LEARNING THROUGH PLAY – A FUNDAMENTAL ACTIVITY IN EARLY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Playing is the most simple and efficient way to achieve learning in toddlers and young children. Playing is a transposition of real life based on the transfiguration of reality, the processing of the child's aspirations, tendencies, wishes. Playing is a dominant activity at this age, which is seen in how it polarizes the other activities in the child's life, in it duration and weight, in its efficiency, as playing is the activity that causes the most significant changes in a child's psychology.

The purpose of this paper is to provide information on the concepts of learning and play, as well as the ratio between them.

This study aims at analysing how children's games become an efficient learning solution in toddlers and young children. The observation method lay at the basis of the research, resulting in the analysis of the behaviours of twenty children, aged 3-4 years old, from the Casuta Fermecata Kindergarten, in terms of their play.

Keywords: play, learning, teaching-oriented play, adults' role in playing, stimulating learning through play.

Introduction

The research undertaken by Jean Piaget and Gaston Bachelard in psychology and genetic epistemology lay at the basis of the development of theories related to children's learning. Through his investigations, Jean Piaget put the foundations of a functional model in terms of intelligence development. He reached the conclusion that one cannot talk of knowledge resulting from a mere registration and storage of observations, without considering a structure to be assigned to the subject's activities.

Piaget's theory revealed two fundamental aspects related to intelligence

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development: the stages of a child's development and the construction of knowledge through the subject's interaction with the environment.

Learning in toddlers and young children is closely related to development and does not refer only to the act of learning in teaching activity, but also to the child's acquisitions in all the phases of his/her development.

In young ages, a child's fundamental activity is playing, which is the most natural means through which children learn about the environment and develop properly. Moreover, playing is a way to express emotions and feelings.

"Playing is a basic activity in kindergartens and includes all areas of activity, undertaking the learning process in an attractive, engaging manner, that is easily assimilated by the child" (Bocos, 2002; our translation). Playing is an open school, with a programme as rich as life. By playing, future is anticipated and prepared. Playing is even thought to fulfil, in the life of a 3-8 year-old child, the same part as work for adults. It is a child's specific way to assimilate his/her work and develop. There is a mutual relationship between play and work, as "play is the natural path leading to work, to discipline, to group activities" (Schiopu, 1970; our translation). Only those who are aware of play in a child's life may easily understand how efficient it is to use it in the educational process.

In pre-school children, learning (acquiring new knowledge, as well as developing skills and abilities) mainly deals with the attractiveness, the pleasant nature of the activity. For this very reason, learning and play elements should be combined at this age, which is done through a specific form of pre-school activity – didactic play. This activity combined play and the children's serious work. Playing fulfils a range of functions, such as: the knowledge function – by playing, a child learns the features of the environment; the formative-educational function – playing helps educate a range of features of the child's character, skills, abilities and attitudes, as well as social life; the entertaining function – play provides the child with a pleasant way to learn and spend spare time; the movement function – playing contributes to a proper development of the body (Cretu, 2001).

As any activity, play includes various components, which proves its formative nature: the purpose of playing is given by the objectives envisaged in the educational activity; the content of the play refers to the skills and abilities children need to fulfil their tasks; the task is the child's effective action in the development of the game, so as to result in the fulfilment of the envisaged goal. In other words, the task is a problem children must solve by means of their knowledge and skills; playing rules are required, as they explain how children should play (Verza, 2000).

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Learning is an activity that aims at changing the children's behaviour, with a view to integrating them in social life. From a teaching-oriented point of view, learning is defined as the acquisition of experience or gain of knowledge, the development of abilities, skills, competences and behaviours.

In pre-school children, learning is intermediated and simplified by the presence of play. The following elements must be taken into account in order to ensure a pleasant atmosphere: the child's experience and needs to play, the children's social relations, the respect for the child's identity and personality, as well as providing a favourable climate for the activity to be developed.

Work is a form of activity implying the existence of a clearly stated goal, a minimum effort for the young child, which culminates in the attainment of results. As for young children, work is simple and accessible, according to the particularities of the age.

