

THE OPPORTUNITY AND EFFICIENCY OF ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE EARLY EDUCATION TIMEFRAME

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ABSTRACT

The time of the assessment process, in order to be appropriate and efficient, has become lately the main subject in redefining the Assessment Process in theory and practice. Assessment doesn't mean any longer only enforcement and controlling the results of the learning process, but it also means optimization and developing of the learning process (the science of humanistic docimology). The formative assessment has rebalanced the concept of modern assessment by being the core of the priorities when deciding the combinatory between the learning processes and the skills/competences resulting from the learning process. The essence of the Formative Assessment consists of the optimal time of its duration process, as the children need a systematic evaluative feedback to help them in organizing the learning process and the learning progress. This is an open subject in redefining the concept of assessment in early learning process from the perspective of time level. It makes significant changes of the evaluation components and in the relationship between them: the final products of the assessment, the culture of the assessment process, strategies in evaluation, instruments of evaluation, etc.

KEYWORDS: early education, assessment, assessment tools, assessment process, assessment strategies.

1. EARLY EDUCATION REFORM

Early childhood is the most important period of human life, which is marked by crucial moments to the child's development and later success in school and in life. As it was stated in "Early education and the specificity of preschool child's development", research in the last 30 years have shown significant correlations between environment and intellectual development, between early learning and learning that occurs in other stages of life. Thus, children raised in a stimulating environment have an accelerated intellectual development compared to those grown in a restrictive medium. From birth till grown-up, children are persons who develop emotionally and have special responsiveness to different types of stimuli, something that can be influenced by the information the child receives from the environment and the quality of information processing" (6, page 5).

Something else must be highlighted, namely that adult intervention on the child during this period is fundamental. We speak about that certain

efficient processing of information where the child needs a mentor, about the monitoring of learning, with the prospect of transforming it into a self-monitoring, about the challenge of becoming aware of the learning process in order to understand it, in an appropriate and effective dialogue with adults, about the cognitive and affective communication necessary in the learning and developmental space. Ultimately, it is all about the optimal functionality of the "zone of proximal development" (L. Vygotski), which compulsory requires the adult intervention for safety. So, early education reform is less directed towards the institutions and more towards their training atmosphere and especially towards the adults' skills in relation to their interventions on children: what they need to know about children and their development; what they need to know about how and what to do in relation to the child's needs and his potential development; what they have to become as concerning their attitude, motivation and responsibility towards the child's education at this age. If early education is from 0 to 6/7 years old then we take into consideration as adults both the educators and the parents.

2. THE PLACE AND ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN EARLY EDUCATION

In the words of J. M. Monteil (1997, p 58), whatever views we cherish, there can be no learning without assessment and self-assessment. This statement is especially true and important in the case of early education, given the features of learning at this age and the issues of preschool learning and especially the need for permanent feedback on the quality of the learning process and the learning outcomes. The assessment is intrinsic to the educational process at this age, it is an organic part of the structure of education and it is indispensable for regulating and optimizing the entire educational process, including the process and processuality of child learning. Naturally, assessment is a starting point in education, then it must constantly accompany and regulate education in its development and it also is the final point (relatively speaking) of an educational stage, as a benchmark for a new beginning.

The essential characteristic of evaluative activity in early education today represents its approach both in terms of process and procedures regarding the measurement of learning outcomes. The assessment activity involves development, processuality, regulation and self-regulation. Searching for a balance between teaching and learning as a product, between aspects that are summative, that classify, certify, and allow the identification of the causes/difficulties faced by children in their learning process, as well as between the regulating and self-regulating mechanisms have led to its extension from the assessment of only the learning outcomes and to the assessment of the learning process and processuality. We could say that, in early education,

formative evaluation is a priority, whose lines of force are (Roland Abrecht, 1999):

- it is mainly addressed to the child with its peculiarities;
- it involves the child in the learning process, making him constantly aware of his approach;
- it is an integral part of the learning process, it eases the "climb", does not interrupt it;
- it is looking for adjustment to a particular learning situation, so it needs to act with a certain flexibility, to be open to plurality, diversity;
- it deals more with the learning process than its results;
- it is not limited to observing learning, but it also helps through constant adjustment and regulation;
- it identifies the difficulties, classifies them on their degree of complexity, trying to identify their causes, to overcome them, rather than to penalize them for summative assessment;
- it equally serves the educator, allowing him, through feedback, to effectively focus on the milestones of valuable pedagogical strategies.

