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Cultural and natural environment in education as support for the development of active life from early childhood[1]

The article focuses on the issue of motivation provided by school and extra-curricular education of children for their active interest in the outside world. It is based on the educational concept of regional education which is present in the curriculum of primary education in Slovakia as a cross-sectional topic of educational content and is integrated in all educational areas of its curriculum in pre-primary education.

Key words: primary education, educational environment, cultural and natural environment, regional education, active learning, determinats of active learning
Słowa kluczowe: wczesna edukacja, środowisko edukacyjne, środowisko kulturowe i przyrodnicze, edukacja regionalna, aktywne uczenie się, determinanty aktywnego uczenia się

Wsparcie aktywnego rozwoju dziecka we wczesnej edukacji z wykorzystaniem środowiska kulturowego i przyrodniczego

W artykule zwrócono uwagę na wykorzystanie w edukacji szkolnej i przedszkolnej dzieci ich najbliższego środowiska kulturowego i przyrodniczego do aktywnego zainteresowania przyrodą i otaczającym je światem. Koncepcja edukacji regionalnej jest obecna w programie nauczania szkół podstawowych na Słowacji jako element treści nauczania, a w edukacji przedszkolnej jest zintegrowana ze wszystkimi obszarami edukacyjnymi programu dydaktyczno-wychowawczego.
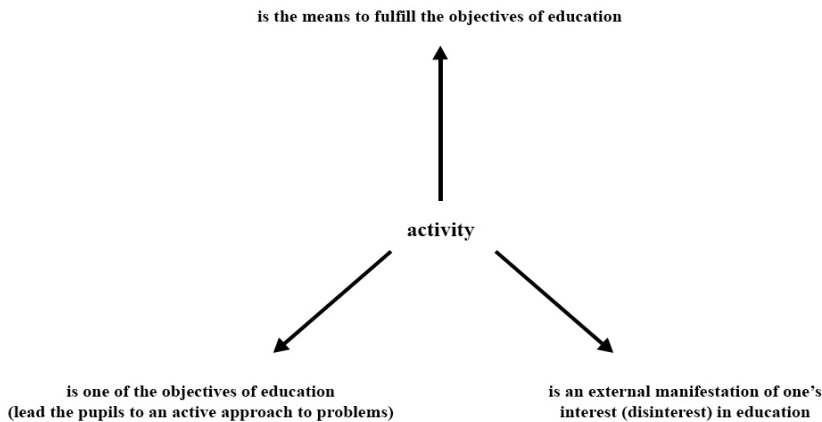
Introduction

Quality and effective education is an implicit requirement for any well-organized society oriented towards sustainable development. An education program that prepares children for real life and respects the level of their personal development is a necessity for assuring such a quality. It is a program that, in addition to accentuating cognitive processes, also provides space for the motivational function of education, socialization, emotional development of children, and offers real practical outcomes.

The starting point for getting to know the world by children in both preschool and younger school age is their nearest cultural and natural environment in which they know their way around the best. An important element in the education of children of this age is, therefore, its regional aspect. In the early period of education, it enters into it as an elementary cultural and natural environment, which becomes a means as well as a target of educational processes. The early period of a person's life is an important stage in personality development because it brings one into the process of education in its both formal and informal context. This refers to the nurture and education of the child before entering primary school together with the first years of education in primary school.

Objectives of the active approach towards learning and living

Activity and movement are some of the manifestations of life. In the process of nurture and education, the activity and active manifestations of children have an important place in the fulfilment of the educational program's objectives. In addition to that, they also represent a means of achieving these objectives. The formation of an active approach to life also plays an important role, which we see as a consequence of the appropriate but also lacking motivation of children (Fig. 1).

is the means to fulfill the objectives of education

activity

is one of the objectives of education
(lead the pupils to an active approach to problems)

is an external manifestation of one's
interest (disinterest) in education

Figure 1. Activity in education.

Source: author's own.