The types of play of children are closely related to their cognitive development phases, according to Piaget's theory. Thus, until 2 years old, most types of play are manipulative, from 2 to 7 years play is mostly symbolic, while games with rules correspond to concrete operations from 7 years old (Vrajmas, 2006).

Depending on who initiates the play, two types of symbolic plays can be distinguished:

Free play is the play used by a child along a day. Irrespective of the objects s/he uses and the movements s/he makes during playing, these actions are agreeable to him/her and no one imposes them. Thus, s/he learns many things on the environment, on the effects of his/her actions, on what is allowed and not allowed.

Teaching-oriented play is play resulting in the performance of learning goals and tasks, using an accessible content, attractive and recreational means of organisation and development.

Teaching-oriented play aims at reaching educational goals, and it is only initiated by adults. It combines instructive and formative elements with entertainment and may be used in teaching various subjects. Teaching-oriented play may be sensorial, logical and mathematical, for orientation, creation, role plays, motor skills-oriented, etc. It helps "use the recreational adaptive goals of human activity, in general, in terms of education, at certain moments of its ontogenetic evolution in particular" (Cristea, 1998).

Games with rules may be established both by children and by adults. At an early age, games with rules are frequently invented by children, and they are mostly based on competition in the case of young children.

Construction games are games through which a child practises skills and

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capacities resulting in cognitive and muscle development. By means of construction games, children perform sorting, grouping, association, matching and correlation-based activities. Children build with the help of various materials: wooden cubes, lego, clay, stone. By means of these games, children establish causal relations between objects (small-big, light-heavy, thick-thin).

Movement games are based on certain rules, aiming at reinforcing motor skills such as walking, running, throwing, jumping, balancing, catching and climbing. In choosing games, the allocated time, the relevant age, the requirements have to be taken into account. Likewise, movement games may also take place outdoors.

Play, learning and activities are highly important in the development of psychological processes, as well as in the development of toddlers' and young children's personality.

In childhood, games occupy a central part in the children's life. Thus, games are the most satisfactory way in which they manifest their need for activity.

By means of games, children accumulate a lot of knowledge on the environment. At the same time, their psychological processes of reality reflection are highly developed: representation, imagination, perceptions, memory, language and thinking. By manipulating objects during playing, a child may distinguish notions such as size, colour, shape, weight.

Games also are a means to develop emotions and social-moral feelings. Feelings such as solidarity and friendship develop by taking part in collective games. "As a whole, the entire psychological life of a child is involved in a game, resulting in his/her humanisation and socialisation, in his/her proper psychological and physical development" (Mitrofan & Ene, 2010).

In the case of games, the educative influence of education is more efficient than in other teaching activities. Games may be a dominant strategy in young children.

Henri Wallon said that "games are a child's specific activity", that, actually, "games overlap his/her entire activity as long as they remain spontaneous and educational disciplines do not impose objectives". According to Ch. Buhler, "games would a step in the total evolution of a child, decomposed, in turn, in successive periods" (Cretu, 2001).

Research assumption:

If play is used in teaching activities, we exert a positive influence on the young children's interest in curricular activities and, implicitly, we improve their outcomes through an integrated approach of learning activities, resulting in an enhanced educational output of young children.

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Methodology

The sample

The research sample includes 20 toddlers from the 3-4 years group of the Casuta Fermecata Kindergarten in Craiova. The research was undertaken during 4 months, September 20, 2016 – January 20, 2017.

Methods

In order to achieve our goal, we have used the following research methods: the observation method, pedagogical experiment, the test method, the product analysis method.

Outcomes of the research

The children's progress is visibly significant between the initial and the final phase. Teaching-oriented play provides the teacher with the opportunity of reaching significant goals related to both the formative and the informative aspects in the development of young children's personalities.

The contribution of teaching-oriented play is clear, as well as the importance of using interactive methods in developing communication skills, memory, imagination and logical thinking, which is very important at an early age.

Every child is born with a specific adaptive equipment which develops and improves under the influence of environmental stimuli, provided that the influences of the factors involved in a child's evolution are unitary and continuous.

Teachers at various levels of education must be aware of the quality of the processed product, so that specific educational activities favour the child's adaptation and integration in the new environment, with no major difficulties.

