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Assumed activity of kindergarten as an environment that initiates children into lifelong learning - content analysis of Polish Core Curriculum for Preschool Education

**Zakładana działalność przedszkola jako środowiska wdrażającego
dzieci do całościowego uczenia się - analiza treści polskiej Podstawy
programowej wychowania przedszkolnego**

Abstract: The object of interest in the text is the assumed activity of kindergarten as an educational environment that initiates children into lifelong learning. The research is aimed at solving the following research problem “what is the specificity of preparing children for lifelong learning in kindergarten?”.

The interpretive perspective of kindergarten activity was made one of the concepts of educationalization/pedagogization present in the Western scientific discourse. Its basic premise is to view educational institutions as places where students, ceasing to be mere recipients of knowledge transmitted by teachers, acquire the consciousness of being educational subjects convinced of the need and importance of education.

In order to achieve research objective, that was the construction of the characteristics of the assumed activity of kindergarten in the field of initiating children into lifelong learning, the content analysis of Polish Core Curriculum for Preschool Education was made. The most important conclusion of the study is expressed in the finding that kindergarten is an educational environment in which the preparation of children for lifelong learning is

carried out in an indirect and fragmented way, based on a paradigmatically eclectic educational process

Keywords: kindergarten, preschool education, educationalization, pedagogization, lifelong learning, lifelong learning competencies, core curriculum for preschool education.

Introduction

The subject of lifelong learning is usually associated with adulthood and the diverse contexts related to it. Such recognition thereof is incomplete. For, as T. Alexander (2012, p. 53) notes, lifelong education is “a whole system of teaching and educational activities aimed at a person from early childhood to old age”. Similar thoughts are reflected in the reflections of T. Karalis (2009), who notes that lifelong learning includes diverse activities located in different educational contexts, in which subjects at different levels of education participate. In addition, scholarly reflection on the idea of educationalization, discussed in more detail later in the text, emphasizes the commitment of educational institutions to take action to prepare people to function in a learning society, and therefore for lifelong learning.

Recognizing the validity of the need to begin acquiring lifelong learning competencies in the early stages of a person's life, the objective of the text is to reflect, at a theoretical and an empirical level, on the assumed activity of kindergarten in initiating children into lifelong learning. The institution is understood here as a learning environment, that is, as a complex system of interactions in which children and the environment function in dialectical relationships, thus constituting a space for the acquisition of experiences, knowledge, skills and attitudes (Sheridan, 2011). In this context, the assumptions, shape and quality of the educational process taking place in it in their connection with the diverse factors (micro, meso, exo, macro and chronosystem) that condition them are considered important (Bronfenbrenner, 1969, after: Sheridan, 2011). One of the most important factors organizing (Grundy, 1987, after: Gosper and Ifenthaler, 2014) and normalizing (Erevelles, 2005) kindergarten activity, and at the same time providing a cognitively significant source of conclusions regarding the importance attributed to this educational institution in preparing students for lifelong learning is the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education. Consequently, the empirical part of the text was based on an analysis of its content, directing it towards solving the research problem concerning the specificity of preparing children for lifelong learning in kindergarten.

