

A constructivist approach in environmental education for preschool children

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Abstract: Preschoolers must learn to understand nature, to appreciate its beauty, to discover the components and features, to approach and protect it. The Kindergarten doesn't follow only the child's school preparation, but also its life preparation. Therefore, tracking of training is not limited to the learning type, but also in personality building developing behaviors, skills.

Keywords: nature, preschool, kindergarten, teacher, parents, partnerships, educational environment, projects method, thematic projects methods, environmental education, environment.

1. Introduction

Nature has given a remarkably large and varied number of its riches. Nature, a good of all, from which we are part must not only be known, but also protected. The more we know, the better we understand the need to preserve it. Nature Protection, preservation of biological balance of ecosystem should be a concern of everyone, and yet at an early age. The child reveals a growing sensorial curiosity, and if we discover the way to extend this curiosity, the desire for knowledge becomes support.

Pre-primary education in Romania is addressed to children aged between 3-6/7 years old. Scheduled activities are recommended to be designed and organized in terms of focusing on *socialization*, for the

age group of 3-5 years old, and those falling in 5-7 years old, in terms of *preparation for school*.

Then, when you start to design an educational approach, you should regard several factors involving staff in training activities with groups of children. When enrolling to kindergarten, children come with a certain luggage of knowledge, with skills in different stages of development and an important role is played by the family environment in which they arise. Therefore, on a partners list in education, parents have a privileged status and the duty of involving in the actions of their own children.

Also in the run-up design, there will be made partnerships with puppets and interactive theatres, schools or similar interested units, state or private kindergartens that practice alternative pedagogies, Local Council, medical societies, police units, tourism agencies, or other interested factors that can participate in situational activities.

Another important matter is creating a suitable educational environment, for continuously stimulation of spontaneous learning of the child. A favorable cultural environment not only leads to the development of intellectual skills, but at the same time it stimulates the aesthetic feelings of a child and concludes to beauty appreciation as human perennial value and to the education of ones affective side, who's asked to be formed in the spirit of justice, democracy, tolerance, mutual respect, etc.

2. First step: socialization

It is known that in the first year of school, the parents must communicate very much with the teacher, that the parents are "schooled" along their child, and also that they must scarify time for a good start in the new stage of their scholar life. If this year is important in the transition to a new level of socialization, the integration in another educational environment not least must be the first year of kindergarten.

In the second childhood (3-6 years old), named by M. Debesse "the age of old faun", a capital event occurs, enrolling to kindergarten, institution that represents an intermediary formula between family and school itself.

The enrollment of the child in kindergarten requires a special preparation, when parents must paint in the most attractive colors the certain experience.

Of course, the first day in kindergarten varies from a child to another and from one parent to another. If for calming the child, of its reaction we took measures according its needs, with the parents the persuasive work is a lot more intense. Parents feel the need to confirm the child's state in every moment. Therefore I've planned at least a week with the parents for comforting the children's pain, and persuade them that they are not abandoned for ever in that place. But even after the period planned for integration the parents must not be abandoned in the interest of bringing the child in kindergarten.

In the educational process I've made use of projects method, the first projects were light and based on more educational material acquired by me. In the first semester of the 3-4 years old group, there were studied issues such as: **“Kindergarten”**, **“My family”**, **“Soap and water”**, **“Doll's clothes”**, **“The apple”**, **“What's red”**, **“The pine three”**, **“Snowman”**.

It is known that at this age of 3-4 years old, the children are individualistic and so the group methods were seldom used. They were able to be practiced with the help of elder children, when they were gathered and who helped in accomplishing an action.

An important role in forming small groups it is played by arranging the class on fields of activities. For this group of children the fields of action inside the class were: “Doll's corner”, “Construction”, “Art”. For example when colors were learned, at “Art”, there were exposed paintings and different objects representing the learned color

The projects method gives the possibility of active participation of the parents in the process of learning and also it is useful in evaluating the knowledge and skills acquired by the child. So a parents meeting can be established at a short celebration, during a project that can become in the last part, a way, an opportunity to disseminate information but also can be a way of psycho-educational formation of what the individual preparation of a child requires.