As defined by G. De Landsheere (1979), formative assessment is basically occurring during the learning task, having as main objective to inform the child/student and teacher on the degree of control achieved and, possibly, to discover where and why a child/student has learning difficulties in order to propose or make him discover ways/strategies to allow progress. Also, this type of assessment is intended to guide the advancement of the child, to make him recognize where and why a child is experiencing difficulty and help him overcome it. This assessment is not translated into marks/grades and even less into scores, being just a piece of information, a feedback for both the child/student and the teacher.

In the same spirit, M. Scriven (2010) said that continuous/formative assessment is characterized by two main features:

- the much faster rhythm of the assessment activity, greater frequency of checks and assessments over a period of time, the evaluation accompanying the learning activity;
- the significant shortening of the interval between "evaluation" and "correction", on one hand and between "evaluation and change" and "improvements" of the teaching activity.

In early education, the evaluation functions are specifically centred on the child's needs for adjusting and optimizing learning and on his optimal development.

3. TIMEFRAME FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF EARLY EDUCATION

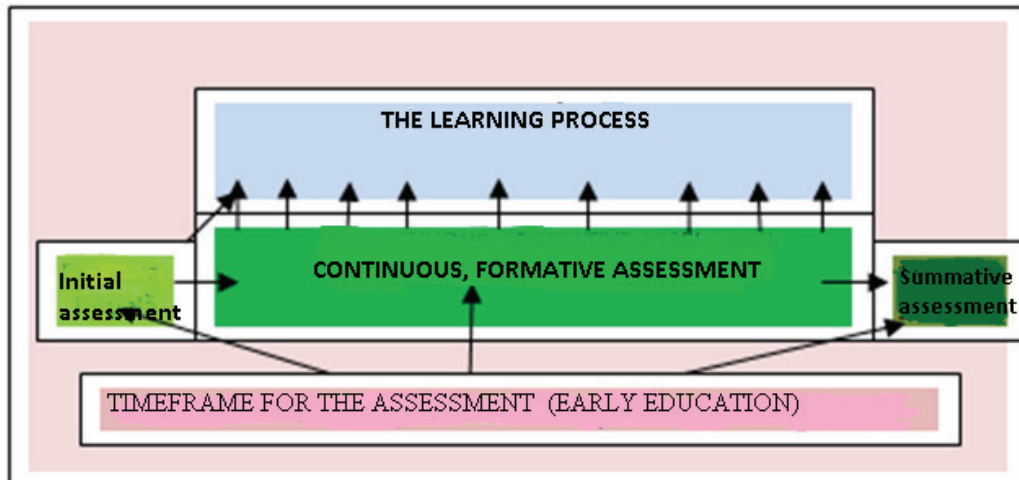


Fig. 1. Timeframe for the assessment of early education

As the figure above suggests, assessment is an ongoing activity that precedes, accompanies and follows the learning process. Placing assessment before, during and after learning marks the timeframe of the preschool assessment, which is continuous and intrinsic to the learning process. Integration into an articulate, balanced and dynamic system of initial, formative and summative assessment provides the quality warrantee for the evaluation strategies ([5], p.17). If the initial assessment, preceding the learning process, has mainly a diagnostic and predictive function, the continuous assessment, which accompanies and is constantly and operationally integrated throughout the educational process, has mostly a feedback and formative function, whereas the cumulative or final assessment has a predominantly ascertaining and partially predictive function for the next series of children. Each of these types of assessment has its own importance and role and only together they provide a comprehensive, meaningful and effective evaluation. The necessity and importance of each of them are highlighted best when dealing with them in their complementarity relationship.

