Chapter 2

Learning and Teaching in Early Education: The Potentiality of the Educational Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents how interaction with the social world stimulates the learning ability in the early years. There are two types of social relationships that affect the development of the individual in childhood: adult-child relationships and peers. Both social systems give rise to different vital experiences that will influence their social development. During the first years of age, the adults who surround, care for, and provide support help acquire a fundamental role in the social development of the child. Attachment between the child and family, parental educational styles, and family discipline become basic elements of analysis. Peer relationships are transformed with the entrance to preschool. The school environment is the second stage of life in common. This chapter analyzes the learning process of children and the influence of the most important developmental contexts such as family, peers, and teachers in this process.

INTRODUCTION

Learning changes not only our knowledge and our way of doing things, but also our way of being. From the first years, we learn how to be a girl or a boy, a good student or even how to be popular among our classmates; and we mainly do it in educational contexts.

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All the boys and girls are born with the ability and necessity of learning. The way to strengthen or transform this ability has been object of interest for Educational Psychology. It is widely recognized that paying attention to this objective requires a deep understanding of the psychological development during the first years. Recently, a significant change has been noticed in the field of preschool education, in which we have moved from focusing on what children should learn to discuss approaches about how we learn and how we can improve the learning processes in the 0-6-year stage (Fuligni, Howes, Huang, Soliday-Hong, & Lara-Cinisomoc, 2012). In this chapter, we will pay attention to the interactive potentialities of the educational context dealing with the relationships that are established between preschoolers and their teachers, among the children themselves and between the school and families.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN IN PRESCHOOL YEARS

Learning can be carried out in many different ways. We sometimes learn with little conscious control, without having to plan, like when we decide to take an umbrella because we see clouds in the sky and we have learnt that this may indicate rain. However, in other occasions, a high level of organization and structure in the learning process is required, like when we start using letters to end up writing our name and creating new words. Moylett (2013) identifies three main actions involved in preschool learning: a) to explore, which includes the direct immersion in the experience and which entails the implementation of the abilities to investigate, experience, imitate and interact with things and people; b) to imagine, think and create, which include all the mental abilities which imply creating and exploring hypothetical worlds, analysing and communicating experience, as well as developing new ideas and plans in order to face a certain situation; and c) to entertain while learning, which entails the ability of being involved and concentrated on what someone is doing, paying attention, keeping a continuous effort and enjoying the achievement of objectives.

To Explore

The boy or the girl uses his/her curiosity to build an interpretation of the world which surrounds him/her. Children try to make sense of what is around them in different ways: e.g. grabbing, suckling, hitting or throwing objects. This exploratory play leads them to establish contingency and cause-effect relationships, and to test the properties of the objects. We refer to building sensory-motor schemes or repeated action patterns, which will be the basis of what will later be the mental schemes. The schemes could be of scenes (what things can be found in a greengrocer’s or which ones are in the play corner), of events (what I do in my daily routine, when we have a bath, after the break, etc.) and of scripts and stories (what sequence of facts and characters appears in the Three Little Pigs tale or what happened in the trip we did last week) (Ortega, 1999). These mental schemes become an efficient way to organize, with a certain correlational structure, the great deal of information we receive from the outer world. They are product of an implicit learning, based on associative and interactive processes of detection of regularities in space and time which allow us to control and predict most daily situations quite rightly. They can conceptually be wrong or incomplete, but they are very efficient and useful for daily actions; thus, its function is mainly pragmatic, looking for success and avoiding problems. Thanks to these schemes, a child can predict the fall of an object without knowing anything about the gravity law. However, this implicit knowledge will help him to avoid accidents.