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Educational Potential of the Child's Out-of-School Experiences in the Opinion of Early Education Teachers

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Abstract

In this article, research based on a qualitative strategy is used to synthesize the beliefs of early education teachers about children's out-of-school experiences and the need or possibility of using them in early childhood education. The aim of the research was to establish teachers' ways of thinking about the features of children's out-of-school experiences and their value in the school-based learning process. It also investigated the importance that the respondents attach to children's out-of-school experiences in the context of constructing knowledge during classes. Studying teachers' conceptualization of this area is very important due to their relationship with school practice – more specifically, because they design the didactic and educational situations aimed at integrating children's out-of-school experiences with the knowledge and experiences at school. The experiences gained in the extremely complex and dynamic contemporary space of a child's life are an important source of their knowledge and the basis of learning. In the course of the research, the following research questions were probed: What characteristics do teachers attribute to the out-of-school experiences of children at early school age? What conditions, if any, do teachers create in the classroom for children to compare the experiences they gain in the everyday space of life with their school knowledge? Due to the interpretative approach adopted in the qualitative research,

the method of individual open interview was used, as it reveals what the respondents think about reality and not what the researcher thinks about it, looking to confirm their own theses. The interviews were conducted with early childhood education teachers directly by the researcher from November 2019 to February 2020. The analysis of the individual interviews helped identify the constitutive features of children's out-of-school experiences. Although the teachers were aware of the continuity, multiplicity, transformation, and integrity of children's out-of-school experiences, in their statements they expressed caution about using them in education at school due to their "imperfection." The teachers' way of thinking about the role of out-of-school experiences in the education of a child and, consequently, in school practice, requires change.

Keywords: early school age child, out-of-school experiences, constructing knowledge, teachers' beliefs

Introduction

In the face of multiple transformations in the social and cultural space of human functioning, education ceases to be an activity that is separate from life and becomes an integral part of it (Bagnall, 1994; Gunguz & Hursen, 2015; Malewski, 2010). Everyday life becomes a synonym of the synergy of experience, reflection, and knowledge that stems from them. There is an interpretative change in the understanding of the practice of education and upbringing, as well as the meanings that are given to these processes. The dominant perspective in learning about the essence of the learning process is to perceive it as an integral element of the everyday world of life, as a natural activity integrally connected with other everyday human activities (Rogers, 2003; Meighan, 2005). Thus, an important issue that sets the framework for the search for educational potential in various areas of human activity is connecting the learning process with the everyday world of an individual's life (Aittola, 1998; Romi & Schmida, 2009). Everyday life is a source of multiple experiences embedded in various contexts of human existence. Experiencing events in

everyday situations is associated with facing new challenges and with what is part of the permanent changes of contemporary reality.

As a result of the development of civilization, the emergence of new forms of participation in sociocultural life and widespread access to information, the space of a modern child's life is changing; new spheres of their experiences are therefore emerging. When characterizing the space of a child's life, Barbara Dudel and Małgorzata Głoskowska-Sołdatow (2009) emphasize that it is a "space" experienced by them "in the physical (sensual) and cultural (related to symbolizing) dimensions – a space which it gives meaning in relation to situational conditions" (p. 174). In this space of life, the process of learning takes place, understood as "the acquisition and transformation of various types of experiences – cognitive, social, but also life experiences related to one's own biography, including various types of situations that are the place of events, meetings, and dialogues with others, as well as practical experiences. On the basis of such experiences, knowledge about oneself, the world and one's relations with it is constructed" (Uszyńska-Jarmoc, 2009, p. 123). Each individual experiences and remembers a certain situation differently. Therefore, it is the individual dimension of experiences, in addition to the personal characteristics of the individual and sociocultural conditions, that determine the individualized path of the child's passage through the "developmental labyrinth" (Nelson, 2007, p. 241).