Step I: pre-test

All investigated subjects were subject to a pre-test, consisting of:

Measuring their mental age by applying the Goodenough test. The tool was applied in order to equalize the two groups (the experimental group and the control group).

Testing language development by applying the Verbal Scale of the Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children III, including the following sub-tests: information, similarities, arithmetic, vocabulary, comprehension.

In order to establish the influence of play on the formative properties of learning, docimological tests were applied for language and mathematical

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education. The following conditions were observed when drawing up items for the early education level: a (low) number of items; items suitable to the children's level in terms of difficulty; items matching the requirements of the pre-school educational curriculum; items dealing with the children's capacity of applying certain contents in a different context; establishing the method to quantify and assess results.

Step II – intervention – consisted of a systematic application of teaching-oriented play for various integrated activities within the experimental group, for 12 weeks (during December, January, February, March), while the control group undertook activities without applying this systematic learning method.

In step III – post-test – we no longer applied the Goodenough test, as it acted to equalize the used groups at the pre-test. For language development testing we applied the same trial as during the pre-test. For docimological trials, parallel forms of the tests applied during pre-testing were used, with a view to cancelling the test learning effect.

In our study, we presented play as a central element in educational strategy in terms of integrated curriculum. We proved that it is a learning tool in early ages, which helps stimulate relational life, accept and valorise differences between individuals and, especially, develop the child's personality through integrated activities.

The outcomes achieved by the children confirm the assumption. We assessed that the pre-schoolers' cognitive capacities are developed in all kindergarten-specific types of activities.

The assumption of this work was a starting point. We underlined both the children's right to play, and how we act. We adapted, chose and alternated play time and space, play types and we organised suitable environments for the deployment of every game.

We attempted for any new notion we studied or analysed by "playing" not to seem unapproachable; on the contrary, everything was accessible due to play.

Teaching-oriented play may help build the foundation of a child's personality, who becomes capable for social and school integration.

Along the presented games, we involved the children in various experiences of action, representations, relations, integrated in various contents. The action includes organised teaching activity, plays, assessment and social interaction.

Each phase in an individual's development corresponds to states of maximum receptiveness for certain fields.

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Teachers must identify the contents and issues with a major impact on the development of a young child's personality.

The presented ideas are not new, and the issue of integrated curriculum, of integrated curricular activities remains open; this is also seen in the large number of proposed theories, which mutually support or oppose one another.

In Piaget's point of view, a dynamic balance between the assimilation of school requirements and the accommodation thereto cannot be structured before the child's access to the 1st grade.

Following the trails of the daily system, of the evolution process, it is our belief that, by approaching activities in an integrated manner, a teacher organises learning as a director, a moderator, helping the children understand, accept and incentivize personal opinions, emotions, feelings, become partners in learning. Thus, the teacher acquires various competences, such as: counsellor, mediator, coordinator, co-assessor, animator, partner in learning.

Activities specific to integrated curriculum help develop critical thinking, the qualitative side of training, positive feedback. The intertwining in a coherent scenario of contents corresponding to the involved experiential fields results in integration. In the manner of integrated activities, the entire programme of a day is a whole, with contents being organised and structured so as to remove the border between learning fields.

Hence, the integrated approach is an intertwining of content in an attractive, flexible form, that leads the child's activity towards investigation, documentation, research and practical application of what s/he has learned through play. Once more we seen the prevalent part of ludic activities in a child's life, especially since they must be used frequently both in curricular and extra-curricular activities.

The interpretation of results confirmed the assumption and the development of the children's personalities from several points of view: cognitively, it improved their cultural horizon, presenting events from their daily existence; from an educational standpoint, it provided examples of moral conduct which stimulated reflection to distinguish good from bad and follow good; in terms of formation, it developed their thinking, imagination and communication capacity.

The proposed assessment aimed at proving the main qualities of play at an early age, and we attempted at finding new solutions, modern work methods, providing for a complex training at a group level, as well as at the children's individual level, for an easier integration in school activities.

