THE EVALUATION PROCESS IN THE EDUCATIONAL CHILDCARE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Evaluation is a process used in various sectors of a society. The actions that could be evaluated are numerous and so the projects that are altered because of them. Therefore, assessment in education must also be taken into consideration. In all grades of the education system the evaluation is required and thus the young children's education should be no exception.

The evaluation as part of the teaching-learning process involves the use of diverse techniques and tools of observation and record that enable to organize the information collected in order to adapt the process to the several children. The assessment involves the planning, collection and interpretation of data and the adaptation of educational practices. It also allows know the children with whom you are working with, which should be a constant concern for any educator.

According to many theorists the evaluation process is crucial at all levels of education. Being the young children's education the “poor sister” of education in Portugal and even with less importance the education of children from 0 to 3 years old, the evaluation process will facilitate the attribution of credibility to this level of education and improve the quality of the service in the country.

The assessment serves as a regulatory element of the educational practice at any level of education and involves principles and procedures adapted to the specificity of each child. Regarding pre-school assessment the evaluation assumes a formative dimension that aims at making the child the protagonist of its own learning.

Scriven pointed out in the sixties the concept of formative evaluation assigning the following points as key ideas for achieving a practical formative assessment: regulation (of the process); reinforcement (success); measurement (difficulties). These three areas involve the use of procedures that allow clarify what is considered important to learn, to place the child in those areas of learning and identify the source of difficulties and the most appropriate means to remedy or enrich the children's learning. The procedures of formative assessment use practices that guide children towards the targets that were set, so towards the desired learning. The procedures of formative assessment also use practices that permit teachers / educators learn ways of planning early guidelines. So, its main role is to report the achievement of the objectives determined before and assist in the decisions regarding the processes to achieve those objectives. It is, therefore, to understand assessment as a means to improve the learning processes (in Leite & Fernandes, 2002 [9]).

Evaluate is thus an act that requires a pedagogical attitude and specific knowledge aimed at promoting appropriate strategies for each child and for the group. Related to the assessment is the learning: we asses to learn and to decide on the instigator conditions and modes of that learning. Cortesão (1993) [3] considers that the formative evaluation involves a diverse set of practices; integrated in the teaching-learning process and that contribute to a greater possession of learning.

Leite & Fernandes (2002) [9] also emphasize that for the achievement of the intentions that guide the formative evaluation this needs to be systematic and continuous throughout the whole training process. It doesn't make sense that the formative evaluation is only used in static and separated moments. The assessment does not exist separately and it is not a neutral process, it regulates the pedagogical practices and the processes that result from them.
The use of the evaluation process by education professionals is an indicator of quality. Through the implementation of this element appropriate practices are being met for the children’s development in daycares.

Keywords: Evaluation, personal and social development, day-care centres.

1 EVALUATION IN CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

1.1 Types of assessment for early childhood education

There are three types of evaluation for the child education: the common vision of the assessment, the professional vision and the technical vision. In the first type of evaluation there aren’t activities, times or specific instruments of evaluation. The main feature of the professional vision assessment is that this is viewed as a particular competence of the professional educators. According to Zabalza (2000) [20] the evaluation is something that the future professionals must learn through the process of training they receive. The last type of evaluation, the technical one, is carried out by specialists in fields that transcend the educational activity.

These types of assessment meet important roles in the childhood education development and are needed to improve them. Each type has specific conditions and influences, in a sense, the professionals’ actions. It is difficult, in practice, to use the evaluation types in their pure form, once it can happen that they mix in situations of the educators work.

1.2 Areas of evaluation

1.2.1 Children’s assessment

Since children are the main reference of education work it is vital to know the children’s situation and if its development proceeds in accordance with what is expected for their age and in accordance with the type of educational approach that was planned. The assessment in the children’s education must take into account all areas of development and should be seen as a project with a unit sense. This is not a spontaneous and order less accumulation of activities and unique proposes, is the idea of set that allows to conduct a complete and well integrated development. Another characteristic of child’s assessment is that it is a continuous search of information over time and the objectives that want to enhance and enrich children’s development should not be overlooked.

