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THE PROGRESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING AS RESPONSE OF SKILLS` ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

In this study, we have proposed to present the results of an empirical research that identifies the positive implications of the competences assessment in learning progress of preschool children. We will analyse children's results relating to the stated objectives according to the elaborated observing grid. Children's progress in learning represents the confirmation and affirmation of the role of assessment of competences in supporting the early learning of children.

In the present study, we conducted a research project, using also the experiment method. We aimed to analyse the impact of the assessment of competences on the learning progress in earlier childhood.

The sample's research consisted of 2 pre-primary school teachers and 56 children. The control group consisted of 27 children being evaluated by references objectives. The experiential group was represented by 29 children from another class, having the same level of education. This group has been evaluated based on competences.

The results of the research have confirmed the conclusions regarding the formative role of organizing the assessing situations based on competences, the development of teachers' skills to harmonize the methods, the resources and the formative strategies with the objective and subjective factors determined by the interaction between teachers and pupils in the evaluation based on competences

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Keywords: Learning progress of the child, assessment of competences, motivation of learning.



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1. Introduction

The idea of this study is to demonstrate the formative role of evaluation-based on competences in early education. We propose to analyse the relationship between the results obtained by children in the case of an assessment based on objectives with the one that aims the achieving of competences. The purpose of this analysis is to identify the beneficial effects of competency assessment and to support the motivation for pre-school children learning, as well as the progress in their learning.

The assessment should support the development of each child (the passing from current development to the immediate development), to stimulate the accumulation of knowledge, capacity building, self-confidence.

Therefore, the formative-educational character of the evaluation activities in the kindergarten must be emphasized, considering the interests and the level of development of the child. Especially now that changes in social life are so fast, it is not as important as "how" they know, but "what" and "how" they apply what they know. It is the age at which they can acquire new knowledge all the time, and the influences of the environment have a very important role in providing a complex and varied experience. When children satisfy their curiosity, they accumulate new information and learn to draw their own conclusions.

"School assessment is increasingly conceived as an integrated part of the learning process and its pillars" (Abernethy, 1996, p.5). In the last decades, pedagogy has given a great attention to the study of the "formative" assessment concept, which attributes an important role to the student, analysing the progress of his skills.

Modern assessment marks the evolution from the controlling role of the acquired knowledge to the evaluation of the learning outcomes and of the processes involved, basic components of the didactic activity structure.

Ion Cerghit states that evaluation is a "science of value" (p. 287), which refers to a system of value judgments. Thus, "education clearly states its priorities for a certain system of values, justifies its options and preferences in relation to certain values which are translated into objectives. These values must acquire and internalize the student himself, to integrate them into his knowledge and sense structures and personal conduct." (Cerghit, Potolea & Manolescu, 2005 p. 288).

Evaluation, along with teaching and learning, should be seen as a single unit to which we report: "We need to talk about the evaluation in terms of processes. Instead of the established evaluation term we need to refer to "evaluation activity", "assessment in action, in progress" (Manolescu, 2004).

2. Problem Statement

The evaluation becomes an approach focused on the active involvement of the child in learning, on his cognitive processes, on regulation and self-regulation of knowledge, disregarding his role as a simple instrument used in the measurement and control of the didactic process.

"In postmodern pedagogy, competence - centered assessment is an issue of interest in current theoretical analyses. This is the case in the approaches for the selection and identification of methodologies and tools ensuring the quality of assessment, by reference to the validity, fidelity and relevance of appreciations on the competence level, with a motivational role and in self-assessment."

(Bunăiasu, Stoian, in Tilea, Duta, & Resceanu, 2017, p.37)

If in the traditional education the teacher has evaluated the knowledge assimilated by children, and they have to memorize the given information mechanically, through the competence-based assessment, pre-schoolers are evaluated not from "what they know" but from "what they can do with what they have learned", being helped to learn by themselves and to apply the assimilated information. The teacher has the role of a guide that respects the individual path of a child development and, at the same time, she becomes a partner for little children, she learns how to listen to them, has free discussions about what they are interested in. The teacher must accept that "travelling" in the educational space allows children to investigate and find answers to their own questions.