Theoretical framework of research

The theoretical framework of the ongoing research is one of concepts of educationalization abstracted by B. Lambeir and S. Ramaekers (2008). Three of them describe the postulated shape of the educational process taking place in a kindergarten, the implication of which is the legitimacy of making them an interpretive perspective in the process of empirically exploring diverse aspects of the functioning of this institution. I have presented the results of ongoing research in relation to the concept of educationalization as a facilitation of child development and making education responsible for solving social problems elsewhere, in this text I focus on the one postulating the adaptation of the shape of education to the needs of a learning society by initiating participants of the educational process into lifelong learning. It is important to note that the chosen meaning of educationalization/pedagogization is not well-known in the Polish scientific discourse, in which the term *pedagogizacja* is understood as the activity aimed at constantly increasing parents' preexisting commonsense pedagogical knowledge by elements of the scientific knowledge on bringing up children and youth, as well as issues related to it (cf. Kawula, 1997; Musioł, 2013). Notwithstanding the fact that parents can also take action to prepare their children for lifelong learning and that it is possible to improve their competence in this area, the aim of the text justifies not including this issue in the analysis. Presenting the axial idea for the discussed concept of educationalization, Lambeir and Ramaekers (2008) emphasize that educational institutions are to become environments in which children/youth, instead of merely being recipients of knowledge transmitted by teachers, acquire the consciousness of being educational subjects convinced of the need and importance of education, including its learning component. Such an assumption is in line with Michael Strain's (2000) idea of educationalization of organizations by establishing in them culture of learning, that is relevant to contemporary conditions, changes, challenges, as well as needs of learning society¹. Preschools should therefore be institutions where a culture of active participation and reflexivity is present, where children are provided with and seek out tools and resources to explore and solve problems, and thus acquire new knowledge,

¹ Leaving aside educational institutions and considering educationalization of organizations in broader, social context, the idea corresponds to an understanding of educationalization in sociological terms as "transferring pedagogical ideas and categories to areas of life directly unrelated to educational activity, such as the economy, politics, civil society, culture or private life" (Czyżewski, 2013, p. 51).

experiences, skills and attitudes that correspond not only to the requirements of the core curriculum, but also to their individualized needs and interests (Dahlberg, Moss, Pence, 2013). Here it is worth pointing out the value of the problem-based learning method, which is done by confronting the child with a specific problem, the solution of which requires research and reasoning skills (Edwards, Hammer, 2007).

In a kindergarten implementing educational activities in accordance with the chosen concept of educationalization, the basic activity concerning and undertaken by children is learning understood as “the combination of processes through a lifetime whereby the whole person-body (genetic, biological and physical) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotionally or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person” (Jarvis, 2012, p. 103). In this sense, a preschool teacher is a person who seeks child activity-based ways that lead, as it were, “by the way” to building a child’s school readiness, while at the same time having the awareness that preschool is supposed to contribute to building in children the following attitudes of lifelong learning: “interest in learning new things, confidence in ability to learn, motivation for seeking new learning opportunities, willingness to be responsible for their own learning, learning from mistakes, persistence in tasks, openness to constructive criticism and patience” (Cotton, 1998, p. 2), as well as encourage and support them in exploring the surrounding reality, experimenting in it, asking questions or questioning existing knowledge. In such a constituted educational process, the child becomes an explorer, discoverer or thinker (Bałachowicz, Halvorsen, Witkowska-Tomaszewska 2015, after: Witkowska-Tomaszewska, 2017, p. 97), naturally perfecting being active, collaborative, creative, critical, strategic, independent - qualities that are components of the profile of a lifelong learner (Leone, 2013). In the context of preparing a child for lifelong learning, it is also worth mentioning the 8 key competencies in this process identified by the Council of the European Union (literacy competence, multilingual competence, mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering, digital competence, personal, social and learning to learn competence, citizenship competence, entrepreneurship competence, cultural awareness and expression competence), the acquisition of which should also be initiated in preschool education.

In summary, the functioning of the above-described variant of kindergarten corresponds to the assumptions of the constructivist didactic paradigm. Among other things, a teacher who implements a teaching process in accordance with its assumptions takes into account the child's previous knowledge, focuses on creating teaching situations that are problem-based and require independent and unguided cognitive activities, understands the value of errors in the learning process, and together with learners reconstructs their reasoning and tries to answer the question of what the student has constructed under certain conditions (Klus-Stańska, 2018). Thus, the teacher is neither passive nor leaves the students to themselves, as he plays the role of diagnostician, tutor, advisor (Karbowiczek, 2020) or facilitator, at the same time realizing his/her own competence in lifelong learning and being a personal model for children in this regard. Thus, the concept of educationalization under discussion is not only consistent with contemporary demands on the educational activity of kindergarten, but also the requirements characterizing the 21st century for people of all ages to find themselves in a social reality that requires improving their knowledge, skills, attitudes through learning and/or interpreting, which are components of everyday life, situations, circumstances as opportunities for such activities. Moreover, the discussed concept of educationalization is closely linked to the perception of the child as a subject of educational processes. The term subjectivity, as J. Bałachowicz (2009) notes, is a polysemous concept, so it is necessary to specify that the presented approach to preschool education corresponds to the perception of the child as "a being who influences the content, form and course of events in which he or she participates, acts according to his or her own will and orientation towards changing himself or herself and the social, natural and technical world" (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006, p. 112), as well as "the one who cognises as opposed to the object of cognition" (Kupisiewicz and Kupisiewicz, 2009, p. 135).

