

EDU WORLD 2022**Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues****EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN KINDERGARTEN**

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Abstract

The most natural and fundamental way of learning is learning from experiences. A child firstly starts learning through different cognitive, social, emotional and physical experiences. It is very important to encourage the child's needs to explore, to test new things. Before starting the school, a child is learning through a range of practical activities, initiatives and self-evaluation. The findings suggest to be paid a lot of attention for authentic practices, encouraging exploration and personalization. It is not easy for a teacher to find out different ways of teaching efficiently and keeping the children focused. The purpose of the experiential learning is to determine the child to take initiative, to take decisions and to be responsible for his actions. Engaging children in free play provides relevant experiences and meaningful learning that then become sources of their learning process to build new concepts and knowledge. Then, the development of the scheme provides the basic foundation for cognitive, physical, emotional, social and moral development among preschool children. It is not easy for a teacher to learn different ways to teach effectively and keep children focused. Experiential learning involves exploration and experimentation and is used when children have the opportunity to observe various phenomena and objects, so that, based on the information gathered, they must arrive at the formulation of generalizations.

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1. Introduction

Learning is an evolutionary process, of an informative-formative essence, consisting in the acquisition (acquisition, storage, processing and internal valorization) by the human being - in an active, exploratory way - of the life experience and, on this basis, in the selective modification and systematic management of the conduct, in its controlled and continuous improved under the influence of the variable actions of the environment.

“Learning is, from a pedagogical point of view, the activity designed by the teacher to determine behavioral changes in preschoolers, pupil, student by valuing their ability to acquire knowledge, skills, strategies and cognitive attitudes” (Cristea, 2002, p. 201).

For Robert Gagné (1975), learning is “that change in human disposition or capacity which can be maintained and which cannot be attributed to the growth process” (p. 11). Basically, learning implies, according to Doron and Parot (according to Sălăvăstru, 2009, p. 12), “a change in the behavior of an organism as a result of an interaction with the environment, which translates into an increase in its repertoire”.

Piaget's (1969) research reveals how intelligence evolves before and after language acquisition, the stages of intelligence development play a key role in cognitive learning. The adaptive function is manifested by “accommodating and assimilating the external reality - physical and social - and adapting to the given environment” (p. 64). Piaget was one of the proponents of this function in any activity that supports learning. During the game, the child uses acquisitions acquired from the external environment, finalizing by internalizing the rules of this world. During childhood, there is an increase in the child's ability to quickly and coherently translate into play the elements of reality: roles, attitudes, objects.

Development refers to the “process of change and stability that occur throughout the human life span” (Papalia et al., 2007, p. 28). Physical, psychosocial and cognitive are three dimensions related to human development. Papalia et al. (2007) explains physical development as growth of the body and brain, sensory capacity, motor skills and health while changes and stability in emotions, personality and social relationship refers to the psychosocial development. Finally, the changes and stability in mental abilities such as learning, attention, memory, language, thinking, reasoning and creativity refers to cognitive development.

Learning creates the area of closest development, which dare, provokes, calls to life and sets in motion a whole series of developmental processes, which are now possible for the child only in the sphere of interrelating with those around him and only during the collaboration with peers, but which, opening the internal course of development, then become a good interior of the child (Vigotski, 1971, p. 322).

In addition to the meaning of activity, the concept is often analyzed as an action, as a process directed, controlled, evaluated by the educator and as a product in an educational context. Currently, this complex and multidimensional phenomenon, learning, is defined as “a cognitive, constructive, meaningful, mediated and self-regulated process” (Bocoş, 2013, p. 85).

Experiential learning is the process of learning by doing. By involving children in practical experiences and reflections, they are better able to connect the theories and knowledge learned to real-world situations. This experience may include events in the child's life prior to the learning experience,

current life experiences, or those resulting from participating in activities organized by educators and other facilitators of the learning process.

The general concept of experiential learning is ancient. Around 350 B.C., Aristotle wrote in *Nicomachean Ethics* for the things we must learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them. Experience is the action of consciously perceiving one's surroundings. Experiences can be made conscious by individuals. But, as an articulated educational approach, experiential learning is much more recent.

