



EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE TREATMENT OF THE CHILD AS A CONSTRUCTOR OF OWN DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Treating the child as a constructor of his own development means that it actively, independently and organized creates an own system of functional knowledge. This implies an educational environment that supports children's individual interactions and that encourages freedom of children's cognitive interpretations and expressions. To achieve that, the opinion of teachers about the impact of the structured educational environment on the child's partner role in his own development is very important.

The aim of this paper is the relationship between the educational environment and the child as a constructor in own development, depending on the teacher's understanding of the learning and developing process and of the child's role in it. For this purpose, a structured open interview with 37 preschool teachers in 7 focus groups and an observation of child's participation in 6 preschool institutions, were used as research procedures. The results are processed qualitatively and for research data analyses the analytical and descriptive methods are used. The research provided a general knowledge that educators do not feel the need to create a specific and structured educational environment in order to provide a partner role for the child in the educational process.

Key words: Early learning, Constructivism, Partnership, Functional knowledge, Interaction, Child's partner role, Active learning, Educational process

INTRODUCTION

We cannot see the relationship between the educational environment and the child's role in development in isolation from the overall systemic setting of early childhood education. In particular, we cannot separate it from the educator as a factor that implements its own implicit pedagogy based on the understanding of developmental processes and the child as a participant in them. But the emergence of different discourses and the distribution of different directions in their contexts confused the professional who implement educational processes. Starting from the latest knowledge about the role of the child as a constructor in his development, which derives from the modern directions of the constructivist discourse, our interest is focused on their impact on the quality of the treatment of the child in early childhood education. Namely, the focus turned to the

following dilemmas: How do educators understand child development, What do they understand by the term constructor of their own development, Do they see the role of the child through the prism of the overall organizational, programmatic and systemic setting of early childhood education, How do they see the relationship between the different segments in education - especially the relationship between the educational environment and the possibility for the child to play the role of a constructor of development, How they can to connect with the practice according to the different contexts of interpretation and understanding of the scientifically accepted pedagogical discourses. Hence the motive to work out the topic of the connection between educational environment and the treatment of the child as a constructor of own development, but depending on the understanding that educators have about the learning and development of children. It is particularly intriguing to know that despite the different understanding that individual teachers have about constructivist education, the attitude that children's individual construction of

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knowledge should be supported is common to all of them (1, p.43) But learning is only one aspect that encourages the overall development of children. Our intention is to encourage thinking that the child does not only participate in the construction of knowledge, but also has an active role in the overall personal and overall development in general. Simply put, it is a builder and development partner. According to a number of researchers "...Children participation is associated with every stage of the educational process from the establishment of school rules to the development of educational policies. It is very important to carry out the right to participate in the school since children spend most of their time in school after their home environment and they are part of social conditions..."(2)

Knowledge about the influence of the environment on the quality of knowledge in early childhood development is not new. The most meritorious in terms of communication with the environment, as well as in terms of interpersonal relationships in the environment, from the classics are: Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, Isaacs, F. Froebel, Pestalozzi, and even, in his time, Socrates, etc. "Piaget has great merit in determining the effects of interaction with the environment. Namely, he emphasized the importance of sensorimotor activities in the development of perception and thus also in intellectual development. According to him, the child interacts with the environment from the earliest age and develops certain functions which he classifies in several so-called stages of constructing concepts..." (3, p. 14.)

This issue has been studied by many theorists and practitioners, such as: Ryan and Graue 2020, Cobb, 2013, Phillips, 1995, Steffe & Gale, 1995 (according to Göncü and Main, 2023); Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Savery and Duffy 1995, Brooks and Brooks 1993 (4) etc. "According to constructivists, cognition is not a reflection of reality, but rather knowledge is "put together" as an active and personal construction with which reality is created" (5). Today, in this sense, constructivism dominates as a direction that emphasizes the need for an independent, natural, active and purposeful involvement of the child in the learning process in order for the child to get the opportunity to independently but still purposefully construct comprehensive and flexible systems of

functional and applicable knowledge . "The interactive constructivist approach accepts the possibility of different interpretations of reality, learning has a public and personal aspect - students learn when they interact with the environment, and knowledge is acquired when a person reflects on previously realized interactions." Only if both aspects of the previous idea are included can it be connected to new experiences." (6) When we talk about the constructivist approach in learning processes and in development, we must refer to the partner role of the child in creating his own development. "In the educational process, the partnership is reflected through the equal participation of the child in the implementation of all educational aspects" (3, p. 17) The child who is a partner in the educational process, in addition to the responsibility for his own development, bears responsibility for the development of all participants in it. After all, respecting the individual characteristics of the child, his interests and needs, the educator simultaneously values them and thus acquires knowledge about his efficiency in the educational process. In this way, he is constantly searching for new approaches to the educational activity. "Children are and should be taught as actors in the construction of their lives, society and the lives of those around them." (7, p. 329).