Early education therefore offers an individualized assessment program designed to identify training needs and to support the development of the child as a person, offering conditions that promote physical, social- educational development of the language and also the cognitive development in manners that integrate various fields.

An important role in assessing children's competences is the approach of using alternative assessment methods and an integrated learning approach. They develop relationships of collaboration, trust and mutual respect between the teacher and the children, but also between them. The child no longer feels "controlled," but is supported in his activities. The teacher thus fulfills the role of organizer of learning situations and facilitator of information, representing the bridge between the child and the requirements of social life.

The use of alternative assessment methods develops a relaxing learning environment, because children are assessed in a common learning environment using contextualized tasks; requiring them to conduct experiments, projects, portfolios, both as evaluation tools and as learning tasks. It is not important to prioritize children by assessing the obtained results, but to identify their progress, their evolution, the understanding of the evaluation criteria, the evaluation approach, the reflection on achieved performances, the explanation of compensatory ways to stimulate the progress in learning.

Among the methods of assessing children's competences, the projects method represents a modern strategy of organizing and conducting the instructive-educational and evaluation process that promotes individualized education with multiple formative valences depending on each child's own developmental rhythm, his requirements and needs.

Using this method, the activity is focused on the child. Now it is no longer an object, but a subject of education, it is in the middle of the evaluation process, which identifies progress or regression in learning. The child is directed to discover by himself what is around him.

In a program based on assessing children's competences, the educator/the teacher facilitates learning rather than conveying knowledge. Teachers facilitate the involvement of children in activities and working with materials, asking questions openly and making suggestions with a non-binding character that stimulate children's thinking. The educator helps and supports each child so that he can participate according to the level of his abilities and modifies the activity with the materials in order to allow a successful participation.

Early education proposes another approach to the educational space through "incentive areas". Stimulating areas (areas of interest) are areas in the group room that correspond to certain activities for

which preschools typically exhibit interest: cubes, role playing, books, table games, sensory exercises, learning games, drawing and music.

Skills achieved by children are evaluated by giving them the opportunity to participate in activities in the area that they are most interested in at that time. Thus, the evaluation has a profound regulatory character, providing a continuous feedback to the teacher and motivating the child to learn.

The teacher is planning and ensuring appropriate activities in each area, changing them frequently to achieve the objectives of the curriculum that relates to making certain changes in children's capabilities and interests. The activities in each area provide children many opportunities to learn through action and to learn by the game. The interest areas that can be found in a group are: "plastic arts", "building games", "library", "science", "sensory", "table games", "music and theatre", "dramatic game".

The instructional-educational process implies skills training, strengthening and verifying them by putting them into practice. In order to get the best results, we need to consider what methods and procedures we choose, which kind of processes we are involved in, for the training and evaluation of these skills.

In the instructional-educational process, the assessment relates to performance, to children's behaviours and products. The competency refers to the formed structures that underlie the tasks, written works, or oral responses (Gayet, 1997, p. 63).

Abernot says that the assessed performance is related only to a part of what the student's competence is.

Viewed in this way, "the evaluation has the function to translate the state of a competence into a system where the comparisons are possible. These comparisons are made either on children - some with respect to others - or on the development of the skills of each child." (Abernot, 1998, p. 6).

Manolescu (2010) states that "School competence refers to the totality of the abilities and capacities which, in principle, the child is capable of, and which have been determined on the occasion of prior evaluations to the evaluative process."

Performance is what the child performs effectively, situationally, as a result of mobilizing his capacities. "Performance refers to the degree of efficiency that results from mobilizing the cognitive and affective-volitional resources of the student when he has to face to a particular task." (Stan, Ionescu & Chis, 2001 p. 235).

Competence therefore focuses on the potential of the child, while performance reflects the updated performances in well-defined contexts.

At the level of all European countries, it is paid a continuous attention to improve the evaluation process. Thus, there is a growing focus not only on the assessment tools, but also on the impact they have on the child.