Active approaches in the outcomes of children's education are also declared by the State Programme Curriculum for both pre-primary and primary education in its general objectives as follows: "(…) improving social activity of the child and meeting the need for social contact with both peers and adults, (...) supporting the child's relationship towards learning, (...) mediating the foundations of public culture and developing the dimensions of school competence, in order for the child to easily adapt to the subsequent primary education, (...) allowing the child to fulfil their life and learning through playing games, direct experience, and active observation (...)"[2]. In the field of primary education, the curriculum formulates an active approach in the objectives and acquired competences as a support of those cognitive activities, "which are expressed by concepts such as one's own active exploration, searching, observation, (...) the need to improve pupils' self-confidence in solving problems related to learning, leading pupils towards active citizenship, (...) the ability to recognize a problem at school and in its immediate surroundings, thinking about its causes, and proposing solutions according to one's knowledge and experience"[3]. The objectives and aims of the active approach in the educational process are a prerequisite for children to acquire those competences that will become part of the equipment forming their personalities and characters in the future. In that case, these individuals automatically direct towards being active, the activity itself, and the active approach to life and problem-solving even in their adulthood, without the need for

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[2]   ŠVP ISCED0, p. 6, https://www.statpedu.sk/files/articles/nove_dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/svp_materske_skoly_2016-17780_27322_1-10a0_6jul2016.pdf (31.12.2020).

[3]   ŠVP ISCED1, pp. 3–5, https://www.statpedu.sk/files/articles/dokumenty/inovovany-statny-vzdelavaci-program/ svp_pv _ 2015.pdf (31.12.2020).

external impulses and encouragement of such an activity. In addition to their own personal problems, they are also interested in the problems of their community, problems in the civil or social areas, or those related to the environment, nature, the protection of cultural and natural values, and their solutions.

The objectives stem from several areas and determinants entering the educational process:

- ***The meaningfulness of content*** – both content and process have to offer children an answer to the question "what is this good for?" In addition to practical and cognitive use, the equivalent output of educational activities is also joy, mutual fellowship between children and adults, and the motivation for other activities and learning.
- ***The interconnection of school and life***, and the context of pupil's life – integration of the state as well as school curriculum with the environment and its content.
- Learning to think critically, form arguments and seek solutions.
- Expressing one's opinions politely and tolerating the opinions of others.
- Being able to evaluate, being capable of self-reflection and self-correction.
- ***Learning from a mistake*** – finding the right solutions and answers requires thinking. In education, an error should be seen as a way of finding the right answer – learning to form arguments, seeking where in the resolution algorithm the error emerged, why it happened, what circumstances helped in finding the solution of the task and many others. The assessment of the error itself as a binary phenomenon does not suggest what to avoid and how to proceed in analogous solutions.
- ***Active participation in the life of one's community and society***, civic engagement – the creation of school tasks, appropriate selection of proposals for projects and project-based education, creation and implementation of joint intergenerational activities and events.

Inducing children's activity requires the creation of an appropriate environment as well as the selection of appropriate factors for the selected activities – space for autonomous learning, appropriate motivation for activities and actions, space for creativity and its development and support, openness and flexibility in education (in the selection of topics, time allocation for preparation, implementation, and reflection of projects), meaningfulness and usefulness of the executed activities, reflection, evaluation and mutual appreciation of the qualities of educational outputs.

The activity of children during the process of education is manifested in two ways – internally or externally. Internal activity and its intensity are not apparent during the process of education. It can only be identified based on the pupil's manifestations or results. The pupil's external activity is manifested by expression, drawing, movement, writing, or by their mental activity[4]. In the educational

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4   M. Zelina, *Aktivizácia a motivácia žiakov na vyučovaní,* Methodical Centre, Banská Bystrica 2002, p. 78.

process, the teacher should create such conditions that would induce children's activity, which would then contribute to their interest in learning, gaining new experience, and making them analyse and evaluate their gained experience. The main objective of the activities conducted in such a way is to make children joyful about learning and induce the need to learn for themselves and their further life[5]. Teaching tasks requiring children's activity for their fulfilment support the need to be active in all situations.

Environment as a determinant of active learning

The world that surrounds us is a source of learning not only in a formal but also in an informal field of nurture and education. We consider the family and the wider social environment – community, town, region, media – to be informal. The formal field includes the classroom and school premises, extracurricular cultural and natural environment, in the case of them being used for fulfilling educational objectives. A decisive factor for the effectiveness of such fulfilment is the appropriate stimulus of the environment.