The Preschool period presents a diversity of new biological environment that the child meets. So the adjustment period in the new environment leads some parents in despair regarding the excessive sensitivity of mucosal, leading to viral and lung diseases.

Also now it is drawn the attention for personal and collective hygiene rules obeying.

In the second semester, when children costumed with the new environment, there will be asked the help of parents in providing project

materials. So the required skills for the collectivity will be again practiced through issues as: **“Napkin and handkerchief”, “I’m a clean child”**. Another interest issues are: **“My mother”, “The sun”, “The cat”, “The carrot”, “The egg”, “The car”**. All this were designed to form more skills, to correct speaking difficulties but also to improve vocabulary. I have encouraged the free expression at children, about what they do or don’t like, about good and bad in told stories. In this semester I’ve tried to apply first collaboration methods in the group. Even if the tendency to work individually led, by establishing rules they succeeded to collaborate in achieving tasks. The accent felled on team work that becomes a lot easier and interesting.

In this semester I have organized the first walks outside the kindergarten in the purpose of a better instrumentation of the learned contents.

During a scholar year we were able to classify along psychologists the children in temperamental bars generated by games and other collective activities so we were able to help the parents with different materials to improve knowledge about their children’s behavior in different fazes of growing. We actually came in support of developing a healthy and normally familial climate that influences the forming of future adult person.

It is noticed that the stage of socialization (3-5 years old) must be one of permanent communication between kindergarten and family, of finding a common road regarding the development of the future adult.

If the first year of kindergarten is one of testing, informing, the second is useful in forming skills, behavior, of adjusting functions that may become obstacles in the future developing of the child.

After the initial evaluation in which there were renewed know ledges previously obtained and there were evaluated the new acquisitions after the holiday, the themes proposed to be solved in the projects method were:

First semester: **“Little preschooler”, “The story told by grandma”, “The home in my dream”, “Autumn fruits”, “Let’s eat healthy”, “The rain”, “Small animals getting ready for the winter”, “My town”, “In Santa’s Country”, “The slay”**.

The number of projects is not a lot bigger, but now I’ve implied more interactive methods such as: brainstorming, the LOTUS technique, circle learning, the pyramid method, the mosaic.

From the MOSAIC method there have been noticed the following benefits:

- there were developed listening, cooperation capacities, active involving in independently solving a task;
- the children learn to research from different sources: parents, neighbours, books, television, etc.
- they practice the skills of presenting and exposing using variety ways to learn others;
- they co-work with the ones that studied the same issue;
- they learn to trust one another.

Again starting with this age we diversified the experimental actions. So as it is noticed in the project "Small animals getting ready for winter"(annex 4) for creating a thematically corner I have gone out in the kindergarten yard, from where I've took sand, leaf, animal skeletons. Other components of the model were brought by the children, and other was made by us.

For the second semester there were scheduled projects as: **"Domestic animals", "Wild animals", "The mother and the grandmother", "The Spring in colors", "Here comes the bunny", "By plane", "Children's Day", "Summer with cherry at the ears"**.

The partnerships I've settled helped in offering the children new ways in experience the knowledge gathered. So I've programmed with an IT firm the initiating of children in computer language, the puppets theatre fixed the stories we told, and some actors taught us how to handle puppets, we've invited happy characters, clowns. With certain kindergartens we developed activities together. In our work we received help from the parents, in learning and in fun, especially for birthdays celebrating.

After certain authors around 5 years old it is formed approximately 50 per cent of ones intellectual potential and the thinking is practice and situational but also bringing a strong affective influence. Therefore during this scholar year we implied stories, poems with a strong moral effect. Children had so the opportunity to analyze facts, actions of characters and they were able to apply what they've learned. An important role was given to vocabulary development, but also to the correcting of language deficiency.

The goals that I've settled in a constructivist way followed: the communication between the groups, to live the satisfaction of success,

to develop understanding and creativity, to analyze with courage, to concur obstacles, to manifest criticism in evaluation.

3. Second step: school reparation

Once entering in the group of 5-7 years old, the accent falls on preparing the children for the next step of its life. Schooling is a long period of ones life, the child must learn to adapt the system and learn all the time, because you can learn from all and anything. Therefore I've considered equally important as school preparation, that the preschooler must acknowledge the medial recognized values as being the tomorrow citizen of this world.

