

Shaping Learning Competencies Through Play in Early Ages

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Abstract: *The efficiency of the process of shaping learning competencies in early ages derives from using teaching strategies specific to this age, where teaching play should have an important role.*

The role and importance of play in early ages resides in the fact that it facilitates knowledge assimilation, fixing and consolidation and, due to its moulding characteristic, it prepares the child for school learning activity, contributing to shaping the learning competencies.

Key words: *Early education, learning competencies, play*

INTRODUCTION

In the complex world we live, where the need for information and communication is ever growing, the way a human being starts to develop is decisive for his psycho-social further development. Early education changes our perception on young ages, both in theory and in practice, offering a positive, humanitarian, holistic perspective over the psycho-social development from birth until eight years old, over the educational offer specific to this age, over play and learning activities.

The human being possesses the learning potential to the highest degree, manifested since birth and until his disappearance as a psycho-physical, emotional-cognitive and spiritual reality [6].

The experiences lived by the child up to six years old lead to fundamenting the further learning and determine the social abilities. At this age, the child predominantly learns by doing („learning by doing”), but through observation and listening as well (to do, to notice and to listen are the verbs defining the child’s dominant actions).

Learning that results in a sustainable behavioural change, occurring by means of a personal experience, becomes therefore the „engine” of the psycho-social development and this gives the child the possibility to undertake new learning activities.

We may speak about learning only in the case when behavioural changes are noticed, such conduct proving how much gifted with competencies of doing something new the child is, in a different manner from what he could have achieved prior to learning, „alterations of the human capacity that may be retained and cannot be attributed to the process of growing” [3].

Learning presumes a process of acquiring according to experience, that makes certain psychical activities or conduct to shape or modify under the repeated and variable influence of environmental circumstances [4]. The theory on the psychogenesis of intellectual operations [9] states that the subjects’ practical action with the object represents the starting point in building up the operational structure, concluding there is no knowledge resulting from a simple recording of observations without a structuring made by the subject and revealing therefore the decisive role of action in learning and developing. In Piaget’s vision, learning has the functional significance of an application of operations acquired to a large variety of objects and events, which is specific to learning at early stages.

The share of external or inner actions, structured in mental – that is reflexive – operations differ as well according to the nature of the tasks to solve. „Action becomes the main ~ laboratory ~, where both various specific psychical structures and processes, starting with perception and ending with thinking, as well as the emergent wholeness of the human psychic take shape and consolidate.” [2].

Learning through action – by means of objective, concrete actions and by means of mental, reflexive activities, as well as the interaction between these represent a constructive, efficient learning that add to the child's psychosocial development.

We are taking into consideration that any intellectual or motive skill, any cognitive ability or strategy develops based on active contacts with elements and requirements from the natural and social reality, within the learning contexts and circumstances in the early ages, stimulating the children's activities.

The analysis of learning competencies at early ages allows us to reveal the individual characteristics of the functioning of these competencies, and also to set the frame for the specific intervention educational strategies, according to the existing level.

Under a psychological aspect, competency represents an individual's state of psychical potentiality to adequately and efficiently act or a system of acting and operational traits that, together with the needed knowledge, abilities and experience lead to efficient and high quality actions [7]. Competency equally presumes to know and be able to do an activity above the average level. It differs from the notion of capability, that is defined as a fulfilled ability and has consolidated by experience, practice, assimilation of knowledge and shaping of skills [7]. Therefore, competency expresses the individual's possibility to successfully perform a certain concrete activity that can be proven by facts, whereas capability is a mental activity that mobilises competency, in order to transform it into dynamic knowledge. Capability cannot be expressed apart from competency.

Competency produces continuous restructuring of the already existing structures, based on capabilities, knowledge, skills and abilities. A new competency would not be build on a barren field, but on the contrary, transforming the previous acquisitions of that who learns. It is estimated not only according to the volume of assimilated information, but also to the level of understanding and the skill to operate it.

In shaping learning competencies in early ages we should take into consideration both capabilities and knowledge, as well as skills and abilities. At this stage, the learning competency presumes making appear and setting learning as an intrinsic, conscientious and guided activity of the personality. It is based upon a system of previously acquired knowledge and skills, has a flexible characteristic, which is indispensable in order to perform in new circumstances.

In this context, we consider learning competency as the child's ability to wittingly perform an action that is adequate to a purpose, in variable orientation circumstances and an action consisting of concrete procedures in a new situation.