4. OPTIMAL TIME FOR ASSESSMENT IN EARLY EDUCATION

The time factor is important in education and, as we know, it is one of the major variables of the curriculum. We frequently speak about time for teaching, time for learning, time for listening, time for assessing, but we speak less of time through the perspective of its opportunity, with respect to what to do and when to do it. This dimension of time, opportunity, regarding what

should be done, is essential to education in general and to assessment, in particular, and even more to the early education evaluation. Of course, assessment itself as a form of measurement and evaluation of what is assessed is important, but its real value and especially efficiency are given by the moment when it is performed, with respect to its necessity.

It is about the opportunity of assessment time/moment in relation to the required assessment and the type of evaluation. The initial evaluation or the "necessary evil", as experts call it, not accidentally takes place before the start of the educational process, because only then it is effective and fulfils significantly its diagnostic and predictive functions. In 1981, D. Ausubel stated: "if I wanted to reduce all pedagogy to a single principle, I say: what most influences learning are the skills that the student has from the start. Make sure of what he knows and train him accordingly!". Therefore, the success of teaching and learning depends on the information the assessment made before the commencement of the learning process provides.

The opportunity of assessment time is discussed more in the formative evaluation, which is centred on learning processuality and must, according to M. Scriven, shorten the maximum range between the "evaluation" and "correction" on the one hand and between "evaluation and modifications" and "improvements" of the pedagogical act, on the other hand. Even more, this appropriate time depends on the child's age and peculiarities, at young ages being done in small steps, and also depends on the child's individual characteristics, on each child's learning problems, even on the tempo of their activity, and, not least, on what is being assessed. Any delay in the evaluation, and any hurry, too, can have direct consequences on the quality and efficiency of the assessment and indirect consequences on the decisions that are to be taken.

Also when it comes to the time of evaluation, its opportunity, we must take into consideration the required/optimal time for these activities, which usually, ironically, because of the lack of time, are short-circuited, and are simplified, and are abolished, with all the consequences resulting from this. The most common shortened or removed assessment moments are those related to communicating the results of evaluation and especially to discussing issues arising, to analysis causes, to making decisions and implementing them. Almost all evaluations are scheduled in insufficient time intervals, so they should be done fast, the written evaluations are preferred, but students' problems, results of these evaluations are not analysed, discussed and resolved by appropriate action. Assessment should be assigned as much time as teaching or, to be in line with modern teaching, it should be organized in such a way to allow efficient integration in a timeframe and have an appropriate assessment period in relation to its requirements and purposes. Children and teachers need not only a general feedback but a systematic one, in appropriate moments in relation to their

learning needs and problems, respectively, in order to adjust and optimize the teaching process. Formative assessment is the core priority in decisions concerning the combinatory between learning processes and skills seen as outcomes.

5. EVALUATION AT APPROPRIATE TIME AND OPTIMIZATION OF THE CHILD'S LEARNING

There is a direct relationship of determinism between the effectiveness of the assessment made in due time and the optimizing of the child's learning. We frequently speak of the fact that things not done in their time will generate hardly recoverable or irrecoverable consequences. We know that some bad habits of writing, expressing oneself, grammatical accuracy, etc. improperly and not thoroughly structured in childhood are difficult to correct at older ages. Similarly, certain habits, attitudes, behaviours, that have not been given the necessary attention, time and time opportunity will be difficult to restructure later.

Also, the optimum time of evaluation requires a reorganization of the relationships between the components of the assessment, with final effect on optimising learning and on gradually progressing towards success. So for example, the optimum assessment time requires different methods, techniques and instruments in relation to the type and timing of the evaluation and it also requires a more consistent promotion of qualitative methods of evaluation in general, but especially in the formative assessment. Thus, we may speak of rewriting the conceptual map of the assessment in early childhood education, from the perspective of the time horizon of the assessment and of the significant changes of the relations between the components of evaluation.

6. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

Assessment, exactly as teaching and learning, are the cornerstones for education and their quality determines the quality of education.

The assessment moment, for it to be opportune and effective, has become one of the landmarks that required rethinking the theory and practice of assessment.

The essence of evaluation in general and, more particularly, of the formative one lies in the optimal time to be done; children need a systematic evaluative feedback to enable them to organize their learning and progress in learning.

The optimum as concerning time in assessment directly determines the quality and efficiency of evaluation, and respectively, the quality and efficiency of children's training and development.

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