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THE ROLE OF THE INTEGRATED, THEMATIC PROJECT TO LEARNING PROGRESS OF THE CHILD IN THE EARLY PERIOD

Aida Cornelia Stoian

Assistant Professor, PhD, University of Craiova, Romania

Abstract

In this study, we have proposed to present you the results of an empirical research in order to identify the positive aspects of the integrated, thematic project in learning progress of children in preschool. Using the observation method, we analyzed children's results regarding the objectives in the respect to the objectives in the grid. Children's progress in learning represents the confirmation and affirmation of the role of this integrated, thematic project in supporting the early learning child.

Keywords: integrated project, learning progress of the child, alternative methods, interdisciplinarity, constructivist strategies

JEL Classification: I20, I21

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1 INTRODUCTION

The psycho – philosophical basis structure in the manner of educational integrated approaches is the holism, in fact – the attempt to conceive a fully integrated unit of information that can lose their sequential features. This approach facilitates the inclusion of special knowledge in logical assemblies that exceed quantitative but also qualitative the characteristics of curricular divisions.

Children are offered chains or suite of integrated themes depending on the educational objectives or in relation to their interests and skills.

The integrated curriculum is the expression of the way in which we can see the child development and we can also think of its learning. "Integrated curriculum involves creating meaningful connections between themes or skills that are usually made piece meal in different disciplines. These themes and skills have a strong connection to the everyday life of children and aim directly or indirectly to contribute to the formation of some values and attitudes" (Ciolan, 2003).

All the development areas are interrelated and interdependent. The development in a field conditioned the development in other areas. Although the curriculum is structured into curriculum areas by setting and refference objectives, it aims to develop the whole child, the objectives between curriculum areas being related with each other and also with the development areas.

Knowledge, skills, developed abilities by each curricular area, are closely correlated and they become more solid when learning activities are carried through interdisciplinary themes, when the activities are made connecting the knowledge, skills, abilities in different areas of development.

Thematic studies and projects are integration practices to what children learn in the educational process. So, children are required to learn significantly. "Cross – curricular themes" are studying integrated themes that focuses on personal and social development of the children. These themes have a transversal character, they reach beyond the boundaries of traditional school subjects and they propose some skills training or some fundamental values for the every day life. To be introduced successfully in school, cross – curricular themes requires creating of diverse learning experiences and the experimentation of learning acquisitions in concrete and varied context (Ciolan, 2008).

In the early education, integrated teaching and learning signifies the way in which the teacher integrates several areas of experiential contents, exploiting the resources of many activity centers in order to achieve many reference objectives. The

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integrated approach of teaching provides stimulating children in several areas of development, paying equal attention to all of them.

Integrated activities are conducted alternating the modalities of work organization: frontal, in groups and also individual, depending on content, age and individual particularities of children and time of the day.

The trans-disciplinary approach proposes the interplay of several areas from the perspective of the genesis of a new field of knowledge. This trans-disciplinary approach capitalizes and proposes higher level skills, conceived and designed in a constructivist way.

Constructivist pedagogy follows the child stimulating participation in the development of knowledge. Children build their own understanding. Teaching means self – support in learning. The concepts shouldn't be taught directly, but teacher can help the child to build his own concepts. Transmission of information should not become an end in itself, but it should remain an incentive offer and to differentiate their own cognitive structures. The teacher works together with his children not to deliver ideas, but to guide their constructive effort.

Constructivists especially propose and support the following pedagogical strategies: experiments, projects, solving the global and significant problems, the simulation, collaborative learning strategies that emphasize the tie opinions and negotiate meanings (Honebein, Duffy & Fishman, 1993; Jonassen, 1991; Duffy & Cunningham, 1996), the establishment of learning communities, including open communities – interviews with experts, methods inspired from the cognitive – apprenticeship concepts (Collins, Brown & Newman, 1989) "intentional learning" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1989); constructivists are opting for a continuous assessment, they use a variety of measurements, avoiding the criterial assessments, promoting the evaluations in real context and counting on measuring and assessing of high level competences; there are used especially the following assessment methods: portofolios, projects, group discussions, public themes presentations, the development of some detailed plans for work projects; the assessment is focused on the construction process of knowledge.

