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**APLICATIONS AND CONTEXTS OF  
THE SOCIO-CONSTRUCTIVE (Social-constructivist)  
PARADIGM  
IN EARLY EDUCATION  
CASE STUDY**

***SUMMARY***

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The interest for the early education has as cause the fact that the childhood experience got tremendously modified within the last years, the parents and teachers are granting nowadays more importance to learning and early development rather than in the past. The science progress in areas such as neurobiology, psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology has confirmed the social constructivist theory of Lev S. Vîgotsky concerning the vital influence of the social context in the child's development. Thus, the knowledge creation is no longer considered as an internal comprehensive process but a process achieved within the social interactions.

In the early education, the main consequence of Vîgotsky's ideas is the modification of the report between development and learning, learning being able to lead and stimulate the optimal development of the preschool child. Following the recent discoveries of the emotional and social development of the child, it was extended the applying into practice of the social constructivist theory, solving thus an older dilemma which persisted in connection with the practices which should be used in the kindergarten. In this context the early educational programs centered upon the socio-emotional development of the preschool children have got more influence within the last twenty years as compared to the programs centered upon the development of their academic competences. Different organizations performing in the area of the early education and well-known on international level have elaborated, proposed and disseminated a series of quality standards and good practice sets in early education. Thus, in the context of the constant preoccupation upon international plan for promoting the early education, the interest of the national authorities in this area had presented a meaningful growth in the last decade.

The content of the present Ph.D. thesis is enrolling within the effort to connect the issue of the early education from our country to the debates taking place, on the international scale, upon this topic. More exactly, we tried to discover how we can apply within the preschool educational system from our country a series of practices specific to the social constructivist paradigm of learning and early development.

**The theoretical section** of the PhD thesis comprises four chapters. In the first chapter, there are defined the concepts of early education and early development, being presented in the same time the five fundamental perspectives of approaching

the early learning and development: biologic-evolutionist, psychodynamic, behaviorist, the one of the cognitive development and the contextual one. Then there are concisely analyzed the ideological fundamentals of the early education, starting from the premises that the classical ideological paradigm of the early education (romantic, of cultural transmission and of progressive education) tend to unify within socioconstructivist paradigm of learning and early education, the model of early education being focused upon the development, as a specific of the democratic societies.

In the second chapter, it is described the social constructivist paradigm of the early development. First there are analyzed the ideas of Jean Piaget, Lev S. Vígotsky, Jerome Bruner, Urie Bronfenbrenner and Barbara Rogoff concerning the preschool child development, comparing the constructivist theories with the socioconstructivist ones. The social constructivist paradigm of learning and early development is accepting the idea of building the knowledge, but is conceding a higher importance to the social interactions and to the socio-cultural context, rather than the internal development mechanisms.

The sintagm *socioconstructivist paradigm of early education* can have two different significations. The first, more constricted signification is referring to the neo-constructivism, to the representatives of the Geneva School, who have proven through experiments the cognitive progress of the children upon the basis of the social interactions. A second signification of the sintagm „social constructivist paradigm” has a wider sense and is referring to the consensus achieved between the community of teachers and educationalists concerning the practices to be used in the early education. These practices have as fundament a mixture of ideas extracted from the constructivist and the socio-cultural theories of the development. Among these ideas we consider that the most important are the following:

1. The educational activities of the preschool children are developing in a determined social and historical context (Vygotski, 1978); as a result, the ideas concerning the child’s development are influencing the practices used by both teachers and parents. An integrated approach of the child in

early education is aiming the interaction between the family and the kindergarten educational microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

2. Knowledge has a constructed character (Piaget, 1965). From this reason the physical environment, the educational ambient and the experimental learning have an extremely important role for the child within the age period 0-7 years old (Bruner, 1970).
3. The quality of the social interactions among the children and between the children and adults are influencing and determining the optimal development of all competences and motivating, emotional, social and cognitive abilities of preschool children (Siraj-Blatchford and others, 2002).

