

PRESCHOOLERS OBSERVING THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT OF CLUJ-NAPOCA, ROMANIA

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Abstract

The present work presents an experimental research we realised in the 2016-2017 school year at "Universul copiilor" [Children's Universe] Kindergarten with Extended Programme, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The following hypothesis was tested: If the preschoolers are directly involved in learning situations in which they will study the urban environment, then they could acquire some quality knowledge about this type of environment, developing appropriate attitudes and behaviours concerning the urban areas. In the structured experiment, we applied an initial test; we organised more activities of observation in the kindergarten's yard and in other places nearby (i.e. street, school, library, flower shop, etc.). In these places, the preschoolers noticed the urban environment and discussed how to behave in it. After carrying out these activities, we applied a final test. This test showed us increased knowledge, therefore the research hypothesis and the efficiency of the organised learning activities were confirmed.

Keywords: *visit, field activity, immediate horizon, close horizon*

INTRODUCTION

For preschoolers to acquire autonomy and to teach them to adapt themselves to the optimal urban environment in which they live, it is necessary to let them know this environment very well and to involve them in problematic situations, letting them alone to solve them. Because many children come to school accompanied by their parents or grandparents, they are less concerned about developing useful landmarks concerning the orientation in space and, for that reason they cannot come at school alone yet.

After the discussions with some preschoolers' teachers, we noticed that there are many activities taking place in the kindergarten classroom. To give children the opportunity to know in depth the immediate and close horizon of their kindergarten and to offer them an optimal framework to form the necessary skills for orientation in space, we proposed several activities of observation in the kindergarten yard.

To expend the limits of the space known by children, we organized more activities around *Universul Copiilor* Kindergarten, in Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County. The main purpose of these activities was children's recognizing and observing some attitudes and behaviours in the urban environment and the formation of some appropriate attitudes and behaviours within this environment.

These activities were included in a scientific research in order to analyse the efficiency of the organised didactic activities. In this experimental activity, we tested the following hypothesis: *If the preschoolers are involved in learning situations in which they directly acquire some quality knowledge about the urban environment, they could form appropriate attitudes and behaviours to the urban environment.*

All these activities were organised in accordance with the *Curriculum for Preschool Education* (2008) from Romania. In this official document, it is recommended the organization of observation activities, and within them, the preschoolers have the possibility to develop many illustrations about the urban area they live in.

STATE OF THE ART

Observing the environment observation was considered an essential method in geographical knowledge (Petrea, 2005) and in the Didactics of Geography (Dulamă, 1996; Dulamă, 2000; Dulamă & Roşcovan, 2007; Dulamă, 2008a, 2008b; Mândruţ & Dan, 2014). In the pre-university education system from Romania, the observation method was frequently used over time, in the

formation of geographical representations during field trips (Dulamă & Ilovan, 2015, 2017), for the study of both natural and built heritage (Ilovan, 2007), for the study of the forest environment (Dulamă et al., 2016; Dulamă et al., 2017). Teachers consider observation a valuable method for environmental education and in the education for sustainable development in Romania (Ilovan et al., 2018). To increase learning efficiency, both guiding observation and providing feed forward and feedback are recommended (Dulamă & Ilovan, 2015).

In preschool education, it is recommended children's use of the observation method to gain knowledge about the environment (Dulamă, 2010; Jucan & Chiş, 2013), to study the plants and the animals (Dulamă, 2012), to investigate immediate and close horizons (Dulamă, 2011).

The observation was used in trips, studying the arrangement of the space within a monastery by children (Souca & Sale, 2017), knowing wild animals in theme parks (Mocan, 2017), identifying the characteristics of some trees (Rusu, 2017), and knowing the environmental components found in fairy tales illustrations (Oros, 2017).

METHOD AND MATERIAL

This experimental research was realized in the 2016-2017 school year at *Universul Copiilor* Extended Programme Kindergarten, in Mănăştur, Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County. In the first stage, we tested the preschoolers' knowledge about the urban environment. In the second stage, we involved the preschoolers in several learning activities we organized near the kindergarten. In the third stage, we tested the preschoolers' knowledge about the urban environment to illustrate the progress obtained due to their involvement in learning activities. In these activities, the preschoolers explored the environment in the kindergarten yard and in the streets near it (i.e. the sidewalks, the crosswalks, the traffic lights), near the *Liviu Rebreanu* School (the yard, the sport field), in some flower shops and in some pharmacies, in the alleys of the neighbourhood blocks.