3. Research Questions

If competency-based assessment is used, then the motivation of children to learn is supported and the progress in learning is enhanced.

4. Purpose of the Study

- O1: to appreciate the extent to which the use of child skills assessments contributes to identify their training needs;
- O2: to analyse the formative role of competence-based assessment to increase motivation for children learning;
- O3: to compare the progress made by children following the application of the competence-based assessment and the application of objectives

5. Research Methods

Investigating the learning progress of children in the larger group aimed at the developing competences in the field of "Development of language, communication and the prerequisites of reading and writing". Thus, the respondent teacher has recorded the level of achievement of each specific competence in the monitoring record in September, following the initial evaluations.

Then a training program has followed, using at G1 - evaluation strategies based on competences and on G2 -evaluation strategies against the benchmarks. In March, at the beginning of the second semester, the progress or regression in children's learning was registered, reporting to the same competences.

Each skill has been defined by a variable, taking/getting as values the children's levels of engagement "never = 1", "sometimes = 2" and "often = 3", "frequently = 4" . We presented the results of the two groups comparatively.

6. Findings

Each child's activity observation sheet includes eight competences describing its activity: c1. They participate with interest in the proposed activities; c2. They are intensely involved in solving the received tasks; c3. They are very involved in carrying out the evaluative tasks if there are used alternative evaluation methods; c4. The comments that are made refer to the proposed topic; c5. They demonstrates the originality in thinking by expressing one's own opinion; c6. They are solving the proposed items in the evaluation sheet; c7. They aspire to a high level of performance; c8. They accept suggestions and guidelines to improve their learning style.

Analysing the results which are describing the first competence, c1. They participate with interest in the proposed activities, we find out that at G1, 30% often showed willingness to participate in the proposed activities, and 70% were always willing to participate. Compared to G2, we have noticed that 10% of children rarely participate in the proposed activities, 30% often participate and 60% always participate.

The assessment of the activity of each child was made by describing their behaviours in relation to the following criteria: they are involved in the proposed activities, it uses various useful teaching materials, it explains the way of working, asks for information related to the proposed topic, preserves the materials used in other activities and they use them in the proposed activities.

For c2. There is an intensive involvement in the solving of the received tasks, it was made a comparative analysis and it was found that the percentage of students involved in solving the received tasks is higher in the case of G1 group students than those in G2. Thus, at G1, 40% of students often get involved in solving the received tasks, 20% often, 35% sometimes, and 5% never. Compared to G2, we have noticed that 22% often get involved in solving tasks, 44% often, 18% sometimes, and 26% never.

This competence was assessed by direct involvement of the children in searching the necessary materials to solve the given requirements, by structuring the information in order to accomplish the proposed projects, by correcting the individual activities carried out by the children, but also together with the teacher, in order to acquire various materials which are useful to the activities.

For c3. They are involved in the evaluative tasks, if there are used alternative evaluation methods, the following results were recorded: G1, 20% often get involved in solving the tasks, 45% often, 25% sometimes, and 10% never. Compared/By comparison to G2, we have noticed that 35% often get involved in solving the tasks, 65% sometimes.

In this situation, it is noted that using competences-based assessment, children are motivated to participate in the evaluative work (G1). The behaviours presented by children in G2 illustrate that they are less interested in participating in the evaluative process, in the case of objectives.

The assessment of this behaviour appealed to children's preference for using other methods than traditional ones: the project, the investigation, the portfolio.

For c4. The comments which were made are related to the proposed theme: the following results were recorded: at G1, 47% of children's arguments are often related to the proposed topic, 23% often, 30% sometimes. By comparison to G2, we have noticed that 77% of children's claims are often related to the proposed theme, and 23% sometimes.

The situation in c5 case demonstrate originality in thinking by expressing one's own opinion: at G1, 35% often demonstrate originality in expressing their own opinion, 45% often 20% sometimes. By comparison, at G2, we have noticed that 5% often demonstrate originality in expressing their own opinion, 75% often, 20% sometimes.