On the other hand, by setting up situations that he will discover and solve, he enables the child to realize his possibilities and interests, to value them, to locate them and successfully present them. "Providing a symbolic transformation of the child's experience, it provides new knowledge, ideas, experiences, performances, notions" (8, p.102). It is in this way that it opens up possibilities for the planning of educational influences by educational personnel. That is why we say that the child is an accomplice in the planning of educational influences, that is, he is a partner in the entire educational process. Constructivist pedagogical paradigm and modern educational systems treat the child as an interactive participant and constructor of his own development, that is, as a partner and subject in the educational process. Using original ideas in the interaction with the environment, the child creates challenges for new and specific pedagogical creations and influences on his individuality. In this way it directs the choice of environmental influences and thereby participates in own development.

The child must use his natural autonomy in the interest of his own and overall development. Regarding the autonomy and participation of the child Amanda Munday, in her work "What is Autonomy in Early Childhood Education", says: "Children have an innate desire to be independent and to do things on their own, so it is important to give them the task for the appropriate age and to provide the necessary support to help them succeed."(9)

In this direction it is important to create a pedagogical structured educational environment in which the child will explore, experience, change, and thereby direct the organized educational influences. Namely, this implies an educational environment that supports children's individual interactions and cooperation and that encourages freedom of children's cognitive interpretations and expressions. The interaction with the environment, helps the child to create challenges for new and specific pedagogical influences on his individuality and thereby it participates in own development. "By providing him with natural stimuli, and with richer experiences, the spontaneous processes of curiosity and attention gradually transition into deliberate and conscious actions."(10, p.3)

On the other hand, to achieve that, the opinion of educators about the impact of the structured educational environment on the child's partner role in his own development is very important. Also, it is important how they understand the constructor's role of the child. In other words, it all depends on how much and in what way the practitioners understand this, that is, those who will practice constructivism and children's partnership in the educational process. Namely, all the research and theorizing regarding the need for a structured environment for a quality construct of knowledge among children would be without special effects if the practitioners' awareness of the need for proper understanding of those discourses is not encouraged.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a qualitative research that focuses on the *educational environment and the child as a constructor in own development, depending on the teacher's understanding of the learning and developing process and of the child's role in it*. We considered the question from the following aspects: The teachers' understanding of the learning process; The teachers'

understanding of an environment that stimulates the construction of knowledge in children; The teachers' understanding of the treatment of the child as a constructor of knowledge and as a partner in the educational process and The basis or orientation that educators use for planning educational activities. Analogous to the subject, the purpose of research is to discover *whether and how the opinion of preschool teachers about the processes of learning and development and about the role of the child in them is related to the organization of the educational environment in function of the treatment of the child as a constructor in own development*. To answer the questions consistently, observation and interview with focus groups were used as a research's instrument - 37 teachers were interviewed in 7 focus groups and children's classrooms in 6 educational institutions in Skopje and the surrounding area were observed.

The interview with focus groups was structured, open and public, which gave the effect of full responsibility among the participants. It was composed of 12 theses in which, among other things, were discussed for:

- The current state of the conditions for the active participation of the child in the educational process from the aspect of teachers
- Understanding the role of the preschool teacher
- Understanding the role of the child as a partner and as a constructor of own development
- The need that educators feel for structuring and enriching the educational environment, etc.

An observation allows us to perceive:

- The reality of the educational environment
- The child's participation in the process of their own development
- The relationship between: a) the real situation in learning environment, b) the level of children's participation in the educational process and c) the teachers' understanding about the learning and developing processes

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis was carried out qualitatively. Namely, with the help of the analytical-synthetic and the descriptive method, as well as with the application of an appropriate methodological framework, the research showed significant results that require

interventions in the redefinition of some educational aspects, as well as a revision in the initial education and in the professional development of educators. In the interest of this paper, the results are shown in accordance with the key questions that explain the subject of the research, i.e.: "How do educators understand the learning process?"; "What do educators understand as an environment that stimulates the construction of knowledge among children?"; "How do educators understand the treatment the child as a constructor of development and as a partner in the educational process?" and "What is the process of planning the educational activity based on?" The results of the interview and of the observation contributed to obtaining a complete picture of the answers to the set goal in the research.

Respondents in the focus groups of the interview discussed in the direction of supporting the treatment of the child as a constructor of his own development. But they do not support his partner role. These statements contradict each other, which points to the fact that teachers do not sufficiently understand the child's partnership position in the educational process. Here are some of the more representative answers regarding the child's need to construct knowledge: "The child should be active in the learning process." "The child should actively learn and draw conclusions independently." "It should explore and solve different situations in which he will gain experiences." "When he is involved in the learning process, his knowledge is clearer." Regarding the partner role of the child, the answer is interesting: "If he participates in learning, it does not mean that he is a partner. However, the educator himself organizes and determines the educational activity. There is no need for the child to be self-aware, it is small and does not know what he needs. It does not know what it should do in a given situation, and therefore the educator is the only leader in the educational process." Most of the responses in the interview see the child's partnership only through his free involvement in spontaneous games, but after the educator has finished with the activities that he planned them for all children: "The child should not be involved in the educational process because he should not interfere with the teacher's work." "The educator has certain goals that he must achieve and must not deviate from them. The

involvement of the child can hinder him in the realization..."