Among the first works on experiential learning are *Experience and Education*, John Dewey in 1938, *Experiential Learning as the Science of Learning and Development*, David Kolb in 1984. Later works on experiential learning refer to these works. J. Dewey outlined the research on learning, synthetically expressed in the principle of learning by doing. He argued that any experience of the individual contributes to the preparation of his future experiences. The principle of experiential learning is invoked as a source of current approaches to adult learning, both in face-to-face training and in distance learning. Dewey viewed the educational process as involving the teacher and learner engaged in purposive experience. Dewey (1938) stated that: "an experience is always what is due to a transaction that takes place between an individual and what at that time constitutes his experience" (p. 41).

A few years later, K. Lewin used in adult groups situations close to the real ones (simulation, role play, case study) that led him to introduce the concept of experiential learning. K. Lewin turned to studying group dynamics. In his view, group learning is achieved if there is a contradiction between theory and actual experience.

Chickering (1977) said that experiential learning "occurs when judgments, feelings, knowledge, or skills change for a particular person in life through an event or events" (p. 63).

Yet another philosophical voice that lays the historical tradition for the philosophy of experiential education is P. Freire, a Brazilian educator whose theory of adult education was set within a larger framework of radical social change. The social concern of Freire was the liberation and democratization of the Brazilian people. Freire developed much of his thinking while teaching adult literacy. Freire (1973) "rejected the hypothesis of a purely mechanistic literacy program and considered the problem of teaching adults how to read in relation to the awakening of their consciousness" (p. 43).

D. Kolb contributed to the development of modern experiential learning theory, relying largely on the work of J. Dewey, K. Lewin, and J. Piaget. D. Kolb considers experience to be an essential factor of learning and development. For Kolb, experience is a key element of learning and development. Kolb's theory is represented by four stages of the learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Learning is effective when the learner starts from experiences. When we go through an experience, it does not always lead to new insights and new learning if we do not pay attention to it, we have to reflect on what happened, how it happened and why. In his experiential learning theory, Kolb (1984) argued that learning is "the process by which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, and knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41). Kolb's model can be used by teachers to develop effective learning situations.

“Experiential learning is different from traditional learning in many ways. Students manage their own learning activities instead of being told what to do, and the teacher no longer has control over the learning situations” (Pânișoară, 2019, p. 173).

There are various definitions of experiential Learning. The Association for Experiential Learning defines experiential learning as “a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill and value from direct experience” (Wurdinger, 2005, p. 20). The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) defines it as an inductive experience, “beginning with experience that is process through an intentional learning format and transformed into working, useable knowledge” (Wurdinger, 2005, p. 20). Moon (2004) also said, “As has been pointed out many times ... all learning is based on experience” (p. 119).

Learning and experiences will become more meaningful if there is a close relationship between school, families and community (Education, 2008). Collaboration and argumentation help children to build their knowledge as they reformulate the ideas based on their intuition (Education, 2008). “Children begin in the preschool years to develop sophisticated understandings (whether accurate or not) of the phenomena around them” (Edition, 2003, p. 12). This understanding is one of the foundations that enable children to integrate new concepts and information, then construct new knowledge.

The critical stage in human development is at the age of four to six years old. This stage is also known as early childhood. All the things that children have learned at this stage will have a major impact on their learning experience and personal development (Education, 2008). Children also try to be independent, show more initiative, and expand their creativity and decision making. At the same time, the ability to learn, relate with others and feel self-worth also begin at this stage (Education, 2008). Since children’s early experience has a long term impact on learning outcomes, experience plays an important role in this development stage.

Learning experience, as a basic element in experiential pedagogy, is defined as “the personalized way of internalizing the learning situation, personal experience generated by a learning situation, experience that can be objectified in changes in cognitive, affective or psychomotor structures” (Bocoș et al., 2017, p. 175).

A basic activity in kindergarten is the game which is a cheerful activity, in which children have the opportunity to explore different environments and perform different tasks either individually or in small groups. Among the first writings about the game are *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Johan Huizinga in 1938 and *Les jeux et les hommes*, Roger Caillois in 1958 which captures the game from the perspective of its realization, but also of society, having an anthropological role. Caillois believes that the whole adventure of human civilization can be fully captured in this slow but inexorable transition from traditional, pre-industrial, tribal society, where there is “a healthy compromise between heredity, luck, fate and personal skills based on competition, merit and on the observance of the rules (agon)” (Bulboacă, 2015, p. 233).