We have noticed the contribution of alternative assessment methods to the development of students' critical thinking. Using all these methods, children are calling for a series of knowledge that demonstrate originality in expressing their own opinions. In the realization of this competence there have been evaluated the behaviours of ordering, comparison, structuring, generalization, abstraction, relation, classification, representation, deduction. All these activities have been proposed and developed together with teachers.

The sixth behaviour: c6. It solves the proposed items in the evaluation sheet; Thus, at G1, 45% of the children solve all the proposed items without the support of the educator, 40% solve the items with support, 15% partially solve the items. By comparison to G2, where we have noticed that 10% solve all the proposed items without the support of the educator, 50% resolve the items with support, 22% partially solve the items, and 8% does not solve the items correctly.

Because of the evaluation from G1 children's learning activity it is based on the assessment of competitions, it is noted that they are much more open to/in solving the proposed items by the evaluation sheet, compared to those in G2, where we can notice the reticence with which they approach the items.

The seventh behaviour described in the observation file: c7. It aspires to a high level of performance. At G1, 55% of children demonstrate that they can get very good results without being rewarded by educators, 45% work better when they are appreciated. By comparison to G2, where we have noticed that for 28% the results are not influenced by rewards, 72% are learning in order to be rewarded.

This competence was appreciated by taking into account the operation and processing of information held by children in order to relate them to the other notions, concepts, tools used by them.

Still here was taken into account the involvement and the correct solving of the proposed work tasks, of the determination with which they have participated in the learning activities. Between the expectations of the children in relation to their performances, when they know that the evaluation will be appreciated by a reward and when they know that it will not be.

Behaviour c8. They accept suggestions and guidelines to improve their learning style. It offers us the following information. In this competence we aimed at fulfilling the following children's behaviours: re-interpreting data for children with a difficulty in understanding it, resystematization of information, rebuilding the projects according to the received directions, reorganizing and restructuring the files and learning methods.

At G1, 75% of children often accept suggestions to improve learning activity, 25% sometimes accept. Compared to G2, where we have noticed that 58% are taken into account the educator's appreciation, and 42% rarely taken into account the received observations.

7. Conclusion

The research has demonstrated the general hypothesis that if there are used children's skills assessment strategies, their motivation for learning is encouraged, gaining increasing progress in their learning. The highest increase in performance level, and also the best results were obtained when the children were evaluated throughout the learning using competences-based assessment. This was partly due to alternative assessment methods used throughout the experiment, and on the other hand to supporting children's motivation for learning. G2 scores were less successful, due to the fact that their attention and motivation decreased with the predominant use of cognitive goals.

So, there are also confirmed the specific hypotheses generated at the beginning of the research: if skill-based formative training strategies are used, so, then are identified the training needs of children; if the evaluation activity adapts to the individual particularities of the children, then their motivation for learning increases; if the child's motivation for learning is supported then children can achieve a big progress in learning.

During this research has been found that, in order to develop children's responsibility towards their own outcomes, the evaluation must have a stimulating role, to develop self-monitoring behaviours and self-regulation of learning.

The research has demonstrated the formative impact of complementary assessment methods on the development of pupils' skills, on changes in psychological comfort as a premise of increasing motivation for learning. It has also been appreciated that, alternative assessment methods are more appropriate to measure the progress of pupils learning and to appreciate their cognitive abilities. This thing has been

demonstrated by the students' observation sheet, competence 5: "demonstrates through the comments made by yourself, your originality in thinking."

Advanced competence-based assessments have demonstrated that more children have solved the tasks which were requiring integrated approaches to knowledge, which demonstrates the necessity to address this type of assessment. The same assessments showed that pupils solved items that measured the use or the transfer of knowledge in various situations.

There were outlined ideas and solutions from the realized quantitative and qualitative analysis, whose application and using in school practice can determine the efficiency of the educational assessment.

I consider that this paper has a big contribution to demonstrate the role of competences-based assessment that leads to the progress in learning of the child, as a result of increasing motivation for learning.

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