In terms of its effectiveness for learning, we can divide it into three qualitative parts:

Real environment – namely cultural and historical objects, urban monuments, reservations of folk architecture, educational trails, caves. In education, its subjects are a direct part of reality, with which they interact.

The model environment – works with real artefacts but requires a certain degree of abstraction, imagination, knowledge, and experience. In education, its entities are located outside the real, i.e. outside their original environment, for instance museums.

The environment of a classroom – mediates knowledge (school, classroom), works mostly with imitations, models or demonstrations of real objects.

In formal education the educational environment as a place where educational interaction takes place is traditionally the space of a classroom, where the majority of the nurturing and educational process takes place. The need and the requirement to connect the school with life, and to link the meaningfulness of educational content with children's internal motivation for learning further includes the necessity to make use of adequate means and other determinants anchored in the modern approach to nurture and education:

- ***activity-based learning*** – an emphasis on children's activity and their active approach to acquiring their own new competences,
- ***they should be dynamic, unconventional, playful and creative,***
- ***they make use of real and well-known phenomena*** as a starting point for children's learning,

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5   A. Doušková, *Učenie sa žiaka v prírodovednom a spoločenskom kontexte* (Učebné texty pre študentov elementárnej a predškolskej pedagogiky), Banská Bystrica 2003, p. 73.

- *they make use of innate child's curiosity,*
- *they contain innovative elements,*
- *they bring non-traditional, informal activities* into the educational process,
- *they bring up-to-date topics* resonating in the everyday life,
- *they change the environment,*
- they solve *real problems,*
- they have *an integrative character*,
- they use *effective educational strategies*.

The environment has several important functions in education:

It supports the *fulfilment of objectives*: cognitive educational objective, in particular by exploring the environment, its elements and phenomena, shaping critical thinking, the ability to name and address the problems of one's closest environment, the socio-emotional objective of education, such as: creating positive attitudes towards the environment (environmental sentiment), shaping cultural literacy and creating cultural competences, creating values and their hierarchy, patriotism, local patriotism, multicultural attitudes (based on known, close examples of variety and diversity), civic attitudes, community fellowship, helping people in one's surroundings – classmates, neighbours, seniors, children and others in need, aestheticizing the environment, shaping positive personal characteristics through the environment – thoughtfulness, responsibility, patience, fellowship, cooperation, diligence, empathy, openness and assertiveness, and many others. We achieve psychomotor educational goals through various active approaches: beautification of the environment – maintaining the cleanliness of one's surroundings, planting flowers in flower beds, planting utility plants, creating gifts and greetings for different target groups of people, creating information materials about one's environment, acquiring orientation skills in the environment through various media – maps, sketches, natural and social phenomena, etc.

The environment is *an important means of nurture and education*, which through its elements promotes the demonstration and palpability of educational phenomena.

An important function of the environment is *the motivation* for both learning and lifelong learning, which, through its uniqueness and effective content, interferes with the educational process and thus participates in its progress. Motivation is based on children's needs and supports their formation and development. The environment is also a source of pitfalls, which, when appropriately incorporated into other topics, teach children to be aware of its *safety* and *riskiness*. Risks also occur in cultural (traffic situations, handling of hazardous equipment – gas stove, open fire, electrical equipment, movement near watercourses, communication with strangers, etc.), as well as the natural environment (unknown fruits of ornamental woody plants, picking and consuming unknown mushrooms and plants, inappropriate behaviour during bad weather conditions,

e.g. during storms, handling of animals that have lost their innate shyness due to illness, etc.[6]

In addition to the traditional, internal environment of the classroom, the educational process further also includes the ***external – natural and cultural environment*** for fulfilling its functions. The diversity and uniqueness of *the natural environment* and the different *cultural and historical events* diversify the landscape environment into regions. The natural environment comprises the surface units and relief of the landscape, its climatic conditions, or specific natural creations. The socio-cultural or social environment is shaped by the historical context with the influence of a variety of factors. It integrates a wide and complex range of aspects that form a unit influencing and determining the life and culture of the inhabitants.