Methodological aspects of analyzing the content of the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education

As signaled in the Introduction, the empirical part of this study was decided to be based on an analysis of the content of the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education (2017). The choice of this document instead of more detailed and internally differentiated preschool education programs is determined by the functions assigned to both types of texts. The core curriculum, which is the equivalent of the curriculum in the Polish educational context, directs the educational activities occurring in the educational system, while

educational programs are merely means to realize and put into practice the assumptions enshrined in the curriculum/core curriculum (Jonnaert, Thériault, 2013). The research technique, therefore, is content analysis, applied within the framework of the instrumental case study method, the use of which is justified when a specific case is intended to deepen knowledge of a broader phenomenon (Stake, 2010).

The research problem concerns the specificity of kindergarten activity as an institution that prepares children for lifelong learning. Therefore, the following specific questions have been assigned to it:

1. Are threads related to lifelong learning present in the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education?
2. Acquisition of which competencies related to children's lifelong learning are assumed in the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education?
3. What conditions and assumptions of the implementation of the education process in kindergarten, described in the Core Curriculum, correspond to the idea of educationalization related to lifelong learning?

Analyzing the core curriculum, the following structural units of analysis were identified: sentences/sentence equivalents; the parts of the core curriculum distinguished by its authors; and the text of the document taken as a whole. The categories and corresponding indicators relating to the idea of the subsequent specific questions and the concept of educationalization described earlier were then identified, creating an empirical model for the study and the dispositions for analysis. The research procedure therefore involved (1) identifying passages containing issues included in the dispositions for analysis, (2) identifying words/phrases/sentences consistent with the definitional indicators included in the empirical model of research, (3) analysing and interpreting their content in the context of the theoretical part of the text, as well empirical model of the study. The implementation of the above methodological assumptions created the right opportunity for the realization of the research objective, which was made the construction of the characteristics of the assumed activity of the kindergarten as an institution that initiating children into lifelong learning.

Research results

The first specific research problem concerned the presence in the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education content related to lifelong learning. When analyzing the document, it is impossible to identify phrases that

directly indicate that the kindergarten is responsible for initiating the process of lifelong learning. As if to confirm and justify such a state of affairs is the content of the General Education Core Curriculum for Four-Year General High School and Five-Year Technical High School (2018, preamble), which states that the educational stage that opens the process of lifelong learning is secondary school. At the same time, the themes of children's competencies and the assumptions of implementation of the educational process that fit with the idea of the concept of educationalization described earlier are present in the document, but their links to lifelong learning are not articulated. These will be discussed in the following section of the text aimed at answering the second and third specific research questions.

Another research question pertained to competencies related to lifelong learning that children should acquire in kindergarten. An analysis of the core curriculum based on the catalog of competencies described earlier, mainly related to attitudes, by Cotton (1998) allows us to conclude that it is assumed to acquire the following in preschool education: interest in learning new things and having the motivation to seek out new learning opportunities. They are not expressed explicitly, however, they result from the interpretation of the document as a whole and are deducible from the kindergarten's tasks of supporting and creating conditions for the child's independent exploration of the surrounding reality (items 6, 10, 11) and supporting the child's learning mechanisms (item 15), as well as the child's postulated achievement in the cognitive area of his/her development expressed in undertaking independent cognitive activity (item 19). References to the other competencies identified by Cotton (confidence in ability to learn, learning from mistakes, willingness to be responsible for their own learning, persistence in tasks, openness to constructive criticism, and patience) are missing from the document under review.