The fundamental change in the child's subjective status, raised within the contemporary developmental discourse, is the perception of the child as the subject of experience and its reconstruction, as a result of which the child builds their individuality, knowledge, system of values, standards, management functions, competences, etc. (Bałachowicz & Witkowska-Tomaszewska, 2015). In pedagogical reflection, especially in light of contemporary children's sociology (Corsaro, 2015) and sociocultural discourse, the concept of the child as an active participant in social life, and not a passive object of external influences, is highlighted today. A child perceived in this way constructs knowledge through spontaneous activity in the multidimensional space of life, active participation in the life of social groups, and through purposeful, planned activities on their

own and their social environment. Learning, which is informal and incidental, plays a key role in this process. A child's daily experiences are important and decisive for their development and personality formation, as well as for their perception of the world and attaching meanings to it.

As Krystyna Ablewicz (1997) claims, "the space of a person's life is marked by his experience in terms of both area and meanings, and the knowledge derived from experience is primary and fundamental to knowledge acquired scientifically, systematically, and methodically" (pp. 22–23). The direct experiences of a child – which are part of their emotional states and sensory cognition – the experiences that other people describe based on their own experiences, and verbal messages – or their secondary interpretations transmitted through the media, for example – constitute the intellectual and social capital of a child. In out-of-school, everyday experiences and interactions, people get to know each other and evaluate the quality of their knowledge mostly on the basis of cooperation, joint learning, and family and social coexistence (Pieter, 1993). Learning understood in this way involves all spheres of the child's personality, because experience – according to Knoud Illeris (2006) – basically covers all aspects of learning, both internal mental processes and processes of social interactions, both cognitive and emotional aspects. The learning process, analyzed in terms of cognition, emotions, and the social dimension, takes place within formal, non-formal, and informal education, but in order for learning to be defined as being based on experience, several detailed qualitative criteria must be met (Illeris, 2006, pp. 164–165):

- a) Learning must be subjectively important to the individual, in cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.
- b) It is legitimate to talk about learning through experience only if a single event can be understood in the context of previous and future experiences (the principle of continuity).
- c) The process of interaction between the individual and the social and/or material environment must be of such a nature that the individual in a given situation is the subject, i.e. that they are not only present, but also self-aware.

- d) The formation of experience is always socially mediated; it requires a socially defined context.
- e) The environmental impact of the interaction process must reflect specific sociomaterial and/or social structures.

In the contemporary social and cultural reality, school has definitely ceased to be the only and most important source of knowledge and experiences for a child. Children, adolescents, and adults all learn and are raised to an increasing extent under the influence of the broader environment, in what Trempała (2011) calls the “non-school living space with great educational potential” (p. 96). One’s own experiences are the source of knowledge and the basis of human learning. Joanna Malinowska (2014) divides them into direct and indirect. Direct experiences are involved in emotional states and sense cognition. In this type of experience, the essential elements are the direct participation of the individual in the event, observation and contact with the object of cognition, and human exploration. In indirect experiences, on the other hand, intentional ways are important, including personal and transpersonal sources. The former is composed of accounts of other people from their own experiences and verbal messages, while the latter comes from interpretations created through other people, secondarily transmitted through the media, textbooks, etc. However, Malinowska considers the personal sources of discovery experienced by a child to be the most important source of cognition/learning.

In addition to the reality that is real, available to sensory experience, and understood as a system of real, objectively existing things, facts, people, and phenomena with which the child interacts directly in real time with the use of all their senses, virtual reality is increasingly becoming a source of subjective experiences, which provides new opportunities to act, participate in relationships with people and things, and to simulate and model the real world. In addition, new fields of subjective experience are also opened up by augmented reality, which is created by superimposing virtual information onto real objects. Being in an enlarged reality leaves a human being in a real dimension and in real time; it enriches

the real world without replacing it with an imaginary world (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2011).

Due to the fact that out-of-school experiences are a source of knowledge for a child, simultaneously a condition and a development factor, it is absolutely necessary for a teacher to include them in the learning process at school. According to Jerome Bruner (2006), school is a source of knowledge and individual and social experiences for students and “what it actually teaches, what styles of thinking and what” speech registers “it develops in its students cannot be separated from the location of the school in life and the culture of its students” (p. 48). Otherwise, school is isolated and the children cannot construct their knowledge using everyday experiences gained outside of school. The research on school reality (e.g., Herrmann, 2009; Klus-Stańska, 2002; Nowicka, 2010; Sławińska, 2010; Nowak-Łojewska, 2011; Kuszak, 2011; Kochanowska, 2018) shows that a child’s considerable informal knowledge and large array of experiences gained in everyday life is not sufficiently utilized at school. It is overlooked that children can and are able to learn differently, at different paces, in various social relationships, and – above all – not in a directive, informative, unidirectional, and selective manner (Śliwerski, 2014).