The information that is collected is not just a set of partial, isolated and unrelated data, because the information that we obtain will allow us to have an overview of all areas and a sequenced view of the time. The temporal view allows the educator to know the outcome of children at a certain time and see in which areas of development there have been more progress, setbacks or stagnation. It should be borne in mind that the important thing for a good professional is not how the child is at any given time but how the child evolves (Zabalza, 2000 [20]; Spodek e Saracho, 1998 [14]; Sousa, 1997 [13]).

1.2.2 The evaluation program

The evaluation program is the assessment of the overall functioning of the children, both on a global basis (overall dynamics of the group) and as a more fragmented perspective (the operation of various components of the educational process: spaces, activities, materials, forms of relationships, etc.).

Groups are the scene of several events difficult to control and follow then being one of the major difficulties faced by the education professionals. Thus, it becomes indispensable an observation and assessment model that highlights the most relevant aspects in order to simplify the complexity.
The assessment of the overall operation of the program becomes an impossible task if you do not rely on a model, without it it is difficult to decide which aspects to observe or what type of information to collect.

In childhood education the models of action are diverse, sometimes are more formalized, others appear as generic schedules. The formalized models stand out the formal aspects of education and define the primary variables and dimensions. The more generic models do not enhance that much the operational aspects, defining, instead, the principles which should govern the conduct. It is important to emphasize, then, that a basic model or proposal that serves as a reference point allows educators to conduct a proper evaluation of the program (Zabalza, 2000 [20]; Leite & Fernandes, 2002 [9]).

1.2.3 The kindergarten teacher assessment

The teacher assessment was for a long time the least considered aspect of education. Currently, in Portugal, there has been the implementation of assessment practices of teachers who follow the directives issued by the Education Ministry. The subject has been widely debated by all stakeholders; however Zabalza (2000) defends the teaching evaluation which is guided by directives that are contrary to the ones set by the Education Ministry. In the author’s opinion the educators’ assessment can be organized around three dimensions: the reasons for carrying out the assessment of himself as a kindergarten teacher, the contents of that evaluation and the tools to carry out that evaluation. One of the reasons for holding this type of assessment relates to the high emotional load that work as an educator at this stage of education evolves. It's a job that requires the attendance of a large quantity of small children with very own specificities, with particular conditions of dependence, because the vulnerability and dependency are a basic requirement to attend. This work also involves the difficulty of value the work that is being done, not for lack of indicators on children's satisfaction or dissatisfaction, but not always these are enlightening, and the importance that the behaviour of the educator has to the development of the educational process, because the professional action has to do with the professional competence and attitudes with which the educator faces the work.

In the educator’s evaluation should be considered the relationship he has with the children and families, the strengths and weaknesses in the development of educational work and the work dynamics established in the institution. The daily records of the teacher can present itself as an instrument to carry out his own assessment.

1.3 Evaluation as an educational activity

Barros (2001) [1] sees evaluation as a tool for continuous improvement of the educational process stating that in the nursery context the evaluation is education, since it extends beyond the evaluation of children. The real educational assessment involves the consideration of all players, members and staff in the process. Ventura (1996) [18] notes that as part of the educational process the evaluation should link up with other elements of the curriculum structure and must be seen as another part of the process, if not the most important one. Thus, evaluation for educational purposes must be systematic (obeying a program), continuous (constituting a step in the process) and full (all elements involved in the process should be evaluated).

The assessment while educational activity focuses on the child, see if the development proceeds according to the usual values, if their emotional and social life is evolving and if their intelligence is being properly structured must be data of ongoing reflection by the professional educator (Sousa, 1997 [13]). To assess the development is essential to adopt the strategies that are more appropriate. To evaluate is to diagnose the developmental needs and how these are being met, is the basis of the entire organization and the establishment of programmatic objectives. It becomes relevant to detect the areas of development where the child feels more difficulties to carry out programmatic reformulation to allow their recovery. In this line of thought Spodek and Saracho (1998) [14] explain that teachers perform assessments of children in order to take four kinds of decision: pedagogical decisions (curriculum planning), orientation (allow the
children to make choices, administrative (selection of materials, distribution of children, etc.) and research (related to the study of the educational process).

