

Child-centered Paradigm in Early Education

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Abstract. *The focus on the child in early education has been promoted for a long time by the pedagogical literature. Modern didactics has been concerned on the way children are learning, seen as active subjects of their own training, highlighting the educational benefits associated with active involvement. The quality of their knowledge experience depends not only on the quality of teaching, but also on their own effort and how they contribute to the teaching process. This means that teachers have a vital responsibility in facilitating effort, involvement, interaction and active learning. In the process of acquiring knowledge, it is obvious to shift the focus from its external determinants to the endogenous determinants, those coming from within the individual. The emphasis on the subject, on its interiority, must be understood not only as an organization that responds specifically to certain influences, but also as an organization that models the influences, so as a system of self-organization, which does not ignore external influences on learning, but configures them in a more profound context in order to be explained. In this context, focusing on the child becomes both a condition of quality and efficiency of the educational process, and one of the most convenient ways to solve the many difficulties encountered: insufficient motivation, lack of attractiveness in content, low level of children involvement in learning, mechanical and reproductive approaches, routine or monotony in the training process.*

Keywords: *child centered education, early education, New Education, paradigm, contemporary society.*

1. Historical and curricular premises

The opening of early education towards child centered education was promoted by the representatives of the New Education movement, somewhere between the 19th and 20th centuries. Although theorists of this trend sought to provide solutions to the problems that the training process is facing in their own country, the sources of inspiration were actually in the work of J.J. Rousseau, whose principles are found in the conceptions of all the representatives of this pedagogical current. In the opinion of R. Cousinet, the creator of the new education was Rousseau, because this pedagogical current “did not exist before 1762; it only exists after this date, and Emil includes the essence of the new education”¹.

Within the same current is the pedagogical conception of John Dewey, who contributed decisively in promoting the focus on the needs of the child by dealing with innovative issues, related to supporting children actuation, taking into account their interests, respecting individual particularities, linking theory to practical life or the importance of teachers' creative and innovative activity. He also states that "concretely, the value of recognizing the dynamic nature of the

¹ R. Cousinet, *Educația nouă*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1978, p. 7.

interest in educational development lies in the fact that it takes into account the individuality of children, with their specific abilities, needs and preferences”².

Starting from this outlook, Ed. Claparède, develops the theory of functional education, which is based on the principles of functional psychology and which proposes that type of training which is based on the children needs, “his interest in achieving a goal; this being the natural stimulus of the activity we want to awaken in him”³. According to his theory, “the typical example of an activity carried out in order to satisfy a need is the child playing scene. It satisfies the natural tendency towards activity of the human being in his first years of development”⁴. Based on such a reason, the training activity must be based on internal impulses and on the direct or mediated satisfaction of the child's natural interests that will ensure his involvement in a spontaneous activity performed with enthusiasm.

In the opinion of Maria Montessori, the child's freedom of expression is the fundamental premise of training, so his theory advocates ensuring an organized environment in which the child is free to manifest, a context that ensures his mental development and physical development. “The unmistakable merit of Maria Montessori is that she knew how to give the preschooler the educator he needs - close as a mother, endowed with a lot of patience and delicacy, able to forge his intervention on long observation, who knows how to impose through a supple authority”⁵. Although O. Decroly is another important representative of the new educational trend, his pedagogical conception distances itself from the line already given by M. Montessori, so that he proposes a theory that “goes beyond the child-environment antinomy, antinomy expressed by the two opposite pedagogical theories: one that sets the act of education on the satisfaction of the child's needs, and the other one, on his subordination to the exigencies of society”⁶.

The method that O. Decroly proposes is not an analytical one, but a global one, influenced, probably, also by the spirit of the new school of gestalt psychology, which considered that first is perceived the form (gestalt) and then the parts.

Promoters of new education have reconsidered the educational phenomenon under the influence of developments in experimental psychology and based on new theories of learning, according to which the child, as a partner of the teaching process is not a simple beneficiary, but must be considered at the same time object and subject of education, so that his involvement in the training process can be actively achieved. Greater emphasis is placed on the

² J. Dewey, *Democrație și educație. O introducere în filosofia educației*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1972, p. 113.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁴ I. Gh. Stanciu, *Școala și doctrinele pedagogice în secolul XX*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1995, p. 76.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

holistic development of the child, which analyzes all the factors that contribute to the preparation of children for both school and life.

