Building Meaning and Autonomy in Preschool Education

for the Future Generation

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Abstract

In this paper we analyze, through some case studies, the role of the Montessori (1912) educational approach through an ad hoc organized environment in the classroom and a structured set of activities to perform planned and conducted by an educator. In this way the child will acquire the required self-control to follow a line of conduct defined by him, through his work, guided by his interest and the developed self-discipline. All this will promote an attitude of independence and autonomy, learning how to fend for himself, recognizing his qualities and identifying opportunities to grow and to be independent in the environment in which he could be placed. 

Keywords: Montessori method, autonomy construction, preschool education.

Introduction

Family and school are the basic means for individuals in the first stage of life to assimilate social order identifying their place in it. As stated by Berger and Luckman (1995), the individual has to prepare himself for a properly behavior in the world, to know who is and what can reasonably be expected of him. However, nowadays, due to successive economic readjustments and social turbulence the institutions, pillars of social organization, are suffering a crisis of meaning in their purposes, leaving a strong load to the individuals to structure their sense of life by themselves. Ulrich Beck (1992) studied this social fact that spans most countries, through the concept of "individualization."

Starting with this issue, it is important that the individual acquires the knowledge, values and skills to cope with turbulent environments, without departing from its educational project and personal development. He must learn to plan and manage their own life path, to reinforce their learning from the experience, to gain knowledge that give him a perspective to overcome the immediacy and fragility and to identify linkages and relationships with other individuals and groups to accomplish his projects. We can not overemphasize how among the main resources for meaning structuring, is that the individual build an organized structure of life, habits and regular sequences of action, linked to his life plans.

Taking into account the above, we present in this paper some of the results of an investigation that reconstructs the educational processes implemented when the Montessori (1912, 1914) educational approach is applied, carrying out activities in an organized environment where the child works according to his teleology, appropriating creatively the instructional media, and where the objective is the formation of an independent attitude to learn to fend for himself and where he develops his self-discipline, his identity and recognizes his skills to live in the environment in which he is located.

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We argue that an educational approach to these objectives builds in the individual the habits and personal qualities needed later when he becomes a youngster to tackle other environments. We believe that there is a fruitful relationship between the formative principles of this educational approach and the educational projects that aim to strengthen the re-structuring of the meaning of life in young people, as we cannot overemphasize how among the main resources for social reintegration, is that the individual rebuilds an organized structure of life, habits, and regular sequences of actions, linked to their life project.

The objective of this paper is to present the educational processes that were found in the dynamics of the relationships among pupil activities, organized environment of the classroom, materials, and the guidance of the educator. These educational processes were oriented to: 1) the formation of willingness to learn, 2) the performance of activities chosen by the child and their impact on building his independence, 3) the relationship between his work and his self-discipline expressed in the activity performed, 4) The development of his will through his choice and derived actions.

The processes will be studied comparing a diagnosis of the student's educational initial conditions and the educational goals achieved in a semester.

**Conceptual Framework**

The study of educational processes by the expressed dynamic inter-relationships brings us closer to the understanding of educational change. It's a change sought by the educator, planned, and therefore with an explicit sense, which is expected to form certain behavior in children through self-organization processes. The observed changes respond to the question, the change that is taking place goes to a mature form of himself, to a continuation of the present state, or a transformation? What remains and what changes?

There are no deterministic changes expected because the purposefulness of the individual is present. The procedures or methods by themselves, do not cause an individual to form, nor the imposition of doing things. There is a principle of willingness and interest in performing actions. It is in this self-organizational teleology that a dynamic phenomenon develops toward forms that are emerging in the process, changing the identity. The individual teleology is being formed in the processes as an emerging outcome, not as the result of a priori design or the revelation of something existing.

**Methodology**

During the school year 2009 - 2010, the educator worked with a group of preschool children, composed of 8 girls and 5 boys, mean age of 5 years. In this paper we are referring to Francisco, a boy at the Preschool III level. The criteria were that he had no absences, learning difficulties or disabilities. Another criterion was the number of years spent at school, i.e. he had two years completed, in order to know and compare the initial capabilities and the advance, taking into account the years in the program. The study began with an initial diagnosis.

In this study the unit of analysis is the individual and his relationship with the environment. The approach applied to analyze the educational processes tries to explain the dynamics of the phenomenon by the intervention of subjects with intentional goals, but also seeks to understand the processes of self-organization resulting from the interaction with the environment, the repetition and the transformation potential, which causes new configurations.

The fundamental resource for the study of the educational processes both for initial diagnosis and for the level of advancement was the observation and documentary record by the educator of the child activities performed with the materials, in the areas and the prepared environment. So was the observation and recording of the relationship with the peers according to the value of respect for
Educational Principles

In the Montessori educational model (Montessori 1912, 1914), one of the basic principles is to cultivate willingness to learn and creativity, to assume and adapt to their natural and cultural environment in which they live. Creativity is associated with the surrounding environment, the appropriation of the characteristics of things, the association of images and consciousness that is being formed. The imagination must be fed with reality, with the movement and orientation in the natural and cultural environment. The child acquires his intellectual development through the perceptions of the environment obtained through the senses. To absorb the elements of his society and culture, the child requires social interaction and relations with signs and meanings guided by his personal dispositions, leading to changes in him.

Work is a means of building himself through experience with the environment and working with the material. As an activity selected from his interest it is expected to do it in a concentrated way, and cause satisfaction. With the freedom of the child to choose the activity of interest, it is expected to form a sense of independence as he learns to do it by himself and by his own efforts reinforcing his will. In this way of performing activities it is expected to learn to choose, to decide, to feel, to think, to act and to evaluate. The formation of independence is critical, because it involves care for him and knowledge of one's strengths and capabilities.