1.4 Observation/evaluation

The nursery as an educational environment has as ultimate goal the overall and harmonious development of all children, then the observation / evaluation shall be construed as a priority by kindergarten teachers.

As recommended Cró (2006 [5], 2008 [4]) the evaluation is the continuous and formative observation of the child’s progress (acquisitions in different fields of development) and allow us to confirm the changes originated by the different interventions. The observation, then, is an indispensable tool for the evaluation by making changes in the teaching-learning process in order to adapt to the children’s characteristics and gather information about how they are evolving. The evaluation criteria should indicate the type and degree of learning that is expected for the child to reach at the end of each stage, it is a formative assessment of skills and not of knowledge. For Cró (1987) [6] the educator must perform this evaluation using the observation of children over the implementation of daily routines and activities, in order to achieve certain goals. It is obviously a difficult task because you are observer and actor at the same time, but education is an art that seeks always, no matter the methods or techniques that are available, the harmonious and overall personality development of the learner. Likewise Spodek and Saracho (1998) [14] consider that the entire assessment involves some form of observation, either in a controlled situation, such as filling in a grid, whether in a spontaneous environment.

The educator to be able to intervene appropriately will have to learn how to observe and discuss. Estrela (1994) [8] reinforces this position stating that the educator has to question the reality and construct explanatory hypotheses. Intervene and to evaluate will be resulting actions from the previous steps.

For Tavares and Alarcão (1999) [15] observation is the gaze on the activity of a particular child, this or that group of children, is also the attention we give to what they do. The observation can be: direct, in which the observer looks or register (to return to see) the events or behaviours of children without any intervention aimed at changing them; caused, the child is placed in a determined situation by the observer, or indirect, being this one divided into two parts, analysis of spontaneous productions and interviews or questionnaires to people who know the child. The observation made either directly, caused or indirectly is included in one of two types of observation, corresponding to two levels of intention: continuous observation, developed over time and punctual observation, held at a given moment and in a given situation.

Damas and De Ketele (1985) [7] consider that the observation and evaluation are the main pillars upon the teacher / student relationship and also the foundations of a true education. So, to observe is a process that includes voluntary attention and intelligence in order to collect information from a specific object or situation. Assessing involves selecting among a set of information and criteria the most appropriate ones to the target, to make a decision. Through observation and recording of the fundamental structures of child development, education professionals can better learn the many characteristics that are involved and make a better monitoring stations around the balances and imbalances that development processes naturally involve identifying how the child is in this dynamic (Rosa, 1994 [12]).

For Vayer et al. (1990) [17] assessment is based on objective data as much as possible, collected from observation and measurement, but that is later analysed by a judgment of value that interprets the data obtained with the data expected. To evaluate three questions must be asked: what will we assess, how and why. Since the observation is one of the assessment components it is presented as a basic element for a proper evaluation practice and at the same time, an essential step towards a substantiated diagnosis. The goal to aim at during the observation is the improvement of teaching and learning and to achieve it is necessary to carefully observe the children, their relationship with themselves, with colleagues, with the carer (s), with their family, with the school, with the society and with knowledge. Like Vayer et al. (1990) [17] Tavares and Alarcão (1999) [15] also propose ways to carry out observations: guided observation, systematic and non-oriented observation. The first one defines in advance what you want to observe, based on observation instruments specially designed to focus on one aspect or another of the elements that depend on which one wants to
focus the observation. In the other hand, in non-oriented observation we observe everything that at the moment seems worth to observe without defining aspects or behaviours. It is through observation that the individual knows the world around them, the context in which it is inserted and thus adapts to it better. It is a natural and implicit attitude in the relations between individuals and between them and reality. In the educational intervention the teacher observes the child constantly and it is from these observations and according to specific objectives that he regulates his activities and the activities of his students. The observation is thus a basic part of the educational process and the more conscious and intentional, the more effective, both as an instrument of knowledge and as a means to evaluate performance. However, there are difficulties inherent in the educator's role as an observer: the ratio adult / child, quality time to observe and being both teacher and observer. Thus, it is essential to plan the act of observation, defining observer, observation time and situation to observe in accordance with the pre-defined behavioural objectives.