According to M. Ștefan⁷, focusing on the child is a didactic requirement, more precise to put the child at the center of the training process, and not the subjects included and to start from the interests and needs of the child.

This approach involves a reconfiguration of the relations between the two agents of educational action from the perspective of shifting the emphasis from teaching to learning. Therefore, the child, as the beneficiary of the educational activity, is the one around whom all the steps of designing and implementing the training must be circumscribed, correlated as adequately as possible with the real life. As such, the training process must design didactic situations that meet the child's needs, situations that will generate stimulating learning experiences for his potential, will allow free expression and will trigger epistemic curiosity.

From the perspective of focusing on the child, organizing the didactic activity is a complex process that requires calm, patience and time from teachers, because it requires knowing the potential of each child perceived as individuality and capitalization of this potential by respecting individual learning styles. This premise is one of the priorities of the Curriculum for early education in Romania, an official and mandatory curricular document that has as a priority the child-centered teaching and offers the teacher involved in the teaching process with miscellaneous age groups, flexibility in approaching the school content. According to the same document, early education is focused on the physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of children, respectively on the early remediation of possible developmental deficiencies and differences. Both skills and acquired knowledge in early ontogenesis favor the development of others in later stages of development, and knowledge and skills deficiencies produce, over time, greater deficiencies, failed learning opportunities or impossible to exploit.

The stake of focusing on the child is the uniqueness of the human being, the fact that the human individual is unrepeatable from a genetic perspective, and this premise becomes a priority in the case of organizing the training process. The paradigm of focusing on the child involves the transition from the emphasis on the teacher, as a person who provides knowledge, to the situation in which the child becomes the active promoter of the process of his own development. In this way, we ensure the child's right to diversity, his individuality is respected (age differences, those related to his own style, intellectual work rhythm, memory capacity, volume, cognitive flexibility, etc.) also both his equity is assured and equality in training by capitalizing on the cognitive potential of each student in a personalized way and by recognizing and respecting hereditary, social, economic, racial differences, etc.

Creating a specific environment, selecting child-centered materials, identifying strategies to place the child at the center of the teaching activity, by individualizing learning experiences, encouraging children to express their

⁷ M. Ștefan, *Lexicon pedagogic*, București, Editura Aramis, 2006.

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choices and involving families in children's education are approaches that facilitate focusing on each child. It contributes to building the unique interests of children, their growing needs and offers the possibility of active learning.

Child-centered education in the context of interaction with the natural and social environment requires a holistic approach to human development, and priorities become: building exploratory skills, cultivating autonomy and responsibility.

Supporting, promoting and organizing a child-centered training process in early education in the case of mixed groups, must have as its initial premise the knowing about child personality in accordance with age and individual characteristics. In this way, teachers will accept the idea of differences, sometimes significant, between the potential of children with different ages, will act accordingly by conceiving differentiated teaching tasks, depending on the individuality of each child, which will trigger significant learning experiences in order to make progress.

One of the pedagogical principles underlying the development and implementation of the *Curriculum for early education* is the *Principle of child-centered education* that requires teachers to have a good knowledge of children's age, to respect each person learning and developing particularities and to identify the needs and requirements of the child. Consequently, focusing on the child in the training process specific to early education leads to approaching development from a global perspective, recognizing the importance of all areas of development and providing learning situations that will lead to the full development of the child.

Another teaching principle that supports focusing on the child's needs is that of free choice. This principle recommends the teacher to appeal to the children's ability to choose their favorite activities from the educational offer, meaning those that correspond to their own interests and need of affirmation. The psychological foundation of this principle is found in the specifics of the teacher's attitude towards the proposed activities, towards the different forms of play adopted, but also towards the organization and development of the learning process. This attitude can be graded, “from total acceptance, pleasure of involvement and sustained motivation, to that of formal acceptance (out of respect for educators, obedience, obey), to non-acceptance, rejection or indifference (in the position of spectator, the child does nothing or anything else but not what it is proposed to him)”⁸.

From the perspective of organizing teaching in heterogeneous groups, the *Curriculum for early education* has a major advantage. Therefore, the curriculum has a two-level age structure and, in the context of child-centered learning, encourages heterogeneity (abandoning the chronological grouping system). According to such an approach, building a strategy appropriate to the interests of children and their level of development (child-centered) is from this

⁸ E. Voiculescu, *Pedagogie preșcolară*, București, Editura Aramis, 2003.

point of view a continuous challenge and a permanent effort of didactic creativity from the teacher.