"The project can also be determined by the teacher or by his children depending on their interests. It is usually conducted in group (made of four or five participants, each of them having a precise task to do), through it, children can prove that they have the ability to investigate a particular subject, using methods, different instruments and knowledge in different domains (interdisciplinary approach) (Stoian, 2015).

The project - a complex activity that appreciates the detailed learning and highlights certain qualities of children. It involves an activity which takes place outside the classroom that has a motivator role for children.

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M. Stanciu (2003) distinguis hes these difining aspects of the project:

- unlike the investigation, it is more complex;
- it addresses interdisciplinary learning approaches;
- the title of the project may be a teacher's proposal, but also children can make other proposals;
- it can be continued outside the classroom and outside the kinder garden;
- the finalization of the project takes place in the classroom by exposing the results and also the products.

The project method assesses different capacities as: selecting the correct working methods and bibliography, the correct dosage of working material and of used equipments, identifying an adequate solution, how to organize the modality of organizing the material, the way of presenting the material and the clarity of figures.

Advantages:

- The child is determined to conduct researches and also to act;
- It develops children's creativity;
- It motivates the child, increasing his self-esteem;
- It develops the anticipatory thinking;
- It allows the development of some specific techniques which are used in teaching;
- It determines the development of some techniques in the elaboration of a scientific or practical work.

Limits:

- It reduces the teacher's role;
- It requires some time to do the organization activities and also the assessment activities;
- Children can develop poor concentration as a result of low interest for the project's theme or due to their long effort (Stoian, 2016).

The integrated project method is a learning and assessing strategy which is focused on the deliberate research effort of the child on the whole detection and understanding of the subject, it contributes to practice learning by cooperation.

This approach has an increased efficiency in raising children's motivation and stimulating their superior operations of thinking, because project based learning is at the same time a research action and also a practical action.

The project is an interactive method of teaching learning that implies a micro research or a systematic investigation of a subject which has a big interest for children.

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Project based learning involves collecting of information, processing and synthesizing information, interpretation and personal reflection and cooperation in solving the tasks.

William Heard Kilpatrick (1918) published the study regarding the project based learning which was taken in different formulas by the education sciences on a large scale. The benefits of the integrated project approach for children derive from the following considerations: the active involvement of children in learning process, children build themselves the learning process, working with ideas, knowledge and conceptions that they have already possessed, they are encouraged to freely express their opinion in the context of respect for each other, recognizing and accepting in this way the big diversity of the world, of the opinions and ideas, valuing their own abilities and interests, cultivating creativity and communication competences, becoming partners in the teacher education act.

The advantages of integrated teaching strategies are recognized by comprehensive knowledge of the variety of experience promoted by children who processed differently aspects of reality which gravitates around a central explanatory idea.

The integrated approaches propose interactivity, interconnections, juxtapositions of meaning and interests, learning styles, encouraging the promoting of some understanding broad prospects of reality and also to know its reality.

The effective methods are best seen in the participation of students in the learning process, it is studied into consideration their activation, being understood as a condition sine qua non of increasing school efficiency.

In this project we are proposing the following objectives:

1. The registration of preschoolers' progress in expressing curiosity and interest for the environmental elements because of their integrated thematic projects;
2. Children's development initiative in the activities in which they are involved for the educational projects;
3. Preschoolers' development perseverance in fulfilling their tasks even if they find some difficulties;
4. The strengthen of imagination and creativity in daily activities because of their integrated, thematic projects;

The general hypothesis of this research is:

If we use the integrated thematic project in preschool educational activities, then children's results will record an evident progress, as a response to the method efficiency.