At the start of 5-7 years old group, I've modified the group structure, bringing new fields for the educational space. Along "Constructions", "Role play", "Library", followed "Science", "Art". A special attention was centered on table games, played a lot in the afternoon activities as recreational games with a strong character of cooperation developing waiting skills, rule obeying, understanding of others in the game.

A distinctive element that generated a new approach of learning and collaboration was the arrival of a child diagnostic with autism features. So the hole activity was designed in constructivist system, this pedagogy being useful in the individual approach of learning, but also in accepting, integrating of all in a community. The way of its approach it is not part of the subject of this paper but the way it was implemented took count of this situation. The integration of an autistic child was made first in small groups then in large, made off 20 children.

Because the group is heterogeneous, chronologically speaking and also because of the IQ differences I've approached the following issues to be solved in projects method for the first semester: **"The wheel of seasons", "The week", "The tree", "My city, my country", "My German friends", "Water circuit in nature", "Insects get ready for winter", "Romanian winter traditions", "Christmas", "Eminescu, the Romanian's poet", "Animal reign"**.

Also at this age I've considered that the first knowledge about national tradition, about the collaboration with the religious and ethnic minorities, about the cultural values of the Romanian people. Along the kindergarten activities, I've accomplished a large number of actions that placed the children in new situations, and involved them as beneficiary but also as front leaders.

The approached methods were also diversified. One of the used methods was implied during the winter holidays when a CASE STUDY was made for "Christmas in my family" issue. Then there were analyzed different ways of spending this holiday regarding religion. We then learned that not all the people are the same, that they have different possibilities and also we participated in local community actions (decorating the three in the kindergarten yard with hand made decorations) we also made present for children in need.

The second semester was planned to resume the studied themes, of the methods used in the scholar year, but in the previous as well: **"Pole animals"**, **"My favorite book"**, **"The trinket"**, **"Any baby has a mother"**, **"Spring flowers"**, **"At Easter"**, **"The forest"**, **"The planets"**, **"Protecting our planet"**, **"At school"**, **"All the children of the world laugh"**.

Other used methods for this semester were: STELLAR EXPLOSION, in "Trinket", "Spring flowers", "Protecting our planet", GALLERY TOUR in "The forest", GROUP LOTUS in the final evaluation (the pyramid was made by geometrical pieces). Most of the activities were made in pairs or small groups, and at the end of the year the children grouped according to previously obtained results. So if the accomplished projects that were well appreciated, the tendency were to maintain the group for all activities.

According the parents will, of beginning school at 6 or 7 years old, some children will spend another year in kindergarten. In the 5-7 year old group, I believe that it must not imply other lesson type actions, issues to able them in writing, learning to read. The main activity in preschool is the game, an excellent way to practice all personality's dimensions, a mirror of the world its living in.

The preparation year, for the ones remained in the kindergarten, I want it to come forward to the eventual difficulties for the scholar time, especially for the necessity of spending 50 minutes put. Therefore I've designed standing, meaning seeking or editing, individual solving problems activities. The variety of themes will compensate the lack of mobility. The new issues, along the fixing and resuming of knowledge, forward in completing necessary behaviors for independence earning in studying and why not in life: **"Through my country"**, **"Through Europe"**, **"Money"**, **"Pine always young"**, **"To the zoo"**, **"Bloomed trees"**, **"Happy alphabet"**, **"The little mathematician"**, **"The pollution"**, **"The friend, in need is known"**.

During “Bloomed trees” project we’ve discussed the three stages, about the importance of protecting them and the ways to do that.

All this themes give the possibility of a personality forming, that must integrate into a changing society, seeker of new values in traditions and which tends to a cultural smoothing.

These themes will be accompanied by organized actions with different partners, an important role being played by the school. This activities made with students, will bring them closer to the scholar life.

We’ve planted along children from Din – Din Kindergarten, and students in IV th B grade from J. L. Calderon Highschool, Timișoara, a lily tree in the yard of our kindergarten in 15 march 2008, because we celebrated the forest month according to the biological calendar.

If so far we haven’t played so much attention for the timing of the actions, during this year can be implied activities according time solving a task.

