

THE PRESCHOOLERS' WELLBEING – MAIN OBJECTIVE OF THE ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED IN KINDERGARTEN

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Abstract: The well-being of the child represents a fully comprehensive concept, defined within legislative documents, of public policy, following the completion of international systematic studies (Polard and Lee, 2003; Ben-Arieh and Frones, 2007; OECD – Doing better for Children, 2009; Statham and Chase, 2010; Unicef – Report card no. 11, 2013, The Convention on Children's Rights, 1989), referring mainly to life quality, namely to a satisfactory condition of existence. Explaining and operationalizing the concept of "well-being of children" involve approaching multiple factors, both particularly and at the level of the interrelationships between them, making it possible to carry out comparisons between different communities.

As teachers, we are clearly interested in factors that describe aspects of the educational life in order to raise the awareness regarding their influence on the well-being of the child and to optimize certain elements and actions that directly determine the life quality of students / preschoolers. These factors concern the following aspects: children's access to education, to educational resources; the rate of the school attendance of the degree of children's participation to education; the level of the academic performance; children's literacy level etc.

Another relevant issue presented in the above mentioned documents refers to the child's perspective on its own well-being. Both in terms of investigative approach and formative view, this perspective is a particularly relevant one.

The present article presents, through a synthesis of ideas mentioned so far in official documents or relevant research studies, the influence and the importance of educational factors in relation to the well-being of preschool children.

Keywords: well-being, quality of life, preschoolers, educational objectives, educators

In the recent years there have been quite a few attempts to study the well-being of children, and to define it. After reviewing the academic literature, we can observe that there is no definition of the well-being of children considered to be universal and fully accepted in the scientific community. This is the result of the multiple factors and indicators taken into consideration for measuring the children's well-being state. The only similar aspect, which can be identified in all approaches, refers to the quality of the child's life.

We can notice two main perspectives in defining the concept of well-being of children, as presented by OECD in 2009. The first approach defines well-being based on the dimensions of children's lives and on the indicators associated to each dimension. The second approach involves children in defining the well-being and asking them about their own opinion. This last approach is a subjective one, because children get to decide the aspects and indicators they consider to be relevant for their own well-being. A main limit of this second approach is that very young children are not able to express their opinion regarding their own well-being and their ability to express opinions related to this aspect is sometimes regarded with skepticism by researchers (OECD, 2009). Considering the lack of theory and data correspondent to this second perspective, most of the studies were conducted by identifying a set of dimensions based on the scientific literature that focuses on children's development and also based on some specific regulations already present in official legislative documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children. The studies conducted by taking into consideration a set of dimensions focus on different social, cultural and economic aspects. For example, the organization that works internationally for children, UNICEF, approaches the well-being of children (2013) in a comparative overview, examining a number of 29 countries and identifying the following dimensions: Material well-being, Health and safety, Education, Behaviors and risks, Housing and environment. For each of these dimensions the researchers established a set of components and for each component a set of indicators. We will focus in the following on the dimension related to Education. The components related to this dimension are Participation and Achievement. The indicators correspondent to the Participation component are the following three: Participation in the early childhood education, Participation rate for further education, age 15-19 and also the rate of children that are not in education, employment or training. For the Achievement component the indicator refers to the average PISA scores in reading, math and

science. All these elements, made it possible to compare children's well-being regarding the educational aspect in the 29 countries taken in the research. The comparison determined the strengths and limits for each aspect and for each country. This research does not present any measures for improving the children's well-being in the countries where the indicators showed a very low rate or suggestions for maintaining the children's well-being at an optimal level. But, we think that such complex studies that involve a great number of children are an important landmark for teachers, parents and all other persons and institutions involved in children's lives.

Another result of the revision of the academic literature leads to the shaping of another two perspectives, namely the „developmentalist perspective” and the „child rights perspective” (Pollard and Lee, 2003). The developmental perspective focuses on the skills that children should acquire for experiencing well-being in the future, having as main aim the well-becoming. The perspective focused on children's rights underlines the fact that children should experience well-being also in the present, not only to be prepared to experience this state in the future and also the fact that children should be involved in deciding different aspects related to their life, so that they feel the well-being. Both perspectives are relevant for us as teachers, because in conducting the educational process a starting point must be represented by the child's needs. Another educational principle, related to these perspectives is to prepare the children for the future by stimulating them to acquire a set of specific skills, but this acquirement process has to involve the children in an active, direct manner, so that children don't feel pushed or obliged to acquire new skills. Of course, not all the elements that indicate the level of children's well-being are directly related to education or to educational institutions, but we have to agree that education is one of the main factors involved in determining the well-being of children.

The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (2010) from the United Kingdom defines well-being as a dynamic state and puts it in relation with the fulfillment of own personal and social goals. A multi-dimensional perspective can also be encountered here, by measuring both objective (educational resources or health status) and subjective (happiness, life satisfaction) indicators on the quality of life.

Thus all indicators used for establishing the children's well-being are child-centered. We can also observe the special attention given to the childhood period in relation to the well-being estate and also to the early childhood educational process. So, we state that teachers, especially early childhood education teachers, should be aware of the significance of the concept of well-

being and should activate and properly use all available resources in order to ensure the children well-being in the present, but also to try to stimulate the child to acquire a set of skills in order to experience the state of well-being continuously, in school and then throughout life. Well-being should be aimed nowadays in kindergartens and not only at the level of the participation rate of children to early childhood education or their achievements, but also in terms of daily experiencing the state of well-being by children during the activities conducted in the kindergarten.