These three fundamental characteristics of the social constructivist paradigm – understood in its wide sense – is guiding and orienting the activity of the practitioner in early education upon three major directions of action: improving the partnership with the family and the community, creating the educational environment of the classrooms and increasing the quality of the interactions among the children and between the children and the educators (Carlson, 1999).

The main concepts used by the social constructivist educators in their professional activity are the following: the socio-cognitive conflict, the global development, the proximal area of development and the acquiring support. In a first circumstance, the social constructivist approach of the early childhood education is bringing in the discussion the role of the social interactions in the cognitive development of the child. The solving route of the socio-cognitive conflict indicates the fact that the cognitive adjustment is achieved from the social towards the individual (Doise and Mugny, 1998). The interactions among children, on one side, and between parents and teachers, on the other side, have a meaningful impact upon the *learning tendencies* in the early period (Kochanska, Murray and Harlan, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). These interactions among the preschool children and the adults have an important role not only upon the cognitive development of the child but especially upon his emotional and social development (Sims, 2007). In a second

circumstance, the early intervention of socio-constructivist type is aiming the *global and optimal development* (Hendrick and Weissman, 2010), by *co-construction of learning* and using the *acquiring* (Jordan, 2004; Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) in order to activate the *proximal area of development* of the child (Vîgotsky, 1978).

The third chapter is describing the implications of the social constructivist paradigm of the early development upon the educational practices used in the kindergartens. In this sense, there are presented a few early educational programs centered upon development and applied in USA as well as in Europe: *Project Construct*, *High Scope* and *Reggio Emilia*. After the development of these educational programs there was proposed a series developmentally appropriately practice (*developmentally appropriate practice* - Bredekamp and Copple, 1997).

The adequate development practices of the teachers consist in taking the best decisions upon the information concerning the children development. More precisely, on the basis of these information, the teachers are deciding what and how will teach, they settle on how they evaluate the knowledge accumulated by the children and how will they adapt the curricula and the training to the preschool children's capacities, needs and interests. The development of the preschool child includes three dimensions: particularities of age, the individual distinctiveness of the child and the social and cultural conditions specific to the child's living environment (Getswicki, 1999).

The last chapter is interpreting, in a comprehensive socio-constructivist grid, the reform of the early education from our country. Thus, first of all it is presented the child's integrated approach to the level of educational policy, afterward being analyzed the implications emerging from the kindergarten practice, following the legal changes of the last four years; then, there are identified the ways of improving the educational practice used in the kindergarten as related to the applying and the development of the curricula, the quality of interaction between the learning partners, the reconfiguration of the educational environment and the diversification of the partnership with the parents.

From a socio-constructivist perspective, the social context is decisively influencing the child's development and learning techniques. Thus, the integrated approach of the early development presupposes collaboration between the institutions, organizations and the people involved in the early education. This alliance is generating in time quality educational services. For example, the integrated approach of the child's development is presupposing the completing of the learning activities achieved within the family with those offered by the kindergarten (New and Cochran, 2007). Thus, between the environment of the family and the one offered by the kindergarten there must co-exist a certain convergence: the surroundings from the kindergarten must include a family character and the family atmosphere must take into account the creation of new opportunities for an optimal development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

The solution for achieving to this situation consists in the reciprocal coordination of the two micro-systems for preschool children development, by means of creating connecting bridges within the partnership with the family and by improving the educational environment at the kindergarten. The development of the partnership among community, family and kindergarten represents a guarantee of improving the education practice used both within the family as well as in the institutions dealing with early education, such a joint venture being considered as a fundament for the construction of a genuine learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

**The practical part of the paper** consists in a descriptive case study concerning the innovative practice used at the kindergarten in agreement with the social constructivist paradigm of early education and in a longitudinal quasi-experimental study aiming to increase of the development level of the preschool children, after applying within the family and at the kindergarten of an optimization and development program of emotional and social abilities of preschool children.