The interview also showed that the respondents did not think about the concept the child to be a constructor of their own development. This would mean that they do not practice procedures that will allow supporting the treatment of the child as a creator of his own and overall development. Here the question arises, to what extent the teacher learn the modern theories about the learning and development processes through the academic profiling as well as through the further professional development.

Analogous to the received answers, we were interested in how teachers understand the process of early childhood learning. From the answers received, it is evident that they understand children's learning as a process of acquiring knowledge, but they do not mutually agree with the way in which this process is realized in the period of early childhood development. The following stand out as specific answers: "I talk to them and they receive and remember what I tell them." "They learn while playing but I have to explain to them the things they see." "They gain experience while playing." In this part, not a single respondent stated that they apply metacognition as a process of revising the procedure by which knowledge was acquired and rounded up, and none of them answered in the direction of interpreting the process of independent construction of knowledge by children. As for the planning of educational activities, all educators were unanimous that the planning process should be based on the educational program and not on the child's interests and the child should not participate in its creation. This position indicates that educators have a need to consistently follow and implement program requirements. It is not good and not flexible. Considering the importance of early childhood development, as well as considering the possibility and need for the child to contribute to the organization of educational influences on him through his statements, we can conclude that he is not placed in the role of a collaborator in directing his development. Regarding the role of the educator in the development of the child, the answers received are in the direction of expressing the need for dominance over the child in the educational group, with the rationale

that children at that age still do not have clear attitudes.

Compared to this group of answers, the opinion of the educators is surprising, that in the educational group in which they carry out educational activities, there are ideal conditions for the child's participation in his own development. At the same time, they believe that there are conditions for the child in the group to assume a role as a constructor of knowledge. This opinion was expressed by all respondents, but it does not coincide with their view that the child should always follow the instructions of the educators. In this case, we can state that there is no congruence between learning and teaching in the educational processes in early childhood education. But it is worrying that in this, the most sensitive, period of development, if the learning process is not made as part of its normal functioning as part of the way it lives, then the child receives cognitive information only from the outside of their mind - which resembles the scholastic approach to learning.

The respondents define the stimulating educational environment as any environment in which an educational process is realized, but they do not specify how the educational environment should be used and how it should be structured to stimulate the creation of new knowledge. A key role in this part is played by the educator who, according to the examinees, is competent to determine what from the educational environment can be used and what "must not" be touched. Hence, the opinion of educators is understandable that there is no need to structure the educational environment because it is not a significant factor on the child's role as a constructor of his own development. What is significant for them are only the skills of the educator to use the given materials from the environment in order to organize and direct the educational process. Here again, the desire of the respondents to provide children with independent use of resources from their environment is not recorded.

The real picture of the practice related to the conditions in the educational environment exists in a negative context. The observation showed that there are not sufficiently richly structured educational environments and the materials they have at their disposal are not in

function of children's choice. The educators in the group coordinate their practical use. Namely, in practice, insignificant participation of the child in the process of learning and development is evident, which actually coincides with the opinion of the educators that the child should follow the instructions of the educator and use the learning materials according to the choice of the educator. This coincides with the understanding that educators have about learning processes, about the child as a constructor of development and about the role of the environment in that direction.

Hence, we can state that the organization of the learning environment and the involvement of the child as a constructor in his development are in a directly proportional relationship with the understanding that the educator has of the processes of learning and development. That is, the teacher's unclear understanding of the learning and development processes leads to an insufficiently structured organization of the educational environment and does not contribute to the positive and satisfactory involvement of the child in the processes of his own and overall development.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the data obtained from the research contributed to interesting and significant conclusions related to the subject of the research. In the interest of this paper, the most representative conclusions that could contribute to development and changes in the theoretical and practical setting of early childhood education are singled out:

- Understanding and conceptualizing the constructive and active child's role affects the structuring of the appropriate conditions for that purpose. It means: Proper conceptualization - a better structured environment
- Unfortunately, there is still a prevailing opinion among some of the respondents that is extremely important for the child to adapt itself to the needs of the teachers in the educational process, and not the other way around.
- Educators think that encouraging a positive self-concept and self-confidence in the child affects his constructive actions in terms of development, but they do not associate a structured environment with that attitude
- The analysis from the research provided a general knowledge that educators do not feel the need to create a specific and structured rich educational environment in

order to provide a partner role for the child in the educational process.

- All this does not contribute to encouraging independence and self-awareness in children from the earliest age and does not build a person who is responsible for himself and others

- Considering that we know the necessary conditions for the inclusion of the child as a constructor of development on the one hand, and in agreement with the observing and answers from the interview, on the other hand, it can be freely stated that educators are not critical enough in relation to the existing conditions in the classrooms. Namely, the observation and analysis showed an insufficiently enriched environment in which children learn and develop, and the respondents declared with the opposite attitude

- As a significant conclusion, which is certainly not the first of its kind, there is the need to reorganize and redefine the academic education of educators, as well as the need to redefine the systemic setting of preschool education, including the process of monitoring and permanent professional development of the practitioners and professionals

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