Child-centered instruction is complex and requires the teacher to be well informed about the child's psychological profile so that he or she can make appropriate decisions about how to organize the environment and choose the right materials.

The paradigm of focusing on the child in early education consists in reviewing the attitude of teachers towards the needs of the child and translated into enthusiasm, optimism, admitting errors and impotence specific to age, hesitations, changing the rules of the game if the situation requires it, so that childhood will be seen as: a period of insecurity given by the lack of complete *equipment* from a cognitive, affective, motivational, volitional and social perspective.

2. The roles of the teacher from the child-centered perspective in early education

From the perspective of focusing on the child, the role of the teacher who carries out the teaching activity with mixed age groups is transformed from that of a source of information distribution to that of a learning facilitator. In this sense, it has the role of guiding, stimulating, negotiating the responsibility of learning with children and creating a more secure environment for them. Although the emphasis is on the self-directed role of the child's learning, the teacher's responsibility cannot be minimized, because he is the one with the greatest responsibility.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of child-centered learning, the teacher must know the child so as to identify the most appropriate methods to facilitate the development of the personality, to make it possible to initiate cognitive, socio-affective, behavioral or motivational acquisitions, in accordance with the needs generated by a certain stage of development, but also taking into account the internal and external factors of learning (age, family, environmental change, health, motivation, degree of concentration, type of memory, etc.).

The teacher can focus on the development of academic skills, subsequent to the development of socio-emotional, an approach that contributes significantly to the full development of the child's personality and its preparation to deal with a more fluid, more transactional, more linear world⁹.

The role of the teacher is not limited to observing and identifying particularities or individual training needs, but must make individual training plans, in accordance with the educational objectives, to respect the individuality of the human being, to actively involve the child in planning, carrying out and evaluating the teaching activities, so that the learning experiences lived by the child are positive and allow their transfer from the formal context in non-formal and informal circumstances. Such an approach involves a constructivist

⁹ J. Shapiro, *Noua copilărie. Cum să ne creștem copiii în lume digitală*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2021.

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adaptation of the training contents, but also the identification of interactive teaching strategies (methods, procedures, forms of organization and teaching aids) that facilitate child-centered education and maximize the individual potential of each.

Focusing on the child in the context of early education also involves a designer-type thinking from the teacher. Thus, the teacher must achieve an instructional design that involves the creation of innovative, dynamic and flexible teaching situations that respect the principle of intuition, according to which, in order to make significant acquisitions in the training process, it is necessary to ensure a concrete, sensory basis. to facilitate children's access to direct, direct knowledge, through analyzers of objects and phenomena of reality. In this context, the child is placed in the situation of direct exploration of the reality that surrounds us.

Focusing activities on the uniqueness of each child involves valuing and accepting diversity, so obvious in addressing heterogeneous groups. From this point of view, the role of the teacher is to know and promote different models of learning and development, which suggests openness to expand social experiences in relationships between children from the perspective of heterogeneity and from the perspective of very different backgrounds like social, economic, religious or cultural ones. It is recommended to appreciate and support the different models of life (traditions, customs, etc.) specific to the communities where the children come from, so as to ensure the emotional foundation of the feeling of belonging to a particular community, but also to assume with dignity the social and cultural identity. to each child.

Child-centered education focuses on child well-being in all areas. The present approaches to child-centered care must reflect the realities of the times in which our children live. The current generations of children are preparing from an early age to join elite teams. Expectations towards them are focused on results, not on the process by which they are reached. It is important for teachers to be aware that activities guided by the child's interest are the way we can help them develop their critical thinking skills¹⁰.

The core of child-centered education is to help the child become independent, responsible and confident as it engages them in an active learning process that facilitates the formation of a positive self-image and gives them self-confidence.

Another role of the teacher is to pay more attention to interactions between colleagues, but also to cooperation or collaboration through group or team activities. Thus, the teacher has the task to organize the space, to prepare the materials necessary for the development of games and other types of activities. The teacher should also guide, support and interact with children in a motivating manner that facilitates the development of children's skills.

¹⁰ C. Terebush, *Educația integrată a preșcolărilor. Cum să le stimulăm mințile aflate în dezvoltare*, București, Editura Trei, 2020.