In this article, research based on a qualitative strategy is used to synthesize the beliefs of early education teachers about the out-of-school experiences of children and their use in early childhood education. The teachers’ ways of thinking about the features of children’s out-of-school experiences and their value in the learning process at school are investigated. Studying teachers’ conceptualization of this area is very important due to their relationship with school practice – more specifically, because they design the didactic and educational situations aimed at integrating children’s out-of-school experiences with the knowledge and experiences at school.

Research Method and Procedure

One of the basic tasks of a teacher activating students in the educational process is to help them verify their personal ideas about the world by providing an opportunity to expand their experiences during the exchange of knowledge and individual understanding of phenomena and processes. In order to skillfully combine the experiences of children at school with those gained during non-formal and informal education, as well as with the experiences of their day-to-day existence in the world, the teacher must act as a supportive strategist who skillfully uses their students' intellectual, emotional, and social resources. Such a teacher gives the proper meaning to the child's knowledge by recognizing their preferences and ways of experiencing the world (Samborska, 2013).

Teachers' beliefs about children's out-of-school experiences determine their approach to using them in the process of constructing knowledge in school practice. Beliefs are commonly referred to as all the "mental" prerequisites about the world that the subject feels are real (Lemańska-Lewandowska, 2013, p. 15). The dictionary definition of a belief is "a judgment or opinion based on the belief that something is true or false; an established view of something; conviction, opinion" (Szymczak, 1979, p. 979). According to Magdalena Grochowalska (2012, p. 17), building beliefs is a process in which an individual aims to recreate hypotheses and theories that already function socially; their formulation in practice determines the subjective interpretation of educational reality. Research on beliefs allows one to describe the content that teachers ascribe to reality in education.

In order to determine what features early school education teachers attribute to children's out-of-school experiences and what they mean in the context of children constructing knowledge at school, qualitative research was carried out using individual, open-ended interviews. According to Earl Babbie (2008), an open-ended interview is "an interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. The interviewer has a general plan of action, but it is not a specific set of questions that should be asked in specific words and in a set order" (p. 342). The questions addressed to

the respondents were open-ended. Some of them were basic questions, such as “How do you assess the amount of experiences children acquire in the out-of-school space?” “What is their source?” “How do you assess their value and importance in the process of school education?” “Do you refer to them and under what conditions and in what situations?” The remaining questions were formulated in the course of the interview and were aimed at facilitating the respondents’ thematization of their experiences.

Due to the interpretative paradigm adopted for the qualitative research, the study shows different ways that early school education teachers think about the features of children’s out-of-school experiences and the declared ways of using them in their work with children in years 1–3 of primary school. For Neuman (1994),

the most important in the interpretative approach is the systematic analysis of social meanings created by people in their natural conditions of functioning, with a view to understanding and interpreting how people create and understand their world in which they function. (p. 62)

In an interpretative approach, words are data from the research on which the researcher’s attention is focused. It is thanks to the statements of the respondents and their narratives that it is possible to gain insight into the meanings given by informants to the events in which they participate (Zwiernik, 2015).

The research material was collected by the author as part of a wider research project. The questions, addressed to 23 teachers working in the primary classes of primary schools in the provinces of Silesia and Lesser Poland, focused on the following research problems:

1. What features do the teachers attribute to children’s out-of-school experiences?
2. Do the teachers create conditions in the classroom – in the declarative aspect – for children to compare the experiences they gain in

the everyday space of life with their school knowledge, and if so, what conditions?

The individual, open-ended interviews did not involve repetitive questions or a specific order to the issues. The interview method used allowed for interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. The interviewer followed an overall plan of action, but it was not a specific set of questions that should be asked in strictly defined words or a specific order (Babbie, 2008). As a result, the interview revealed what the respondents think about reality, and not what the researcher thinks about it, looking only to confirm their own theses. The research was conducted directly by the researcher from November 2019 to February 2020. The respondents were all women. As far as the work experience of the respondents is concerned, 8 teachers (34.78%) have worked in schools for no more than 10 years, 10 (43.48%) for between 11 and 20 years, and the remaining 5 teachers (21.74%) for over 20 years.