Research methods. We collected the research data through both participative observation and individual and collective conversation methods during the visits. In the classroom, we collected data through two knowledge tests. We processed the data obtained through statistical methods and we have subjected them to the content analysis method. We studied the official curricular documents and those realised by preschool education teachers. We presented the results in data tables in Excel, and we represented them in charts.

Participants. The experimental group was composed by 28 preschoolers from the middle group. *The Bees Group* children fulfilled the

criteria (age, kindergarten frequency) which we established at the beginning of the experiment. The preschoolers' levels of psychological and physical development were according to their age and had a heterogeneous and average knowledge level. The preschoolers participated to several extracurricular activities – visits – with the preschool teacher, Teci Dana-Simina, and with other adults, in order to explore the urban environment near their kindergarten.

The research material was composed by the preschoolers' results during city visits and to the initial and final tests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of learning activities. In the yard of *Universul Copiilor* Kindergarten, there were organized many observation activities. We aimed that the preschoolers, with the educator's help, identify the two buildings of the kindergarten, analyse the way in which they were located, name the colour and the shape of these buildings, of the fence and of the gate, describe and name objects in the playground (e.g. slide, hint, swing) from the kindergarten yard (Fig. 1), specify the behaviour rules within the sandpit (Fig. 6) and in the kindergarten yard.

In the observation activities organised near the kindergarten, we wanted the preschoolers to name the buildings, to specify the functions (destination) of housing blocks (Fig. 2), to characterize the commercial spaces (e.g. flower shops, pharmacy, newsstand) and some services buildings (e.g. the post, the county library, *Dacia* Cinema).

At *Liviu Rebreanu* School (Fig. 5), the preschoolers had the chance to analyse the school location in space, the colour, the shape and the dimension of the school building and of the gym (Fig. 4), the sports field, the statue of writer Liviu Rebreanu (i.e. a bust), the trees in the yard.

In the street, the preschoolers had directly observed the crosswalk without traffic lights (Fig. 3) and one with traffic lights. They observed and analysed the traffic lights, its colours and they talked about their signification. We discussed with children the rules that they had to observe when they wanted to cross a street with and without traffic lights and about the importance of observing these rules. The children noticed the pedestrians' behaviour at a crosswalk and the car moving over such a pass. The preschoolers explored a trolley station. They identified the trolley and they recognized the figures printed on trolleybuses. In addition, they specified the importance of purchasing the ticket for travel and observed the travellers' behaviour in the bus station, getting on and getting of buses.

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Fig. 1. Observing the playground in the kindergarten yard



Fig. 2. Observing the blocks in Mănăştur Neighbourhood



Fig. 3. Observing the crosswalk



Fig. 4. Observing the yard and sports field of *Liviu Rebreanu* School



Fig. 5. Walking to *Liviu Rebreanu* School in Cluj-Napoca



Fig. 6. Observing the sandpit

Analysis of initial and final tests. We administered an initial test. It included 11 items. To each item, we gave two images and the child had to identify what was in one of them: block of flats/house; cinema/church; crosswalk/street; bus station/sports field; tram/car; library/flower shop; pharmacy/school; wrong/correct crossing of the street; throwing waste on the street/in the container; the street with and without trash cans. The children circled with a coloured line the image in which the requested element was.

These results to the initial test (Fig. 7) confirmed the necessity of the preschoolers' involvement in activities concerning the exploration of the

urban environment in order to know better this type of environment and to develop correct behaviours.

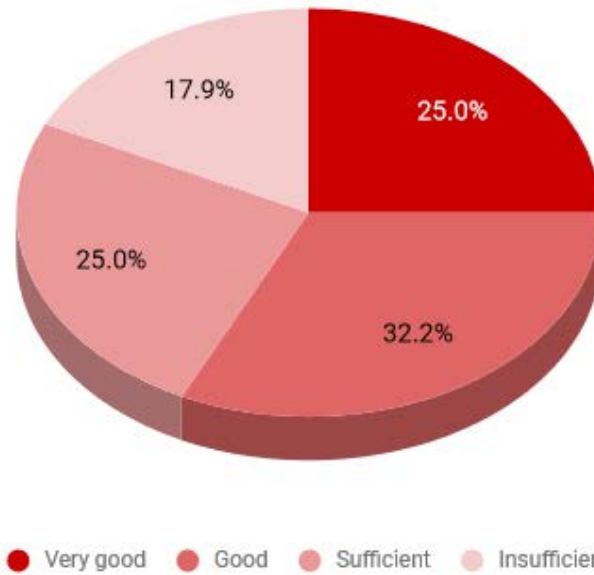


Fig. 7. The preschoolers' results to the initial test

The final test included 11 items similar to those in the initial test. The assessed knowledge and behaviours were related to the observation activities organised in the urban area where the children were involved. Figure 8 presents the results to the final test.