1.5 Observation / evaluation tool

The learning assessment involves the use of pedagogical practices that rely on a set of procedures and instruments that regulate diverse actions and processes of teaching and learning and that simultaneously determine the developmental profile of children. With this in mind Zabalza (2000) [20] and Rosa (1994) [12] emphasize the use of some type of registration as a characteristic of assessment in childhood education. A good evaluation requires the use of an instrument for registration that should be easy to use and compatible with the work done in educational settings. Records are a very important material where you can search information to develop an overview about the children's development. In this type of records, objectivity is not an absolute end, because we feel, think or understand what we see with our very personal interiority. There isn't great interest in wanting to change this, what matters is to have means to observe and understand our personal way of 'seeing'; learning from it and avoid interpretive exaggerations.

Valadares and Graça (1998) [16] pore over the validity, reliability and applicability as fundamental characteristics of any assessment instrument. The validity reflects how far the instrument matches the function for which it was conceived as fidelity translates to what extent the instrument when used more than once with the same kids, provides similar results, it is related with the consistency and repeatability of the results provided. Regarding the applicability, an assessment instrument may be valid and accurate in a particular use made of it and have no applicability because its use requires too long or because it becomes too expensive, etc.

1.6 Reference principles for evaluation

According to Zabalza (1997) [19] there are a series of principles that should act as a benchmark for evaluation:

1.6.1 Evaluate is to compare

While assessing we measure (data collection) and valuate. Each of these dimensions fulfills different functions in the evaluation process. By measuring we understand the state of the current situation we want to assess and through valuation we compare the data obtained in the measurements that reflect the 'how it is' the aspect to evaluate and certain benchmarks that reflect the 'as it was' or 'as it should be '. Without the valuation the assessment would be reduced to a mere out of the context measurement. Without measurement, valuation alone gives rise to a subjective opinion and not an evaluation.
1.6.2 Evaluation as a process and/or system

The assessment should not be separated from the teaching-learning process and has: a purpose, because each assessment responds to one or more intentions, a technique that is selected according to the purpose, questions, chosen the technique we write the questions, problems or aspects to check; an application that includes the type of situation and the conditions under which the collection of information is carried out, a response or behaviour from the children who perform the requested conduct, a correction, the evaluator measures the results, a classification, the evaluator evaluates the results, and consequences arising from the personal evaluation, family evaluation or other type.

Evaluation is a process, because it must follow a series of steps that are not independent of each other and are related and they influence each other, thus evaluation acts as a system. The evaluation process should not be confused with classification or technique. To know how to assess it is necessary to examine every step of the process and to consider that the assessment is integrated into a teaching-learning process, from where structural and diachronic considerations arise. In the structural considerations the teaching-learning process consists of a set of variables or components. Each component performs a specific function for the set. The main role of evaluation in relation to the teaching - learning process / system is to facilitate the information / valuation of the operation of components of this system and the set of all as a systemic whole. If one believes that in the teaching - learning process appear as important elements the objectives, the content, the media relations, the communication, the organization and evaluation, then the assessment plays within that system, the role of obtaining and analyzing data concerning the operation of each of those elements. The evaluation is integrated into the teaching process, in a diachronic account of the process, i.e. as a sequence of teaching actions carried out during periods of time. When truly integrated into the teaching process, the results fit into the process to recover the identified gaps, readjusting the pace and teaching strategies as well as the very form of assessment. The assessment takes place within the teaching process, affecting it. The educator depends on the situation diagnosis that the assessment offers and should record all data and integrate them into the next stage. This may mean the need to incorporate some learning not yet assimilated, or to seek other work strategies if the educator concludes that the former ones did not result.