The psychological characteristics of the 5-6 years old children – development of thinking operations, the transition from pre-operational, concrete -intuitive reasoning to elements of causal reasoning, the ability to operate with general and schematical images, the conscious organisation of the activity based on a structured plan – favour the shaping of learning competencies before admission to the first grade.

The analysis of the pre-school students learning competency has underlined the existence of the following structural elements, which are determining as to obtain above average school results:

- *The competency to learn from an adult*, to acquire from him the activity methods, based on words and demonstration, to listen and understand the learning task (to obey the adult, to follow indications, tasks etc), „what he must do”;
- *The competency of organising one's own activity*, to project the goal (the result), the order and sequence of working steps, as well as the methods to achieve it (how to reach that goal, to independently solve practical and cognitive tasks; „how to do”;
- *The self-control competency*; to achieve control and assess results and methods (to compare the results of the actions with the model, with the adult's suggestions and explanations, to notice the discrepancies and remove them); „how will he know he did things correctly?”

- *The competency to correlate own actions with those of other children, perceiving colleagues as partners in various activities, ability to cooperate with them, to account for the interests of others etc.*

Research points out that pre-school pupils often substitute the learning task with the practical one, rendering value to the process of achieving that activity. The task of performing an activity by applying a certain procedure is a new and unusual situation for the pupil. For him, getting the result is important, he is less preoccupied with how to do it (being asked how he achieved the given task, he cannot describe the operational method). This is why, in order to shape the school learning competency, it is important to teach the child how to separate the learning tasks from the operational methods and its finality.

Being given that in early stages of life the practical action represents the indispensable component of an efficient knowledge, the learning activity should be active, attractive and most of all captivating.

Play allows the active-participative assimilation of practical cognitive tasks and the awareness on action procedures, contributing to moulding planning and self-control competencies, of social competencies - of listening and understanding tasks, of adequately establishing relationships with the game partners – which are specific to the school learning competency at this age.

Play is a prime and fundamental source for developing human personality, a primary manner of learning. Playing represents a complexity of acts, operations and actions centered around a main theme and flowing away sequentially; it is a state of total captivation and abandon apart from external pressures, of involvement in an imaginary world of one's energies and striving.

For the child, play is an activity with multiple psychological and pedagogical implications that contribute to his moulding as a human being. Play puts into movement the entire body of the child, activates his thinking, shapes willpower, gives wings to his fantasy and sharpens his witt. That is why it has been said and still is rightfully said that „through playing, the child's personality and character start being built up.”

Play „may be considered a free, consciencious, unintentional action, also situated outside ordinary life, an action that can still fully absorb the player, an action he is not bound to by any direct material interest and that doesn't pursue any benefit, an action carried on within the limits of a determined timeframe and a specifically determined space, an orderly action, performed under certain rules.” [5].

The finality of play obviously depends on its type. It may signify highlighting individual or collective qualities, sharing ideas, feelings, an escape into a fictional universe, a simple entertainment, development of judgement and imagination, shaping of character, a metamorphosis of the game participants, imaginary accesion to another social or existential level or awareness on the surrounding world.

As a specific action, charged with meanings and tensions, always carried on according to willingly accepted rules and apart from the sphere of material utility or necessity, accompanied by cheerfulness and relaxation, play represents in early ages the main strategy in shaping learning competencies.

Because of its spontaneity, play claims for a harmonious combination between the requirements of the game situation and the abilities of those who play it. **Chateau**, [1]. says that play makes possible the occurrence of some capacities that take shape selectively; states the idea that play involves learning, being a preparation for work, for an activity with defined finality.

By playing, children starts to understand that a norm, a rule is the product of understanding between people and that it may be modified if everybody agrees. He exercises a participating experience in elaborating the group norms and controlling their fulfillment and, at the same time, the self-adjustment according to those rules. Therefore, the moral autonomy that would be reached in further stages starts to develop.

P. Osterrieth underlines that in group and in group only the child may experience reciprocity and solidarity, essential to his mental development and further equilibrium. [8].

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Considering that play „educates attention, physical and intellectual abilities, perseverance, readiness, team spirit, order, sturdiness, modulates the ethical dimensions of behaviour” [10], the pre-school children’s shaping of competencies through learning by means of playing strategies contributes to their optimal integration in school activity.

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