The case study is describing the socio-constructivist practice introduced at a group of preschool children during the scholar year 2009-2010. *The purpose* of the case study consisted in the analysis of the socio-constructivist practices introduced and applied for the group "The Elves" from the Kindergarten with extended program

n.21 – Iasi, during the scholar year 2009-2010. *The objectives* of the case study were aiming the following aspects:

- presenting the ways of re-equipment of the educational environment from the classroom in harmony with the social constructivist paradigm of the early education;
- individualizing the act of learning by using new grouping techniques of the preschool children within their daily activities;
- the systematic use of socio-constructivist strategies of learning used in the group: learning centered upon child, integrated learning, learning by discovery, learning through cooperation, learning from the equals;
- the evaluation of the quality of education for the group “The Elves” during the scholar year 2009-2010, from the parents’ point of view, after using the innovative practice.

During the process of re-equipment of the educational environment in agreement with the social constructivist paradigm of the early education there were taken into account the following criteria: ensuring the children security and health, stimulating the pleasant behavior of the children, reducing the frustrations and conflicts which can arise between the children and the educator, and not the last, stimulating the communication and the social interaction among the preschool children. Therefore, the traditional way of organizing the classrooms presented only eight stimulating elements of the preschool children, in exchange, the socio-constructivist environment had included twenty such elements.

In the last sub-chapter of the case study there are analyzed the parent’s opinions concerning their satisfaction as regards the quality of the educational practice used at that particular preschool children group and it is presented a synthesis made upon the basis of the practical experience acquired after the usage of the innovative practice at that group included in the case study, as well as after the comparative analysis of the traditional practice and of the socio-constructivist practice used at the group “The Elves”.

Reconfiguration of the educational environment upon the basis of international models of well practice was only a first step in the process of quality culture development of the preschool education. Therefore, by introducing some efficient methods of grouping the preschool children, the teachers have individualized the process of learning, which had allowed a better knowledge of the development level of each child. As well, by applying various socio-constructivist strategies, such as the learning activities from their equals, it was stimulated the development of the preschool children attitude towards the process of learning

All these changes were possible due to the high degree of involvement of the parents in the activities developed at the kindergarten. The diversified ways of improving the partnership with the parents used by the teachers in their group had allowed the building of a small community of learning in the domain of early education. The progress in time of this mini-community had become visible after the analysis of the opinion questionnaires filled in by the parents. It was very interesting the fact that, although at the end of the scholar year 2009-2010 the parents had considered that there was an increase of the quality of the educational practice, they had ascertain that they need a better relationship with the educators as regarding the behavior of the children in the family and at the kindergarten. Consequently, in the following scholar year, it was applied, in close cooperation with the parents, a program for the optimization of the emotional and social abilities of the preschool children.

The longitudinal cvasi-experimental study was achieved starting the premises that the most important acquisitions in development, acquired by the child during the period 3-6/7 years old, are those from the non-cognitive level. Among these acquisitions, the emotional and social competences play an essential role in the adaptation of the preschool child to the social life.

*The purpose* of the longitudinal cvasiexperimental study consists in the identification of all advantages and disadvantages generated by the improvement of the collaboration among parents and educators, following the application of a program of optimization and development of emotional and social abilities at the kindergarten and in the family. *The objectives* of the longitudinal cvasiexperimental

study can be organized as *stage objectives (the pre-experimental stage, the experimental stage and the post-experimental stage)*, each research stage aiming to one or several determined objectives. The objectives of the longitudinal quasixperimental study are presented as follows:

A) the pre-experimental stage:

1. the analysis of the parent's needs as regarding the support that can be offered by the educators in the development of the emotional and social abilities of the preschool children;
2. elaboration of the educational intervention program;
3. the creation of the experimental and controlling groups;
4. primary evaluation of the level of global and optimal development of the preschool children from the experimental and the control group.

B) the experimental stage:

1. applying the educational intervention program consisting in achieving at the kindergarten and within the family several development and optimization activities of the emotional and social abilities of preschool children;
2. secondary and tertiary evaluation of the level of global and optimal development of the preschool children from the experimental and the control group.

C) the post-experimental stage:

1. final evaluation of the level of global and optimal development of the preschool children from the experimental and the control group;
2. verifying the research hypothesis.