In answering the second research question, it is also essential to refer to the key competencies for lifelong learning mentioned in the previous section. The analysis, the parts of the document dealing especially with the child's achievements at the end of preschool education, but also those outlining the tasks of the preschool and the conditions and methods of implementation, allows us to conclude that preschool education takes into account, adequate to the level of children's development, the acquisition of competencies in literacy, multilingualism, mathematical and in sciences, technology and engineering, as well as those in cultural awareness and expression. With regard to the first type of competence, it is mainly considered important for children to be able to express their understanding of the world and

things both verbally and non-verbally, to use the Polish language correctly in speech, to read short written words in capital letters, to construct stories and answers to questions, to read and at least partially understand pictures, as well as to give meaning to their experiences and to recognize, name and represent their own and others' emotions and communicate with people of different ages (cf. Emotional area of child development, items 1, 4; Social area of child development, item 9; Cognitive development area, items 1-6, 9; Conditions and method of implementation, item 4). As part of multi-lingual competence, it is postulated that the child should show interest in other cultures, understand very simple commands and stories in a foreign language, use foreign language words and phrases relevant to the play (cf. Cognitive area of child development, items 21, 22; Kindergarten tasks, items 16, 17; Conditions and method of organization, item 10). In the context of mathematical competence, it is desirable to know and understand basic mathematical concepts and to use mathematical thinking and reasoning in the process of tasks and play (cf. Cognitive area of child development, items 12-17), while in the field of science, technology and engineering competence, it is considered important to use concepts of natural phenomena and for the kindergarten to create conditions for independent exploration of nature and elements of technology in the environment (cf. Cognitive area of child development, item 18; Kindergarten tasks, items 10, 11). Competence in cultural awareness and expression developed in kindergarten is related to the intention to experiment and participate in activities that are musical and graphic in nature, giving meaning to symbols, expressing creative expression during construction activities and play, as well as knowledge of the national symbols of one's own country and naming and awareness of symbols assigned to different regions of Poland (cf. Cognitive Development Area, items 7-11). As for the internally heterogeneous group of personal, social and learning competence, there are references in the core curriculum to personal and social competencies, mainly related to relationships and cooperation with others (cf. Emotional area of development, items 2-3, 6-9; Social area of development, items 1, 5-8; Kindergarten tasks, items 6, 7, 8), while there is a lack of consideration of competence in learning skills. In the document under review, it is impossible to identify content that fits into the idea of digital, civic and entrepreneurial competence.

The third specific research question concerned the conditions and assumptions of the implementation of the education process corresponding to the idea of educationalization emphasizing the role of educational institutions in preparing for life in a learning society. An analysis of the part of

the core curriculum on the tasks of kindergarten and the conditions and methods of implementation of the educational process allows us to identify several phrases describing the postulated activities undertaken by teachers that contribute to the acquisition of children's awareness of being subjects of the educational process. These are: supporting and creating conditions for multidirectional activity of the child, undertaking various types of activities (e.g., play) and realization of children's exploratory aspirations, taking into account in the educational process situations conducive to the acquisition of experiences in various areas of development and spheres of human functioning and the use of developing cognitive processes (cf. Tasks of the kindergarten, items 1-5, 9-11, 13; Conditions and method of implementation, items 1, 11, 12, 13). It seems no less important to take into account the child's cognitive needs and interests in the educational process or to help the child understand the dynamic and rapidly changing world (cf. Kindergarten tasks, item 5; Conditions and method of implementation, items 3, 6).

Recommendations for incorporating problem-based learning, problem solving, actualizing research skills, using children's prior knowledge, or recognizing the value of mistakes in the learning process are not present in the core curriculum expressed explicitly. In addition, the prioritization, standardized and expressed in the language of learning outcomes of school readiness, determines the shape of the educational process, making it partly contradictory to the assumptions of the constructivist paradigm favoring the implementation children into lifelong learning.