2 METHODOLOGY

The sample

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The research project was represented by 31 children, between 5 and 6 years old from the „ Magic Cottage" kinder garden from Craiova.

Methods and instruments

As methods and results processing tools were used: methods of graphical representation of the research results with the help of IBM-SPPS program. The qualitative interpretation methods have consisted in: identifying the differences between post-test and pre-test, establishing the concomitant variation, the relation between variables, analyzing the compliance, the content analysis of responses. To study the relation between phenomena, we will consider into account the influences associating and covariance.

To determine the extent to which the interdisciplinary thematic project method can produce the increase of children's education performance from preschool education, we propose to analyze some complete progress worksheets from the large group.

In these progress worksheets, teachers have recorded the development level in September at the beginning of school year, of some different stated objectives in March, at the beginning of the second semester and in all this time we've used more often in the current evaluation but also in learning activity, the interdisciplinary project method.

3 RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis of the variables progress worksheet for the large group. The distribution of results of all 31 children from the large group, to the variables which represent the followed competences, is an unimodal distribution (module 1- for some variables, 0 for the others), simetrical (with a Skewness value smaller than the significance threshold, p=1,96), the Skewness obliquity coeficient for all variables has got values between 95% (-0,42x2; +0,42x2), so (-0,84; +0,84) and mesokurtic. For children's distribution results from September, Kurtosis coefficient is situated at a threshold of significance smaller than1,69; children's distribution results from March is mesokurtic with some tendencies toward platykurtic, because it respects the condition as the Skewness value to be smaller than the threshold significance (p=1,96), but it is not situated at a confidence interval of 95% (-0,82x2;+0,82x2), so (-1,64;+1,64).

We can easily conclude that the distribution of children's platicurtica results from March shows us a higher degree of heterogeneity scores, the results being very spread from the medium. This fact does not worry us, because of children's monitoring performance we do not intend to realize a Gaussian classification, but we want to record

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the progress or regress in learning after applying the project method of evaluation. Also this spread of results around average, it is due to the fact that we've proposed scalar variables, we've also designed ordinal variables specifying the three levels (unrealized, realized in progress and realized).

Those mentioned above, the amplitude of the two scores of our distribution between a minimum of "1" and a maximum of "2", determine us to prefer statistic tests for nonparametric data.

Taking into consideration all these elements, we can notice that the obtained scores by the 31 subjects are normally distributed in the variables to identify children's learning progress from the large group.

Monitoring the learning performances in the large group recorded in the worksheets

The investigation of children's progress in learning from the large group followed the development of the objectives in "Developing skills and attitudes learning" domain. So, the respondent teacher registered the level of achievement of each reference objective from monitoring worksheet from September as a result of initial assessments.

It followed a training program using very often during the class the integrated, thematic project method. In March, at the beginning of the second semester it recorded the children's progress or regress in learning, relating to the same objectives.

Each objective was defined by a variable receiving as values the achievement levels: "unrealized = 0", "realized in progress = 1" and "realized = 2".

We present you in a comparative way the obtained results from September, at the beginning of school year, with those from March. So, we can notice that the standard: "Expressing curiosity and interest for the elements from the environment" is verified through three objectives.

The first objective referred to is "Formulating questions to the changes around them"; if in September 10 of these children haven't done this objective and 21 of them are in progress to do it, in March we can notice the learning progress, so 13 are in progress to do it and 18 children have done/realized the objective of formulating questions about the changes around.

The second objective is "Expressing the preferences during the activities"; if in September 10 of these children haven't done this objective and 21 of them were in progress to do it, in March we can notice an obviously progress, so 13 are in progress to do it, and 18 children have done the objective of expressing choices and preferences during the activities.

The third objective is "Choose and do an activity that fits to their interests"; if in September 20 of children haven't done this objective and 11 were in progress to do it, in

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March we can notice the learning progress, so 11 children are in progress to do it and 20 children have done the objective of choose and do an activity that fits to their interests.