In the context of a project that focuses on early education and also on the well-being state of children we can also identify the multidimensional perspective and also the child-centered perspective. In the Report Promoting the Well-being of Toddlers within Europe, completed in the frames of the Project entitled Towards Opportunities for Disadvantaged and Diverse Learners on the Early childhood Road (2012) it is stated that well-being is: “a positive physical, mental and social state. It is enhanced by conditions that include positive personal relationships with adults and peers, an environment that promotes challenging indoor and outdoor play activities, and an inclusive community that allows the individual child to experience joy and happiness, to unfold his/her potential and to express his/her view on the ongoing activities” (p. 3). This definition reflects the importance of the teacher in assuring the well-being state of the child by preparing a proper environment that gives children the opportunities to experience this complex state.

In the Romanian preschool education system the concept of child’s well-being was officially introduced in 2014, through the methodical letter addressed every year to the preschool teachers by the Ministry of Education (in the Romanian preschool system there is also a Curriculum that was introduced in 2008, but this letter received from the Ministry every year stresses some essential aspects of the implementation of the curricular regulations). In the methodical letter from 2014 it is mentioned that the well-being state includes the following dimensions: mental/psychological, physical, social, material, relations with others, rights and opportunities of development. The concept of well-being is mentioned in this document together with other two relevant and similar concepts, namely the superior interest of the child and the joy/pleasure for learning. It is also stated that preschool teachers have to take into account all these multidimensional concepts in all actions they are undertaking. This will lead to a process of professional development of these teachers and to an increased quality of the preschool

education. It is clear that these statements express the need to reconsider the aims and objectives followed in kindergartens. This reconsideration means to focus less on the transmitted content and more on the child's particular characteristics, on the child's individuality and on its social and emotional development. In other words, the preschool teachers have to become aware of the fact that the child will not for certain remember that he/she learned in kindergarten about seasons, colors, vegetables or fruits, but he/she will for sure remember the climate that existed in the kindergarten, his/her own social and emotional state in this context (Molnar, 2012). This means that the child will be able to remember the extent in which he experienced the well-being state and the factors associated with this.

Thereby the preschool education has to provide children the fundamental skills to develop and strengthen their personal resources, which motivates and prepare them to take over and face certain learning tasks and life problems, to learn throughout their lives and participate responsibly in social life. In the academic literature related to the issue of the child-centered education the cross-curricular skills are also mentioned, i.e. skills that include knowledge, abilities, attitudes that are relevant to all areas of learning, for learning in general. The development of the cross-curricular skills can be done in the preschool period by focusing on the following aspects:

- the development of thinking – the comprehension is made on the basis of building some connections between the prior and new knowledge; in kindergarten it is possible to stimulate and develop the contextual, creative, critical and divergent thinking based on creating opportunities for exploration of ideas in games or experiments and by reflecting upon the own learning process;
- identity development and understanding of interdependences – in the kindergarten it is possible to develop the self-awareness of the preschoolers, to learn autonomous actions, but also to become aware of the dependence on others and of the social and cultural expectations and to promote among the preschoolers the respect for diversity and for the human rights;
- literacy – in kindergarten children get to know all possible ways of expression that can be used in different situations: using words, numbers, images, sounds, movements and technology; this is a preliminary step of learning to read and write in the primary school;

- development of social responsibility – the positive contribution of the individual to the society can be stimulated very early by using examples of different models and of best practice situations (Saskatchewan Curriculum, 2010).

Regarding the relation and the ratio care/education in the preschool system, the education has a more significant role in the latest years (Andres, Laewen, 2008) and the general aim of education is represented by the personality development according to the chronological and psychological age of the child.

Another important element in establishing the educational objectives and aims is represented, as mentioned also before, by focusing on the needs of the child. In order to develop the biological and psychological potential of the children at an optimal level, knowing their individual and age particularities, as well as avoiding the overload, have all a very important role. Of course, in kindergarten the acquirement and the development of some intellectual work abilities are taking place, the epistemic curiosity is stimulated and the concrete-intuitive thinking is being facilitated, but all these aspects have to be adjusted to the specific of the preschool age. The shaping of the young generation should focus both on the cognitive development and on the social and emotional development, by training prosocial, civilized behaviors, by training self-control, empathy, will and creativity, while using elements for the sensorial education.

The kindergarten must prepare children for life in a democratic society. This means that preschoolers have to learn to make decisions and to solve conflicts in a democratic manner (discussion, consensus, vote, without violence). This behavior and action manners should be used in kindergarten by the teachers and they should encourage the children to use them as well. In the kindergarten the children learn about solidarity, about responsibility for their actions and for their own behavior and that they can control their behavior towards others.

The children acquire skills, values and knowledge in different contexts, both in informal contexts (family, siblings, other children, and the media) and in formal ones (kindergarten, school). The development of the child represents the product of a complex exchange of all institutions and locations, interacting with the child starting from his birth. The educational process within the kindergarten and school accompany and continue the education received in the family, and in order to be efficient these must be based on the same

values. Outside the educational institutions, the greatest influence on a child's education is offered by family and group of friends; therefore, the valuing and the expansion of the personal experiences of the preschoolers are very important. Preschool education should support children in the development of their own autonomy, while allowing the accumulation of experiences.

The kindergarten represents for the child the first environment out of the family, the first environment where he establishes social relations outside the ones with the family members and where he establishes the first friendship relations and learns to respect the authority of an educator. The kindergarten should offer safety to a child, so that he develops as balanced as possible and he becomes ever more independent.

The openness towards the child, but also towards the community and towards the pluralization of the life patterns existent in the society determine that children experience the well-being state, as well as the perception of this state as being normal and as being a human right. It is important that not only the preschool system (or the school system) becomes aware of the importance of the well-being state for the development of the individuals and for the good functioning of the society, but also that each person observes the effects of its own well-being state and consequently involves actively in ensuring this state lifelong.

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