The longitudinal study was developed during the period September 2010 - June 2011 with two large groups, an experimental group from the Kindergarten with extended program no.21 and a control group from the Kindergarten with extended

program no.11 (which is a structure belonging to the Kindergarten with extended program no.9). The research had comprised four distinct phases: the preparation of the research, the pre-testing phase, the development of the experimental stage and the post-testing segment. During the section of research preparation, developed between 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2010 and 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2010, we have ensured all formal and ethical (deontological) conditions for the achievement of the longitudinal cvasiexperimental study, as well as for the maintaining of an optimal rhythm of the testing phases; we would like to mention that the envision and the development of the research took into consideration all requirements imposed by the deontology of the scientific research upon human subjects: we have obtained the parent's agreement as well as the educator's agreement for their participation to the experimental research, we have ensured the anonymity of the subjects, the use of the results exclusively in scientific purpose, protecting the intimacy of the involved people, reducing to a minimum the interferences with the didactic process. As well, during this stage, we have selected the experimental group and the control group,, taking into consideration the relatively similar characteristics of those two, each group having 30 preschool children with ages between 5 and 6 years old.

*The hypothesis* of the longitudinal study is the following: applying in the same time, at the kindergarten and in the family, for a program for developing the emotional and social abilities of the preschool children is determining an increase of the development level of their cognitive, emotional, social and driving force abilities as well as of their personal autonomy and the pre-acquiring educational aptitudes of the preschool children.

*The independent variable* of the longitudinal study consists in the development of some specific development and optimization activities of the emotional and social abilities of the preschool children. *The dependent variables* take into account the degree of development of the cognitive, emotional, social, driving force, personal autonomy and pre-acquired educational competences.

*The educational intervention program* comprises a number of 30 activities destined to parents and 34 activities intended to educators and was created upon the basis of development and optimization activities of the emotional and social abilities

of the preschool children included in the two practical guides, one destined to the parents and the other one to the educators, published in 2007 by Catrinel A. Ștefan and Kallay Eva and entitled "Developing the Emotional and Social Competences to Preschool Children". For an accurate evaluation of the preschool children development level it was used the *Preschool Children Development Evaluation* issued by Mircea Miclea, Anca Bălaj, Mihaela Porumb, Dan Porumb and Sanda Porumb (Miclea and others, 2010). Therefore, this instrument was applied during the whole period of the scholar year 2010-2011, to the two large groups of children – the experimental and the control group.

The data obtained after applying the educational intervention program to the experimental group for the duration of the scholar year 2010-2011, were compared to the data obtained to the control group and the results of the research have partially confirmed the hypothesis according to which, the concurrently usage at the kindergarten and in the family of a development program for the emotional and social abilities of the preschool children is determining an increase of their development level and competences in the cognitive, emotional, social and driving force area, as well as in the area of personal autonomy and for the school preparation. Consequently, it was identified an influential relationship between the educational intervention achieved by the educators and the level of social and emotional development of the preschool children. However, it was not confirmed the fact that an educational intervention aiming the socio-emotional development of the preschool children can influence other development areas (cognitive, driving force, preparation for the school or personal autonomy). Therefore we can ascertain that the educators from the experimental group have used a series of developmentally appropriate practice of the social and emotional abilities of the preschool children within the intervention program. Nonetheless, we cannot determine the same thing about the preschool children's parents belonging to the experimental group. The results of the longitudinal study are orienting us towards the belief that there was initially a certain discrepancy between the educators' perceptions and the actions, on one side, and the parents' perceptions and the actions on the other side. This incongruity was smoothed out in time, as both parents and

educators got to adjust their opinions and actions after successive evaluations of the development level of the preschool children.

In fact, one of the limits of this research took into consideration the lack of a strict control as regarding the way of happening, within the family, of the development and optimization activities of the emotional and social abilities of the preschool children. The other two confines of the research have specified the fact that the group of the preschool children included in the longitudinal quasiexperimental study was a relatively small one, the research results comprising a reduced degree of performance for the system of early education, as well as the fact that there are a series of risks as regarding the objectivity and neutrality of the researcher, due to the overlaying of this status to the one of kindergarten practitioner.