Past studies demonstrate that there are many benefits of playing among the young children. Play can enhance cognitive and emotional development (Dorothy et al., 2009), development of language and communication skills (Fekonja et al., 2005), social development, and physical development (Dorothy et al., 2009).

Each game uses both cognitive and social information. Thus the child acquires notions, concepts. “The game also ensures the realization of manipulations, orders, classifications, favoring the operations of thinking” (Crețu, 2009, p. 93). Through the actions carried out in the game, the child discovers characteristics about objects, physical laws, similarities and differences, all of which represent permanent cognitive acquisitions.

The study conducted by Dorothy et al. (2009) found that the concept of “learning by doing” is an important way for children to confront, understand and form new concepts from new information. According to Dorothy et al. (2009) “experiential learning tends to be a natural process most likely to use all of the senses in pretend play, in creative expression through drama, art, music and dance; in unstructured sports; and in exploration of indoor and outdoor surroundings” (p. 284).

In another study conducted by Newman and Roskos (1993), purposeful involvement in activities related to children’s interest will build up their knowledge. Children’s natural curiosity and eagerness are the elements that make them discover new concepts, so that they need to actively participate in learning activities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Children are better able to understand and remember relationships, concept and strategies that they learn through meaningful experience that connects to their lives. The integration between new concepts or ideas with previous knowledge (already understanding concepts or ideas) is the process of building the knowledge among the children (National Research Council, 2000).

Papalia et al. (2011) also stated that children spend less time on self-chosen activities or free play and more time on worksheets and preparing to read. It means that children are more driven to more formal education system instead of non-formal education. As the children grow, social skills and emotion need to be developed as the basic foundation for further learning. Emotional and social adjustment affect the children’s readiness to learn especially for kindergarteners.

As the preschool education is non-formal education, it is suitable to use experiential learning approach in the classroom. Marcon’s (1999) study shows that children from child initiated programmes, in which they actively directed their learning experience, excelled in their basic academic skilled, and they also had more advance motor skills than children who had gone through an academically directed and middle of the road (mix between two) approaches. The children in Marcon’s (1999) study also scored higher than middle groups in communication and behavioural skills. Based on the findings, Marcon (1999) concluded that the child-initiated approach is more effective than the academic approach.

The study by S. Joy and D. Kolb found the attribution of culture through which those involved learn (Joy & Kolb, 2009). Experiential learning theory offers a different conception of learning than traditional learning theories. It should be seen as a perspective on learning that involves experience, perception and knowledge. All these data determined me to study the problem of experiential learning in kindergarten.

2. Problem Statement

Children begin to learn through different cognitive, social, emotional and physical experiences. Fulfilling these functions certifies the major impact of experiential learning. We start from the premise that as long as experiential learning strategies are used by teachers, the effectiveness of the educational

act will increase. We aim to find the correlation between these strategies and the increase of learning efficiency.

3. Research Questions

The present study aims at a two-way action:

- i. Firstly, the analysis of published official studies on experiential learning and the question is: Have changes in learning have been identified through differences in the way individuals learn?
- ii. Subsequently, a local research was conducted in Romania on a group of 250 subjects aged between 21 and 54 years, from the kindergartens in Constanta and the question is: What are teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of using experiential learning?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to determine whether there are changes in children's development through experiential learning strategies and the specific type of these changes..

5. Research Methods

5.1. Selection of studies and reports

Selection of studies and reports included both published books and articles published on ProQuest Central, Web of Science, Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE), Google Scholar. National Research and Council National Center for Education Statistics reports were also included. The keywords included were: learning, experiential learning, learning theories, play, preschoolers, the game. In the search and discovery of as many related studies as possible, references of eligible studies, as well as relevant articles, the snowball technique was used. Articles examining experiential learning were considered eligible. The experiential and practical activities carried out in an attractive, flexible, mobilizing form were chosen, which would lead the activity of preschoolers towards investigation, documentation, research and practical application of what they learned, forecasting experiential learning. In terms of study design, case reports, cross-sectional studies, case studies were included. Written studies in English and French were chosen and there were no gender restrictions. Information on the impact of the psychic mechanisms involved in experiential learning on children - how they develop their skills through involvement in their own learning process - was selected and centralized.