Presentation and Analysis of the Results

In line with the adopted research approach, the teachers' ways of understanding the phenomenon under study were analyzed by the researcher in terms of categories of description. They are "generalized and structured descriptions of understanding the phenomena present in the experience of the respondents" (Męczkowska, 2002, p. 18). The categories of description were selected by condensing topics that appeared while reading the answers of the respondents. Established description categories, on the other hand, constitute the result space and then may be subject to hierarchy – but not necessarily – resulting in the description category structure. It should be emphasized that these categories of description are always individual and collective at the same time, which means that the same statement may reflect various expressions of the same concept or different concepts (Jurgiel, 2009). Due to the interpretative paradigm used for the qualitative research, the research objective

was not to consider the topic in terms of quantity and multiplicity, which is characteristic of a quantitative approach, but at extracting the meanings and dimensions of out-of-school experiences of early school-aged children from the teachers' perspective.

The analysis of the collected statements of early childhood education teachers identified the following constitutive features of out-of-school experiences of children.

Continuity

According to the respondents, at every moment of their life a child is in the world of everyday experience, which can be a source of knowledge and values. From the first moments of their life, a child accumulates experience in the space available to them at a given developmental period. This was indicated in the following statements:

“Children spend time in different places, among people, constantly gaining experience at home, at school, at the playground They learn the world all the time.”

“Contemporary children are constantly ‘attacked’ by various stimuli and information, thanks to which they gain new experiences. The world today is so intense and is changing so quickly that the child is ‘doomed’ to gain new experiences every day and everywhere.”

They combine the continuity of experiences mainly with the dynamics and multidimensionality of the contemporary living space, which in a way forces the individual to be open to new experiences at every stage of life. Children constantly gain new experiences in everyday situations and through various forms of activity in the out-of-school life space.

Multiplicity

The respondents compared a child collecting out-of-school experiences to discovering the world. The child shows openness to new experiences and

learns about new objects, events, and processes through activities such as observation, exploration, experimentation, searching for and collecting information, solving problems, and asking questions. These activities – according to the respondents – are motivated internally, by curiosity, interest in the world, a craving for knowledge, surprise, etc.

“Children are very curious about the world. They focus on everything, especially what surprises and interests them. Children have to touch everything, see what surrounds them on a daily basis This is how they accumulate their experiences.”

“Children gain experiences through their activity – activities in the immediate surroundings and the environment. Young children are curious about the world. If they like or find something interesting, they want to know it thoroughly. They collect experiences.”

“The child focuses on what interests them. They accumulate experience through their activity in the environment.”

The respondents emphasized that the daily space of a child's life has expanded due to new media, and that therefore children's out-of-school experiences have increased by virtual objects:

“I've been working in primary school classes for over 20 years. Today, children have a wealth of experience and knowledge about things that children once did not have, due to the lack of access to the media and the Internet.”

“Today, children live not only in the real world, but also in the virtual world. Thanks to this, they have the opportunity to gain new experiences. It is impossible to completely limit the influence of the media, especially the computer, on children and their knowledge.”

Children's experience of the virtual world, and thus of the wealth of objects that they learn about, was assessed by the surveyed teachers as inevitable. In their opinion, in addition to the media reality – which is the source of the so-called mediated experiences – the amount of out-of-school experiences of children is growing due to messages and reports of other people from their own experiences. The source of indirect experiences in this case is verbal messages from parents, adults, peers, and other people from the child's social environment.

“The child asks parents and grandparents about various things and learns. Especially grandparents can be a treasure trove of experience and knowledge for children. Similarly, the child makes new statements thanks to siblings, peers, and various groups they are in, on the playground.”

Therefore, the respondents pointed to the multiplicity of children's out-of-school experiences, the source of which are both personal and non-personal, and which are shared by other people. It is worth emphasizing that the teachers made no reference to the contemporary socio-cultural theory, according to which the child is not passive in the process of gathering experience, being socialized, and transferring knowledge, but actively participates in this process and negotiates meanings together with others.