At the end of this Ph.D. thesis there are issued a series of recommendations and final considerations. The novelty of this thesis comes from the endeavor to connect the practice used within a group of preschool children with the early education socioconstructivist paradigm. In the process of innovating the educational practice used by the group "The Elves", the educators had followed the following scalable path: the systematical improvement of the collaboration with the parents, recreating the environment in the classrooms, the efficient grouping of the preschool children during their learning activities and assessing the games played by the children for envisioning and practicing some learning techniques from equals.

These actions are inter-dependent, because the reconfiguration of the educational environment would have never be possible without a close cooperation with the parents; it the same idea, working upon small groups would not have been an option and it would made it impossible the identification of the interests of each child without an attractive educational environment. The development of the learning dispositions from the equals had encouraged knowledge building through social interactions on the basis of these individual interests, and, implicitly had stimulated the children's aptitude development towards learning. Consequently, the feed-back obtained from the parents was essential for an appropriate educational involvement as regarding the development of emotional and social abilities of the

preschool children. As a matter of fact, the most important personal contribution to the present Ph.D. thesis consists precisely in this scalable path in innovating the kindergarten educational practice.

Following the correlation of these personal contributions with the research results together with experience accumulated as a practitioner, I have emphasized a series of facets which could have a meaningful impact upon the quality of the educational services offered by the early education institutions of our country to our community. Therefore I have made a series of recommendations addressed to different types of authorities: central authority, local authorities, the initial and continuous training providers as well as to the early education establishments.

In the last part of the paper are described the future research directions aiming to reconstruct the longitudinal study, significantly increasing the number of parents and preschool children included in the cvasi-experiment, achieving a microgenetic study where we can analyze the quality of the preschool children interactions after the creation of a new educational environment in the classroom, as well as the analysis of the impact of the socioconstructivist practice upon the organizational culture and the institutional performance of the Kindergarten with extended program no.21

The advantages of several socioconstructivist practice in the kindergarten are deriving, primarily, from ensuring better conditions for the optimal and global development of the preschool children. It is not merely about the enhanced quality of the equipment and about a superior level of performance and preparation in professional activity of the educators. Another advantage of applying socioconstructivist practice in the kindergarten is the existence of different development opportunities for the preschool children and the common building of knowledge, within a genuine learning community. At least, but not at last, a third advantage is drawn from the teacher's satisfaction towards the positive evolution of each child, the socioconstructivist practice including the individualization of learning and the adequate convergent intervention of the parents and teachers in the preschool child education.

The shortcomings of this practice applied at the kindergarten are not to be neglected. It is about, primarily, a relatively large quantity of materials as well as a superior professional quality of the human resources. A second drawback comes from the kind of instinctive reaction of some teachers when it comes to new educational practice. Undoubtedly it is far more effortless for an educator to work in a frontal position, imposing the authority to the children through different disciplinary techniques. But this working style is no longer modern in a world changing with astounding speed. Twenty years from now, the preschool children will have to adapt to the new world and this will be almost impossible if they are not building their own knowledge through multiple social interactions, acquiring from a very early stage a series of adequate driving power, emotional, social and cognitive competences. Therefore, introducing and using the developmental appropriate practice both in the family and at the kindergarten have become a necessity.

Finally, if it were to evaluate the advantages and the inconveniences of introducing at the kindergarten of a series of socioconstructivist learning practice, we will reach the following conclusion: on short term the obstacles seem insurmountable, but on middle and long term the effort is definitely worth while. This entrepreneurial vision implies a series of metamorphosis in approaching the early education, both on theoretical level as well as on practical and acting level. In reality, the utility of this PhD thesis is developed from the following aspects: on a theoretical level we have offered a series of relevant reasons concerning the introduction at the kindergarten of some socioconstructivist learning practice, and in the practical-implementing plan we have described the results obtained at a group of preschool children, after the accomplishment of educational practice during a scholar year and on the scientific research plan we have studied and analyzed the outcomes of the learning socioconstructivist strategy in partnership with the parents. This triple utility of the PhD thesis is greatly reflecting the coherence of our approach. An approach engraved with an optimist perception for the future towards the world of our children is heading towards.