Summary

The analyses conducted in the text make it possible to answer the main research question about the specificity of activity of kindergarten as an institution that initiates children into lifelong learning. And so kindergarten is an educational environment in which the preparation of children for lifelong learning is carried out indirectly. Detailing this conclusion, it should be pointed out that this institution is not seen by the creators of the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education as a place where the process is professionally initiated. Initiation into lifelong learning occurs mainly through building school readiness that determines success at the next educational stage, as well as taking into account the acquisition of these key competencies for lifelong learning, which are components of the aforementioned school readiness.

In addition, kindergarten is an educational environment in which preparation for lifelong learning is fragmented. Exemplification of the signaled incompleteness of kindergarten activity is the lack of references to those

competencies recognized by the Council of the European Union as important for lifelong learning, which are more universal or concern learning skills. Another example is the failure to take into account those childish attitudes pointed out by Cotton (1998), which are realistically related to lifelong education, and enable the child to be a subject of the educational process, and therefore embody the axial idea of the chosen concept of educationalization.

The assumptions of the educational process taking place in the kindergarten, which are a combination, according to their names used by D. Klus-Stańska (2018), of constructivist paradigm² and normative didactics³, which is praxeological in nature, lead us to conclude that another feature of the kindergarten as an environment that implements children into lifelong learning, is the eclecticism⁴ of the assumptions of the educational process taking place there. In the optimistic version, this eclecticism can lead to the realization of the potential, including for lifelong learning, inherent in each educational concept. Adopting a less optimistic approach to this issue, it is possible to suppose that, in the context of the previously signaled fetishization of school readiness, the result of the eclecticism of the assumptions of the educational process, may be the prioritization of the concept of education resulting from the idea of normative didactics and the failure to use the

² Examples of assumptions that correspond to constructivist paradigm are: supporting the child's multidirectional activity (including the use of developing cognitive processes), development their learning mechanisms, exploration and better understanding of the world, as well as creating opportunities for children to acquire experiences and taking into account in the educational process the child's cognitive needs and interests.

³ Examples of assumptions consistent with normative didactics are: defining, in the form of the child's achievements at the end of preschool education, educational goals that are the same for all participants of the educational process, making school readiness the focal point of the child's development, not clearly emphasising the need to individualise pedagogical action towards each child, as well as subordinating the acquisition of experiences to adaptation goals.

⁴ In this context, it is worth referring to the views of D. Klus-Stańska (2018), who argues that paradigmatic eclecticism can have two dimensions. In the first approach, it is positive, as combining elements of different paradigms makes it possible to compensate for the deficiencies of each paradigm. A consequence of the second approach, which is characterised by incomprehension of the assumptions of the different paradigms and the differences between them, as well as by the inclusion of rather arbitrarily/randomly selected components of each paradigm in a given educational concept, is the incoherence or internal contradiction of the designed pedagogical action (superficial eclecticism). It has not been specified what dimension of eclecticism is present in the analysed document, because this would be an over-interpretation without knowing the full intentions of those who wrote the Core Curriculum.

opportunities arising from the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education to naturally initiate lifelong learning.

Sharing the views of J. Bennet (2006) that the early years of life and related education constitute the fundamental stage of human learning and development, it seems reasonable to make a recommendation on the need to verbalize in the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education and education programs the tasks of the preschool in the field of lifelong learning and the role of this environment in initiating this process. It seems no less important to build, in the course of studies preparing preschool teachers, students' awareness of this issue, by including these threads in the syllabuses of subjects. Finally, I consider it essential to undertake, both at the level of educational policy and kindergartens and the teachers working in them, a reflection aimed at making kindergarten a learning environment in which children feel they are the subjects of educational processes, i.e. they realize each of the correlates of subjectivity-subjective agency, choices and responsibility (cf. Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006).

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