The teacher has another important role, that of organizing the environment according to the child's needs. The environment is the basis for stimulating the independence of its choice, for exploring and training the skills necessary for its full development. This space should be very diverse, so that children can find the full range of land relevant to the culture in which a person develops. It would be advisable to explore not only the kindergarten spaces, but to have the possibility of incursions in the forest, in the fields, on the waterfront, in shops, in museums, wherever they want according to their interests, of course taking the necessary precautions ¹¹.

From a child-centered perspective, it is important for educators to continually encourage preschoolers, even when they are wrong, to provide them with opportunities to explore reality in accordance with their potential, to do research, to build their own world, as they see it, and not as we see it. Situations that create unnecessary time and monotony should be avoided, so that learning experiences, but also playful ones make sense for children.

In reality, the observance of the individual potential, of one's own rhythm, of the particular needs of children becomes the sources of pleasure of playing and learning by satisfying the innate natural curiosity that human beings have.

3. The role that gamification plays from child-centered education perspective

There are many studies whose evidence is indisputable regarding the contribution of games to the development of the child's personality in early ontogenesis. According to C. Terebush¹², children are better able to concentrate and control their behavior when playing, being attracted to some games for hours, just for the simple fact that their game world is full of princesses and princes, superheroes or dolls, and in the context of combined groups the rules of the games they create are easily negotiated by the older ones, with the younger children.

Playing games in heterogeneous age groups has advantages for all the people involved. Thus, the little ones can learn and be inspired from the big ones for the games they will also play, even listening to them and watching them play, how they relate, how they express themselves, what language they use or how they negotiate. In this way, they have a clear image of how a game should be played. Younger children do not exactly imitate older ones. They look, reflect on what they have seen, and assimilate what they learn in their own way, so that even the mistakes of the older ones can provide positive lessons for the younger ones. For older children, interaction with the younger ones helps them to gain more compassion, security and protective instincts, but also good leadership skills of small groups. Even in competitive games, which are usually

¹¹ P. Gray, *Liber să înveți. De ce eliberarea instinctului nostrum de a se juca îi face pe copiii noștri mai încrezători și mai pregătiți pentru viață*, București, Editura Herald, 2021.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 10.

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provoking conflicts, the pride of adults is non-existent, moreover, the presence of younger children in the game, inspires adults to identify strategies as creative as possible. This is also explained by the fact that there is no big stake, because the big ones do not have the desire to dominate and defeat the smallest and most inexperienced, and the small ones do not aim to defeat the biggest ones in the game, so the game facilitates both parties to develop their own skills depending on the individual's psychological potential.

Studies show that in educational institutions where the teaching activity takes place with children of different ages, in the games they play there is no aggression, and the little ones are not afraid that the older ones will aggress them in any way ¹³.

The socio-relational climate created in the games played with children of different ages is much more relaxing, motivational and more fun than in the case of homogeneous age groups. Such an atmosphere favors the creation of a true playful context characterized by joy, well-being and optimism.

According to P. Gray¹⁴, the major benefit of playing games in groups of preschoolers of different ages is that, in this context, the game can highlight children who have the same skills or play preferences, even if they are different ages. Moreover, a child who is lagging behind in terms of skills or has better-trained skills than his colleagues of the same age has the chance to identify a partner in the game according to his abilities, either among the youngest children or among the oldest.

This situation respects the focus on the child's needs, because they can choose independently with whom to relate, either from older colleagues or from younger ones like them, and this position is ideal for meeting their own needs, but also for creating a real playful mood that contribute decisively to the harmonious development of their personality.

In conclusion, child-centered education takes place when teachers know very well his psychological profile, age characteristics, type and level of intelligence, predominant learning style, previous experiences, etc. This knowledge supports the teacher in designing integrated activities based on constructivist theories of learning, which involve interactivity, meaning and discovery, in creating a secure, equitable, stimulating and dynamic educational environment whose stimuli ensure emotional balance, facilitate group communication and unconditional acceptance. Regarding this didactic aspect, the child is provided with multiple roles that turn him into an active and responsible subject of his own development, taking into account the fact that in the *Curriculum for early education* the child-centered paradigm provides the basic for educational approaches that imply acquiring fundamental behaviors necessary for the development of key abilities specific to future training profiles.

¹³B.B. Whiting, The genesis of prosocial behavior, in *The nature of prosocial development: Interdisciplinary theories and strategies*, D.L. Bridgeman (Ed.), New York, Academic Press, 1983, p. 221-242.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 11.