The external environment is the richest and the most important source of educational themes that regional education uses in its practice. This rich source of educational content comprises of the space outside the area of school: parks, streets, historical as well as modern buildings, and external institutions. Through them, the school improves, complements, and enriches the outputs of the educational process. With the use of personal experiences, the pupil remembers the learned information better. At the same time, the pupil expands their motoric skills and enriches their life experience. The choice of appropriate educational strategies is also important[7]. Clerical, hobby-related, and extracurricular organizations and institutions, the family itself as well as the political situation facilitate the development of regional education from an external environment by cooperating with the school.

Regional education – using the environment to learn about the environment

Regional education is an ideal aid in the development of a child's personality on both pre-primary and primary levels of early education. It is an expected carrier of natural and socio-cultural knowledge, as well as a source of real phenomena often well-known by pupils. Children get to know the world through real, and authentic facts, which are in a direct connection with their lives. The need to get to know the nearest neighbourhood, town, and region stems from the need to link school, school teaching, and education, with the actual life and real needs of children. The child should not perceive school and activities stemming from learning situations as activities limited by time and space. Instead, they should be perceived as a means of learning how to deal with specific life situations that the child actually experiences. We understand regional education as a program for

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[6]   M. Gašparová, *Prírodovedná gramotnosť ako prevencia rizikového správania žiakov mladšieho školského veku*, in: W. Horyń, N. Dębowska (eds.), *Człowiek – społeczeństwo – państwo w sytuacjach kryzysu*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Bezpieczeństwa, Poznań 2014, pp. 303–310.

[7]   Z. Huľová, *Projektová, problémová, kooperatívna a výskumná koncepcia vzdelávania v pregraduálnej príprave budúcich učiteľov: pre oblasť technického vzdelávania na primárnom stupni školy*, Banská Bystrica 2017, p. 79.

developing pupil's personality through national significances, entities, and phenomena of the nearest socio-cultural and natural environment in parallel with their knowledge and processes influencing the creation and regrouping of the children's value system, as well as the mutual educational interaction of educational subjects and environment of the local landscape[8]. In the educational process, one of the most dominant features of regional education is its connecting, and unifying role. ***Pupil's personal involvement*** in shaping attitudes towards their own social and natural environment by progressively integrating it into the individual's system of values reshapes the way such environment is explored. Depending on the quality, intensity, and degree of influence on the pupil, this can be both positive and negative. Personal experience, as well as one's own adventure, that directly affects the pupil, and both of which the education offers via the implementation of regional education, represent essential factors in effective learning[9]. Through regional education, the school creates adequate space for pupils' activities and their participation in public affairs. It is one of the ways of teaching the pupil not to understand things and phenomena in isolation but to see them as a part of everyday problems, for which meaningful solutions need to be sought and found. Through regional phenomena and objects, children gradually build up the ability to preserve and protect cultural heritage, which documents and references culture, social life and social relations of the time, in which it was created. Its individual members identify with it at different levels according to the strength of their own cultural identity. This identity is shaped through a regional identity which is an everyday part of young people's lives[10]. Personality cultivation is, in this regard, a long-term process of creating an individual's value system within the frame of which the values regroup, until gradually securing their permanent place in it.

Conclusions

An important factor shaping one's personality is the stimulus of the environment in which education takes place. The most ideal is the real environment, which is often a good starting point for the creation of learning content. It allows learning by experience, direct observation and direct contact with the values of culture and nature. While respecting most factors of active attitude towards life, knowledge and other outcomes of children's nurture and education will be created in the symbiosis of the environment and curriculum, with the creation of a positive relationship and attitudes towards this environment. Such relationships and attitudes then positively affect the process of their reshaping, appreciation, and improvement.

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[8]   M. Gašparová, *Regionálna výchova v ranej edukácii,* MBU Faculty of Education, Banská Bystrica 2018, p. 9.

[9]   G. Bajšaj G., *Zážitková pedagogika – učenie zážitkom*, "Vychovávateľ" 2019, vol. 56, no. 9, pp. 14–16.

[10]   E. Poláková, J. Kyseľová, *Young peoples identification with place identities*, "Pedagogická revue" 2019, Vol. 66, No. 1, pp. 30–50.

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