5.2. Local research

250 teachers from preschool education aged between 21 and 54 were selected from several kindergartens in Constanta. Teachers completed a questionnaire that included questions about experiential learning strategies, in what form they use these strategies. The importance of experiential learning in preschool education, advantages or disadvantages of using experiential learning in kindergarten, the frequency of approaching this type of learning, the attitude of children in implementing this experiential

learning strategy, the benefits of this type of learning approach, which is feedback from the parents following the implementation of this experiential learning strategy. The questionnaire was completed in Google Forms, the centralization of the results was done graphically, including statistical information on experiential learning strategies. The graphics helped me to identify the percentage of advantages / disadvantages of experiential learning and the perceptions of teachers in kindergartens regarding the use and efficiency of using experiential learning as a teaching-training strategy.

6. Findings

6.1. The results of theoretical studies

Information was provided on the importance of experience in learning. A significant influence of the culture of the learners was found, experience being significant, knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.

The studies identified a percentage increase with a preference for experimentation, experiential learning being effective through active engagement.

6.2. Local research results

Following the centralization of the questionnaires, we obtained essential information regarding experiential learning at preschool age. Comparing the information provided by kindergarten teachers, we found that:

90% of the answers highlighted the importance of experiential learning strategies because it responds to the developmental needs of preschoolers, organizes and plans training through an interrelationship of subjects or subjects;

10% of the answers highlight the use of traditional methods.

Regarding the form of using experiential learning strategies, all staff responded in the affirmative, and as forms of experiential learning strategies they listed learning through discovery, through problematization, research, through projects, experiments, play. All types of activities represent different moments of the child's daily program in kindergarten and all represent learning opportunities in the most natural way of the child.

Regarding the importance of experiential learning in preschool education, the importance of establishing competencies, objectives, formulating questions, establishing work strategies, carrying out an evaluation plan was emphasized. Most of the respondents highlighted the advantages: preschoolers have the opportunity to be in practical situations, concrete, real or similar to reality, in which they must use and develop their skills, identify and examine new information, integrate new knowledge, through application and practice, to share their experience, to adapt to the specifics and requirements of teamwork, to support their products and to test their skills and demonstrate performance, responds to an intrinsic training need required by the specific psychological profile of these ages. As a disadvantage was mentioned the danger of over-activating children, which leads to fatigue and decreased attention; remedying this obstacle depends on the teacher's ability to notice when it occurs and to establish those strategies by which to

remedy it. Approaching this type of experiential learning in the educational process is a method quite frequently used by teachers because it involves the integration of knowledge in a practical way.

All the teachers highlighted the pleasure with which the children participate in activities, collaborate with each other. Children are more motivated to discover and feel more confident because they know the topic for a longer time and can actively participate in the activities.

The responses highlighted the benefits of the variety of comprehensive knowledge experiences promoted by children who work differently on aspects of reality that revolve around a central explanatory idea. All participants consider positive the feedback from the parents, whose attitude is of involvement in the organization and development of experiential learning activities. They also continue the topics addressed at home with their children through non-formal activities and discussions.

7. Conclusions

This approach is highly effective in increasing children's motivation and stimulating higher thinking operations, as experiential learning is both research and practical action. The findings highlighted the effectiveness of experiential learning in learning through: the active involvement of children in the learning process, they are encouraged to express themselves freely. The advantages of experiential learning strategies are recognized by the variety of comprehensive knowledge experiences promoted by children that process differently aspects of reality that revolve around a central explanatory idea. The experiential learning is considered to be an effective form of organizing education during preschool education. Experiential learning is a method frequently used by teachers because the involvement of preschoolers in the learning process is much greater. This study addressed the perceptions of kindergarten teachers about the use of experiential learning strategies. The types of experiential learning strategies used by teachers in kindergarten are mainly project-based learning, play, experiments because they are experiential learning strategies that focus on the child's deliberate research effort, on detecting and understanding the subject in its entirety, contributes to the learning of an interdisciplinary way of thinking and contributes to the practice of experiential learning. New approaches to experiential learning must be discovered, in the context of the predominant use of virtual space, to ensure a complete formation of the personality of preschoolers.

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