Predominant Lack of Intentionality

As the respondents stated, the greater the child's freedom of activity and the more stimulating the environment surrounding them, the greater the range of their experiences will be. The child's out-of-school experiences are mainly the result of a process of involuntary, unconscious learning. According to the respondents, in the everyday life of a child, unintended, unplanned gathering of experiences occurs most often.

“Children do not even realize that they are gaining experience outside of school The very fact that they are in different

places among people causes them to gain new experiences. They don't even plan it."

In the opinion of the teachers, experiences outside the school environment are accumulated in almost every situation when a child comes into contact with specific objects, phenomena, and processes that attract their attention. Children gain out-of-school experiences along with a context that includes the situations and circumstances that happened to them.

Specificity and Differentiation

The teachers stated that children build their image of the world every day on the basis of the experiences they accumulate. Due to the diversity of the material and social environments in which they live, each child has a different resource of out-of-school experiences.

"When a child becomes interested in something, it becomes amazing and he or she wants to know about it. Each child focuses on something different. Hence, out-of-school experiences vary among children."

"Every child has different out-of-school experiences because children live and grow up in different settings. They are surrounded by a different environment, and they are in contact with different things and phenomena. Each child experiences the world in their own way."

The respondents expressed the belief that out-of-school experiences are related to a child's craving to learn about the surrounding world. The baggage of these experiences depends on the areas of the child's activity, which the respondents say is significantly influenced by adults.

Dependence

According to the respondents, the intermediaries between the child and the out-of-school world they experience are mainly adults – for

example, parents, who decide about the scope and content of the reality experienced by the child and who direct the child's attention to what they feel are important elements of reality and show them how to interpret them.

“Early school children are still not very independent when it comes to getting to know different things, phenomena, people They are still small. They experience what surrounds them, what is within their reach.”

“When children experience something, they focus on specific, often superficial, external features of objects and phenomena But the adult should help them get to know the world.”

“The task of us adults is to provide children with enough stimuli and to create situations that will allow them to experience and learn about the world around them. The more we give them of ourselves, the more they will be interested in the world and learning about it. Children must be motivated to learn about the world around them and to gain experience.”

The teachers' statements show that the social environment and interactions with others co-define what and how the child experiences. Children are perceived as not yet fully independent and not fully manifesting the ability to act autonomously. Therefore, the process of gathering experiences must be mediated by adults. These opinions from the teachers indicate a lack of faith in the ability of a child at early school age to learn independently.

Processuality and Integrity

The teachers pointed out the multifaceted and integrating nature of children's experiences. Below are examples of statements that illustrate this position.

“Children experience reality with all their senses. Often, when they talk about something, e.g. about new places they have seen, you can see what their attitude to it is, whether they liked it or not, what they would like to change. They remember what interests them, what they experience when they do something.”

“The child experiences everything ‘with his whole self.’ Not only does he learn something new about the world, but he also experiences the situations and events in which he participates. They react very emotionally to what they experience.”

Processuality refers to the respondents thinking about the child’s experience as a cognitive, emotional, and social process. Joyful experiences such as the thirst for knowledge, curiosity, fascination, surprise, the joy of discovery and creation, commitment, passion, and satisfaction increase the effectiveness of cognition and action. An active attitude in the process of acquiring experiences is caused especially by those situations that make students intellectually embarrassed, arouse their curiosity, are a source of deeper emotional experiences, and at the same time create conditions for action.

Transformation

In the teachers’ opinion, the world of children is characterized by temporal variability related to their development and changes in the surrounding reality. Children gain experiences that change qualitatively and undergo transformation.

“Every day, in various situations, children gain new experiences and learn. They develop, they are more independent. What they have learned before changes, their knowledge is enriched.”

“The older the child is, the more experience he gains and he becomes more and more independent. They are trying to get to know what interests them more and more precisely.”

According to the respondents, the transformation of experiences stems from the child taking up new activities. The teachers' statements refer to the concept of structuring and restructuring individual experiences through the individual's own activity (Przetacznik-Gierowska, 1993), in which development is considered in terms of gaining and organizing individual experience. According to this concept, the life experiences of each individual are subjective and unique and have a fundamental developmental meaning for them. The essential thesis of this concept is that experience is the material of development and development is a series of changes resulting from the structures of this experience being organized and transformed, both as a result of incorporating new experiences and adapting activity so as to regulate the relationship with the surrounding world. This position is constructivist in the sense that it assumes that the psychological development of an individual is a process of constructing their mental structures as a result of accumulating and structuring experiences derived from their own activity.