In the approach of this experimental study, we believed that the use of

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interactive and entertaining games would stimulate the children's independent activity, so that they may acquire contents on experimental fields and use suitable methods, corroborated with methods such as: problematisation, learning through discovery and algorithmisation.

Another method is the method of analysis and synthesis in task solving, which develops the thinking and logical reasoning of young children.

The use of teaching play results in the development of clear representations, lying at the basis of an understanding of complex notions, acquiring knowledge with interdisciplinary content and developing skills, so as to set the foundations for logical reasoning and logical thinking development.

Curricular activities aimed at developing skills and abilities of independent work, concretised in the development of capacities specific to differentiated learning, which help develop elementary intellectual work skills and develop logical thinking, able to meet the requirements of early age.

Pursuant to the analysis of assessment sheets, we remarked the children's capacity to classify objects, to present their attributes, to solve the indicated task and verbalise the undertaken action, in suitable terms. Children think logically, memorise fast, have steady attention, a suitable language, they easily expressed themselves in simple and complex sentences.

By systematically applying interactive methods and techniques in curricular and extra-curricular activities, we found improvements in the development of the children's oral expression, in the activisation and nuancing of their vocabulary, the relation between the teachers and the children grew into a modern and democratic one, as pre-schoolers enjoyed freedom and cooperation, collaboration and mutual help-based communication.

The children's initiatives in activities was stimulated and they were encouraged to ask questions, with no fear of being wrong; in time, the pupils got acquainted with the methods and their names, understood their efficiency and the steps to be undertaken to deploy them.

By using creativity stimulation methods and techniques, both individually, frontally and in groups, we found the following: children acquire new knowledge more easily; they are increasingly confident that they can decode and understand contents both individually and in groups; they want to get involved in learning and they show no fatigue as they engage in a conscious, willing manner, learning actively and logically; children improved and nuanced their vocabulary for reasons such as: teaching-oriented play, quintet, quadrants, cluster; linguistic intelligence, rhetorical, poetical expression were capitalised;

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children showed real progress in drawing up dialogue, showing creative imagination, originality, fluency, flexible expression.

According to the curriculum for early education, instructive and educational activities took place, aiming at the operationalization of goals, selecting efficient methods and procedures to create prevalently formative education. Active-participative and interactive group methods were used, ensuring the children's conscious engagement in the learning and teaching process, with a significant focus on the differentiated treatment of children, both within joint activities and free and creative games.

Discussions

The research confirms and proves the importance of play in the preschoolers' life and instructive and educational activities. It is essential to understand that playing is a part of ourselves, that playing is both a need and something that makes us happy. Being aware of it, we, teachers, must recognize the notable character of play and we should use it as often as possible in options which may provide, besides entertainment, the possibility to learn new things.

Play is the activity that provides children with the opportunity to acquire knowledge on the surrounding world, it stimulates memory, concentration, reaction speed, it develops creativity and the vocabulary.

It is well-known that, by means of play, children reinforce themselves physically, as play creates the wish for performance, as well as team work to achieve a common goal. Likewise, play contributes to intellectual and moral development, as previously argued.

Used in instructive and educational activities, playing acquires significant psychological and pedagogical functions and ensures the active engagement of pre-schoolers, enhancing their wish to become acquainted with the presented content.

Play should be organized and its presentation should follow a certain logic, so as to represent a training method. In this case, the main function of play is not to create entertainment, but the function of education, which prepares it for the next step.

As a teaching-oriented activity, play has the following functions: entertainment, creativity, modelling, developing the pre-schoolers' personalities.

Teaching-oriented play, as a form of transition from playing to learning, has a decisive part in terms of assimilation, reinforcement and consolidation of knowledge, and its mostly formative nature exercises strong influences in

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developing a pre-schooler's personality. Teaching-oriented play is a strong ally of teaching staff, a significant means for intellectual education.

Teaching may improve significantly through the teaching staff's interest, as they select and present attractive content, as they complete their educational activities with plays that may raise the pre-schoolers' curiosity, creativity, wish to learn as much information as possible and to become involved in the activity.

In conclusion, play and learning are concepts which, even though they may be used separately, combine and intertwine so as to generate extraordinary effects for pre-schoolers.

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