So, we can notice the verifying standard: "The manifestation initiative during the activities" by four objectives.

The first objective is: "They assume responsabilities"; if in September 20 of children haven't done this objective and 11 were in progress to do it, in March we can notice a big progress, so 11 of children are in progress to do it and 20 of children have done this objective to formulate questions about changes around.

The second objective is: "Exploring the environment using different strategies", if in September 12 of children haven't done this objective and 19 of them were in progress to do it, in March we can notice a big progress, so 11 are in progress to do it and 20 of children have done the objective to explore the environment by different strategies.

The third objective is "Performing an activity plan"' if in September 21 of children haven't done this objective and 10 were in progress to do it, in March we can notice the learning progress, so 12 of children are in progress to do it and 19 succeeded to perform the objective to project an activity plan.

The fourth objective is "Make an activity plan"; if in September 12 of children haven't done this objective and 19 were in progress to do it, in March we can notice the learning progress, so 13 of children are in progress to do it and 18 were doing the objective to do an activity plan.

The third standard refers to "The manifestation of the perseverance in completing the task, even if they get some difficulties.

The first objective follows: "Maintaining the concentration on a task, question, set of indications or interactions despite all the distractions and interruptions: if in September 19 of children haven't done this objective and 12 were in progress to do it, in March 12 of children were in progress to do it and 19 of children have done the objective to maintain the concentration on a task.

The second objective is: "They adapt their behaviour according to the external requests, continuing their activity": if in September 18 of children haven't done this objective and 13 were in progress to do it, in March 8 of children were in progress to do it, and 23 of children have done the objective to answer the extern requests.

The third objective: "Completing a task that is taking place out in succeeding stages: if in September 10 of children haven't done this objective and 21 of children were in progress to do it, in March we can notice a progress, so 8 of children were in progress to do it, and 23 of children have done the objective to fulfill a task.

The fourth standard refers to "The manifestation of imagination and creativity in daily activities".

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The first objective follows that the pupil to "introduce new elements in the known activities": if in September 20 of children haven't done this objective and 11 were in progress to do it, in March 12 of children were in progress to do it and 19 of children have done the objective to integrate what they have already learnt.

The second objective verifies if the child "uses and correlates strategies in unusual ways to investigate and solve problems". If in September 19 of children haven't done this objective and 12 of children were in progress to do it, in March 13 of children were in progress to do it and 18 of children have done the objective to use and correlate strategies in unusual ways to investigate and solve problems.

The third objective is "Create games, situations"; if in September 21 of children haven't done this objective and 10 of them were in progress to do it, in March 11 of children were in progress to do it and 20 of children have done the objective to create games, situations.

The fourth objective follows "Changing the content of some known stories and introducing new characters created by them". If in September 19 of children haven't done this objective and 12 were in progress to do it, in March 11 of children were in progress to do it and 20 of children have done the objective to change the content of some known stories and to introduce characters created by them.

4 CONCLUSIONS

So, we realized the scientific fundamentation of the project's method, referring to integrated, thematic project, we presented the importance of this form of evaluation and of its formative valences, by systematizing and shaping epistemological, theoretical and methodological premises in the literature; and also the role of formative function of the thematic project to contribute to the child's individual progress by achieving and developing some abilities and competences to sustain its learning motivation.

Using these projects as alternative methods determines a representative evolution from the "testing culture" to the "appreciation culture" (Manolescu, 2004). The testing culture performs measures by objective and semiobjective items. The appreciation culture is using alternative methods, open items making a qualitative assessment.

The evaluation is a complex process, with multiple dimensions, which have the role to identify children's learning progress, and not to quantify their results.

Integrated, thematic projects have the role to determine the child to learn motivating him.

The co-participation of preschool child to his own formation add an original and creative coefficient from teacher, which is, as Neacşu arguments: "the real personalization of teaching competence" (Neacşu, 1990).

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