desires and individuality, so that children develop harmoniously and holistically. This approach is also supported by the Waldorf pedagogy, according to the results of a study conducted by Attfield (2022). He argues that this pedagogy is feasible, according to the holistic philosophy of education, which acknowledges the natural development of children as a full nurturing of children during early childhood [60]. According to the results obtained by us and other researchers who were mentioned in our study, we say that earlier is not better, and replacing play with academic activities does not guarantee that later children's performance will be better.

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