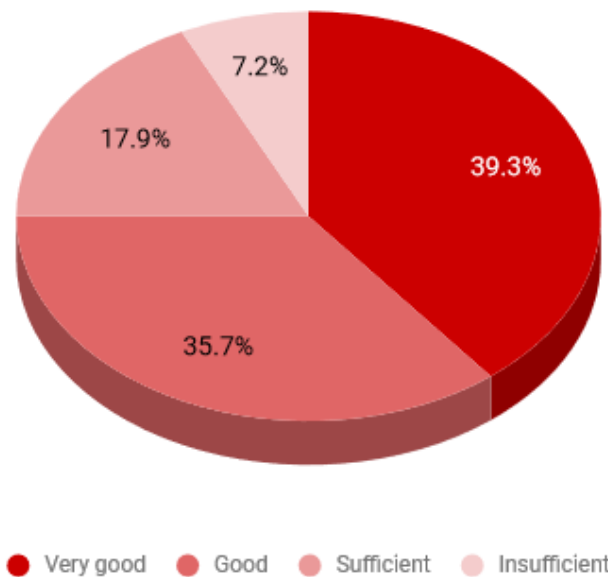


Fig. 8. The preschoolers' results to the final test

In Table 1 and in Figure 9, we present the preschoolers' results to both initial and final tests. To the final test, the children were graded with *very good* (11 preschoolers – 39.28%) and *good* (10 preschoolers – 35.72%). These results show an increase of the preschoolers' knowledge about the urban environment in comparison with the initial test.

Table 1. The preschoolers' results to initial and final tests

No. of preschoolers	Test	Very good		Good		Sufficient		Insufficient	
		Nr.	%	Nr.	%	Nr.	%	Nr.	%
28	Initial	7	25	9	32.15	7	25	5	17.85
	Final	11	39.28	10	35.72	5	17.85	2	7.15

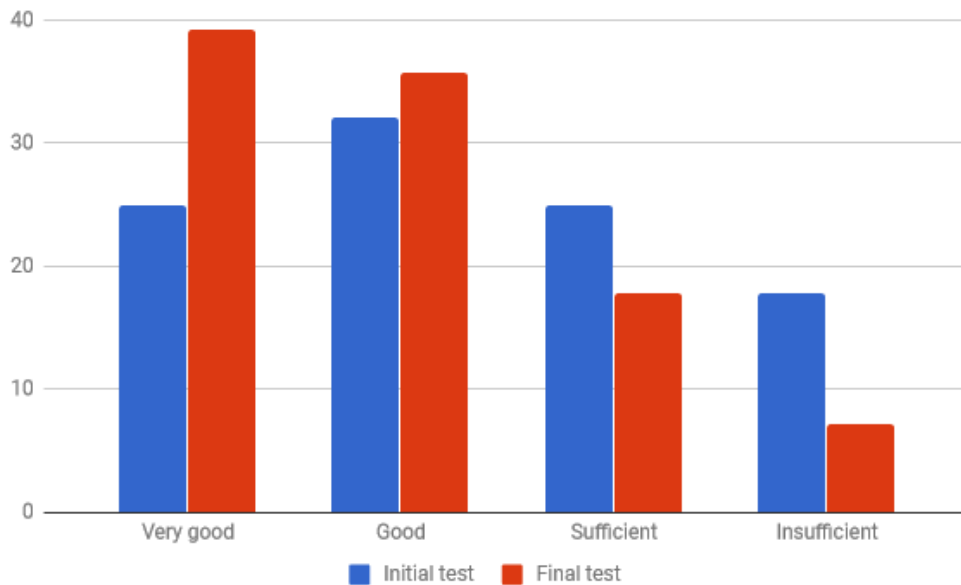


Fig. 9. The preschoolers' results to initial and final tests

CONCLUSIONS

At the end of this research, we found out that the preschoolers had acquired plenty of knowledge about the urban environment and they developed appropriate behaviour. Because of the observation conducted by the teacher through questions and through the correct use of the feedback, children developed representations of apartment buildings, of commercial

centres, of institutions, of streets and of the bus stations in the kindergarten area. The visits in different places in the urban area, where the preschoolers were involved, offered the optimal framework for authentic and quality learning. In the experimental activity, the obtained results to the applied tests are indicators, confirming the research hypothesis.

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