At 6 to 7 years old is the time in which children develop manual dexterity, so a special place in extracurricular activities is given by the puppet theatre, through puppets and dolls hand maneuverability and also by the computer use. In order to develop the attention, and their synthesis power we have provided an archive of films for children and a selection of television shows. The media education should be formed by early ages, the children being prepared to learn, select information both in press and on television. Another dimension of this age is in the use of game in recreation and relaxing. The need of a partner in game is very high, now is the time for bounding, creating friendships and rule obeying and cooperation among children. Thus, together with parents we acquired various board games for the children to build their skills: dominoes, chess, memory, etc.

In the year preceding the school I want to create a motivational environment, of joy stimulation, of knowledge, of expressing, of collaboration for all children because I saw at most that they see in me a model of constructivist knowledge.

Conclusions

The kindergarten should put more emphasis on environmental education, which is designed to help children to recognize the existence of the global environment of which we are part, and not masters. What interested primarily in preschool education is the generation and

maintenance of the inside forum of two states: the desire to know the world and the power to protect the universe life forms. The kindergarten task is to provide the preschooler instruments for a critic and positive appreciation of the biological reality and the surrounding society, teaching him to administrate the environment through responsible and appropriate choices.

During my teaching career I put a lot of interest on the creative side of the children, on their freedom in interpretation, having a mental readiness for new experiences, for the dynamics of the group, for sustaining surprise-responses, for respecting ones logic.

The approach of themes through projects method from the 3-4 years old group facilitated the pass from passive, hearing and receiving attitude to the one of mental and acting involvement. The constructivist learning sensibilized the children's heart, precisely through immediately resolve, through practical completion, through the diversity of expression and evaluating modes. Taking advantage through exhibitions, performances, lectures supported by other children from different generations, children were able to meet and use multiple roles in forming and fixing of knowledge.

The children from the groups I've led came to a clear expression, a luggage of knowledge in permanently enrichment and completion, being willing to know the scientific achievements that are shaped by the color of their candor and wisdom of their age.

Once studying the article's theme, I've considered the psychopedagogical particularities of preschooler, the content of "environmental knowledge" and the adaptation of learning situation in the purpose of environmental education at this age and also the accurate methodology.

The training of environmental conduct, of its conscience is a complex process, long-timed that must be controlled and coordinated, and in forming the right attitude towards the environment that starts in analyzing some actions and concrete situation to analyzing the forming of first moral beliefs needed for the environmental attitude developing. Since the formation of a correct attitude towards the environment may be the result of a single influence, of a single method, we turned to recovery values of formative-instructive of environmental awareness activities.

During the activities, walks and tours we have sought to direct children attention towards surrounding environment perception, as a

living one of their own existence, the capacity to activate in the protection of it.

After the discussions and observations made directly in the nature we found that the preschoolers have perceived and retained messages and specific terms.

An important objective that I had proposed was to form autonomy of action in the surrounding environment through providing skills, behaviors, and necessary attitudes for adjusting the relations of adult life.

The experiment, totaling processes and techniques appropriate to the preschoolers, represent the attempt of forming personal working habits, fixing the bases, developing positive attitudes and behavior, for making value judgments, establishing testing procedures for environmental education.

Following tests have found that preschoolers recognize applied creatures in the environment based on observation, distinguished materials, plants, animals by certain physical, submit the environmental impact of human activities, perceive the surrounding reality as a living environment, acting for the management, care and protecting the environment.

Preschoolers have enriched their vocabulary and words that represent ecological concepts, and changed attitudes towards animals and plants, and ecological habits formed over environmental protection and began to build a proper moral conduct that will lead to environmental awareness in tomorrow's adults.

Environmental education is a discipline of knowledge in action, not the effect of a single one, but of more, in interaction, knowledge is in the service of action, making environmental education a process not only localized in time and space, but continuous processes present in childhood, adolescence and adult life.

Also, the environmental education is a discipline of specialized knowledge, needed for the analysis and quantification of environmental problems, not by uncertain notions, but by ones that can be considered a correct tool for a proper understanding of the environment.

The environmental education is one of surviving that must remove the myth of human over domination, knowing that all the elements of the environment are limited.

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