Evaluation is an important feature of the qualitative development and improvement of the teaching process and must include all components that education has, since reducing the assessment to the consideration of only one technique, one area, one situation and only one modality leads to its impoverishment.

2 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since the stimulation / activation of the overall child’s development in early life is of primary importance for subsequent years it will be required a pedagogy sustained in quality practices that provide the child the opportunity to experience feelings of trust and emotional security, interaction and autonomy. The nursery is an ideal context for the collection of important information about child development and to proceed to the appropriateness of strategies to acquire new skills. Gordon (2005) describes that up to the three years old the child learns to walk, to control the sphincters, to run, to eat, to use verbal language, to meet their needs and to discriminate all the sounds of language. This is an extremely rapid developmental period in which the child learns through the exploration that is offered to them. Already in 1978 Piaget stressed the importance of time between birth and the acquisition of language, marked by an extraordinary mental development, often poorly assessed for not being accompanied by words which allow following the progress step by step. Thus, it becomes even more crucial to the psychic evolution, as it is a conquest, through perceptions and feelings, of the practical universe that surrounds the child (Piaget, 1978) [10]. For these reasons, Brazelton and Cramer (1989) [2] report that the smaller the child, the greater the need for successive assessments.

With small children it seems clear that the most appropriate system of assessment is the individualized assessment. According to Zabalza (2000) [20], the evaluation by comparing the child with other children their age can not be conclusive. Children are not required to look like
others, about their level of development, rhythm, action characteristics or results. Therefore, the main goal of individualized assessment is to perceive if the child is evolving at a considerable pace, if this development takes place in a sufficiently balanced way (in all dimensions) and if the difficulties faced are being overcome.

The assessment should be seen then as a tool for continuous improvement of the teaching-learning process, always considering, as its primary objective, the child’s development. The evaluation process is thus composed of all discussions and activities that take place in order to gather information that enables better educational activities.

Loacker (in Barros, 2001 [1]) indicates that an evaluation process in order to optimize the child’s learning must meet the following steps: a) determine what will be assessed, b) create the means and tools to evaluate c) to evaluate and d) interpret the results. Likewise Ribeiro (1999) [11] point out that only makes sense, in the teaching - learning context, to speak about assessment if there is any planning process. Consequently, this planning includes identification of learning objectives, the design of methods, means and materials and finally the evaluation itself with the use of assessment tools. The assessment allows you to change the educational process in order to adjust and correct what does not lead to an appropriate teaching – learning process. The main function of evaluation is to contribute to the success of this process. According to the author we must check along the way if errors or deviations are being committed and that will prevent from obtaining the desired product.

Valadares and Graça (1998) [16] set out the general evaluation principles: evaluation is an integral part of the teaching-learning process; it requires a prior and clear definition of what we want to assess and the objectives in view; it requires the choice of various assessment tools depending on the objectives and purposes; it requires you to take advantage of the strengths of each instrument and minimize the effect of its weaknesses; it is a necessary means to achieve (improvement of children’s learning) an end and not an end in itself. The evaluation process is a vital need of human beings, because it serves to guide the individual and collective decisions. It is inherently a continuous, systematic, prescriptive and subjective process, it depends on the purpose and on the context in which it takes place, it is multiformal (degree scales, ranking lists, etc.), and it adapts to many different ends (curriculum, teaching, selection, etc.).

The assessment of children from 0 to three years old is an informal assessment based on a behavioural observation of them. Registration of relevant situations is an important form of assessment. This registration may be done in several ways, including through grids of Observation / Evaluation. The evaluation grid, as mentioned by M. L. Cró allow encompass the development, based on the identified behaviours. In the author perspective the use of an observation / evaluation grid, in a natural situation, implies rationale and theoretical references. It is essential to know the subject of observation / evaluation and the references that enable and support the significant behaviours that indicate development (Cró, 2006 [5]).

REFERENCES