We will describe now the elements of the Montessori (1912, 1914) educational model.

The environment. It is a medium prepared intentionally, designed to build an order of life. It is prepared to provoke the development of a child active self-discipline and sense of security needed to explore the inner and outer world. The care and maintenance of the environment where the child lives and works, helps him to form those attitudes to respond to life in a positive way. This educational approach argues that organizing the daily work environment is the basis for the child to develop an internal order. In fact the spatial order helps to build a mental order and order is also a way to trust the existing things with which he interacts.

Educational materials. They are a means for the child to help himself in his self-education and self-development. All materials have a learning objective related with ordering the impressions that the child receives from the world around him, and seeking to provide incentives to achieve his attention and concentration. The materials can present challenges to the child in performing the task, and look for better solutions.

The educational materials intend to train the minds, and are organized into sequences of complexity. They cause stimulation of the senses and the intellectual capacities and open the way to knowledge. Therefore, their objective is to associate the experience of the concrete world with the formation in the mind of abstract representations, which are considered the foundation of creativity. Through manipulating concrete objects the child is abstracting its qualities and gets an abstract learning with a solid foundation in his mind.

The materials are ranked: practical life, language, math, art and cultural and sensorial materials.

The educators or guides. A Montessori guide helps the child to manage himself, to reflect, to have its own will, to become independent. Therefore when the guide gets that everyone in the group becomes independent then she has already reached her goal: the class is working being the guide present or not. Guides should conceive children as intelligent beings, unique and unrepeatable individuals, and remember that her goal is to observe their behavior, their work, their will and self-discipline.
A Case Study

We will compare the initial diagnosis with the status achieved by the end of the first semester of Francisco, a child assisting 2 years to the Montessori school. The areas of development are Lifestyle, Language, Math, Art and culture and Sensorial development. These are taken as the state variables relevant to his development.

We highlight here some of the educational principles exposed, that seem basic in the initial training of the child, so that later in the future as youngster he can organize and structure his sense of life, these are: a) The culture of willingness to learn and the creativity, in order to assume and adapt to the natural and sociocultural environment in which he will live. b) Work as a means of building itself. c) The will, which is required for decision and action.

We believe that these are some of the basics to continue his education into adolescence and youth to prepare him with the knowledge, values and skills to help him to deal with the environment, without losing sight of the importance of his educational and personal development project. In this way he will be able to plan and manage their own life path, to have the willingness to learn from experience, acquire a perspective to overcome the immediacy and fragility, and identify the linkages and relationships that strengthen his projects.

As mentioned, the framework for analyzing educational change is the process dynamics. We start from an initial state of the individual, to go to a later stage in a defined space and time evaluating his personal development brought by his work, the selected educational materials for each area, and the advice of the guide.

Comparing the initial diagnosis with his status at the end of the semester, we identify following:

Practical life area. Francisco continued with a high activity level, such as he had been working during the second year; he showed independence and discipline when working with materials. He worked pleasantly and showed an own will. He also improved his assurance before the group due to the guide strategy to facilitate him a trusted environment.

Area of language. Francisco advanced from a medium level to a high one in the activities chosen, showing a greater freedom of choice. During the semester the guide stimulated his interest in the material, reinforcing his will, and discipline. In two months he formed syllables and improved his tolerance to wait their turn.

Area of Mathematics. In this area he also had a similar performance to that identified in the diagnosis, i.e. exercising his freedom by selecting an interesting work. He also showed recurrence in his implementation, but his imagination was predominant, building the figures imagined. This affected his concentration and self-discipline expected in his work. The purpose of the educator was to motivate and arouse his interest, and managed to get the student to acquire the skills of addition and subtraction.

Sensory Area. In this area he increased its level and recurrent activities, showing improvement in the order and precision in the observation work, strengthening his self-discipline. He expressed creativity in the activities set by the guide. He also liked to experiment and strengthened his concentration and self-discipline.

Area arts and culture. He showed independence in the activities chosen, but for two months he had no willingness to perform the required tasks. He preferred to draw and this need was associated with his creativity, placing here his will. It was after the third month he had the ability to relate listening to the music, with the development of an associated drawing, which implies a creative intellectual effort for association.
Conclusions

According to our analysis, we note that the child educational change involves at least three dimensions: 1) It strengthens the independent work based on his interest, willingness and self-discipline, achieving the goal to start reading. The educator stimulus to arouse his interest is very important. Alongside this progress the student also practiced observation, experimentation and creativity in his activities. 2) During part of the semester in the child prevailed imaginative and playful intentionality through drawing. In this case need, will, intention and activity are closely related. 3) The child emotional maturity takes its own course, and does not affect his work with the materials, but it does his chances of socialization. These three dimensions are involved in the process of educational self-organization. The teleological organization of environment, materials and guidance, is very important in re-organizing the desirable educational changes in the student.

We argue that if an individual is trained in its early stages of life in the skills and attitudes to master his environment in a constructive and creative way, basing his social action on need, intention and will, then he will face the future environment where he will live with certain strengths and strategies. Moreover he won’t lose sight of the importance of his educational and personal development, managing his own life path and showing a willingness to learn from experience.

Bibliography


Notes:
1 The place where the study was conducted is in the Friendship Community Center in Magdalena Contreras, a suburb in Mexico City, who has offered early childhood education services for 38 years.
2 According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. (2008). Innovating to learn, learning to innovate. Paris, France. p. 237 "70-80% of students who have studied at this center have come to finish college."