Imperfection and Subjectivity

The final feature of out-of-school experiences indicated by the teachers is related to the fact that the respondents create conditions for children in the practice of early childhood education to compare everyday experiences with those acquired at school. The respondents stated that personal knowledge resulting from the experiences a child gains outside of school is selective and does not fully reflect those elements of reality to which the child relates, due to the previously indicated features, such as spontaneity, emotional character, and the "immaturity" of the child. Despite the self-declared acceptance of the child's out-of-school experiences in school practice, most of the respondents expressed doubts as to their value in the classroom. Teachers are most often aware that students have knowledge that goes beyond the school curriculum, but they avoid or marginalize conversations with students about it. They focus on the school curriculum and often do not have time to talk about students' out-of-school learning experiences.

One can get the impression that the teachers are not interested in what the child thinks and how they come to their convictions (Klus-Stańska,

2002; Trempała, 2011; Kochanowska, 2018). Similarly, research on the practice of early school education carried out by Renata Michalak (2004) shows that the youngest students hardly ever engage in activities that trigger spontaneous actions and reveal the personal experiences necessary for constructing new knowledge. Teachers, to a limited extent, create conditions for the youngest students to stimulate the mechanisms and processes of building personal knowledge and acquiring skills as a result of the diverse research activities undertaken by pupils independently and in teams. Moreover, they do not see the sense in or need for incorporating the events taking place in the modern world into everyday school issues. Children are not helped in crossing the border between school curriculum and out-of-school experiences, which builds in them the belief that school knowledge is only used to present to the teacher and is not applicable in everyday life.

School is then a “from – to” space because it creates a world that the child is supposed to explore, but which is already organized and structured by the “better knowers,” that is, adults (Dudel & Głoskowska-Sołdatow, 2009). As a result, the child functions in two separate worlds: the school world and the out-of-school experience.

Conclusions

In contemporary pedagogical discourse, as well as the psychological and sociological approach to childhood, children are no longer perceived as dependent in thinking and acting, but are instead perceived as active and engaged “actors of social life,” active entities collecting and reinterpreting experiences and shaping the surrounding world. The contemporary living space is a rich source of everyday experiences for them. Children build their visions of the world based on their own experiences, which “make up an individual construction of reality created with the help of cultural tools and reaching understanding of meanings” (Bałachowicz, 2003, p. 22). The learning process takes place in relationships with others, in organized or incidental situations related to life tasks. As Edmund Trempała (2011) writes,

you have to go beyond the school, which still too often does not keep up with the quite spontaneously progressive development of many institutions and non-school incentives with a large amount of valuable educational information, because everything creates an opportunity to learn and develop one's talents and acquire knowledge or competences. (p. 97)

The teachers' approach to the out-of-school experiences of children in the practice of early school education is largely determined by their beliefs and ways of thinking about the educational value of these experiences in the context of constructing knowledge at school. The task of teachers is to seize opportunities and plan situations for children to share their out-of-school experiences and use them as a building material for constructing knowledge. As Kinga Kuszak (2013) writes,

entering the school space, a child should have the opportunity to confront their existing competences in new situations and the opportunity to participate in various situations conducive to developing and improving their competences so that functioning in various communication relationships outside the home and school environment becomes satisfactory (from the perspective of the individual). (p. 26)

The possibility of communicating in a group, exchanging thoughts and making references to everyday life outside of school, is conducive to the child's integration of school and extracurricular knowledge. As the research shows, teachers of the first three years of primary school are aware of the continuity, multiplicity, transformation, integrity, and processuality of children's out-of-school experiences, but they express caution in using them in their work due to their imperfection. As in the case of other studies on school reality, in this case there was a tendency for the teachers to focus on implementing the recommendations of the core curriculum and on the transmission nature of early school education. Therefore, the teachers' way of thinking about the role of out-of-school experiences in education, and consequently in school practice, requires a change.

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