

MOTOR EDUCATION IN PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS – THE CASE OF GREECE

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to investigate the conditions prevailing in Greece as regards the motor education of preschoolers. Although the international literature on the subject highlights the great importance of motor education for the all-round development of the child, the prevailing attitude towards preschool education increasingly encourages the introduction of school subjects in the kindergarten, while motor activities tend to decrease and to be regarded as a second-rate educational objective.

We conducted a field study using the method of on-site observation, in order to record the motor activities organised by preschool educators. The data were collected by a combination of three techniques: coding tables, journals, and individual interviews.

The survey was conducted in two major Greek cities, one situated in the North and the other in the South. For a period of three months we observed 86 classrooms and recorded all motor and psychomotor activities implemented by the educators in their classrooms. The sample consisted of kindergartens run by the Ministry of Education, daycare centres run by local authorities and private daycare centres.

The results of this survey highlight the strikingly restricted use of motor education as opposed to other subjects such as Language, Mathematics and Art. This phenomenon may be due to lack of space, but also to the educator's lack of knowledge and training in motor education.

GIBALNA VZGOJA V PREDŠOLSKIH USTANOVAH. PRIMER GRČIJE

ABSTRACT

Prispevek prikazuje prevladujoče razmere v Grčiji na področju gibalne vzgoje predšolskih otrok. Kljub temu, da mednarodna strokovna literatura poudarja velik pomen gibalne vzgoje za celostni razvoj otroka, se v predšolsko vzgojo uvajajo pretežno šolski predmeti, medtem ko se gibalne dejavnosti obravnavajo kot drugorazredni vzgojni cilji in se postopoma umikajo ostalim vsebinam.

Izvedli smo aplikativno raziskavo, v kateri smo na osnovi meritev pridobili podatke o gibalnih dejavnostih, ki jih organizirajo predšolski vzgojitelji. Podatke smo zbirali s pomočjo treh tehnik: opazovalnih obrazcev, dnevnikov in individualnih razgovorov.

Raziskava je bila opravljena v dveh večjih grških mestih, eno se nahaja na severu, drugo na jugu države. V obdobju treh mesecev smo opazovali 86 razredov in zabeležili vse gibalne in psihomotorične dejavnosti, ki so jih vzgojitelji izvajali v svojih razredih. V vzorec so bili zajeti vrtni, ki delujejo pod okriljem Ministrstva za šolstvo, centre dnevne oskrbe, ki jih financirajo lokalne skupnosti in privatne centre dnevne oskrbe.

Rezultati raziskave poudarjajo izjemno omejen pojav gibalne vzgoje v primerjavi z drugimi predmeti kot so jezik, matematika in umetnost. Razloge za ta pojav lahko iščemo v

pomanjkanju prostora in tudi pomanjkljivem znanju ter usposobljenosti vzgojiteljev za izvajanje gibalne vzgoje.

Ključne besede: otrok, predšolska vzgoja, vrtec, učni program, gibalna vzgoja

1. INTRODUCTION

Motor activities are part of the curriculum of kindergartens in all countries. However, their role in child development is often forgotten or ignored in everyday educational practice, in favour of other subjects. In spite of this, the international literature on the subject (Schmidt, 1993; Talbot, 1999; Doherty & Bailey, 2003) claims that motor skills form a major part of a preschooler's life, because they help him/her become acquainted with his/her environment and become integrated in it. All fundamental learning situations are mediated by the body of the child (Riga, 1995), which learns a large number of concepts through the experience of motion (Weikart, 1987). Thus, the objective of motor activities in preschool education is not the development of certain groups of muscles, but the overall motion and full activation of the body, leading to the all-round development of the child.

The present study forms part of a larger research project whose aim is to record the situation prevailing in Greek preschool education as regards the teaching of motor activities to children. This research project was prompted by our frequent visits to preschool institutions (kindergartens and daycare centres) in the past six years, within the frame of university level teaching and supervision of our students' practical training.

Through this informal observation of the institutions' daily schedule we noted the scarcity of motor education activities in most of them. The children usually spent their day playing on their own in "corners" or drawing, seated for a long time in their chairs. Whenever they were out in the open (in those of the schools that had a playground and if the weather was good), the children had an opportunity to run around (but not too much, for fear of accidents) and to play with their friends.

In its most recent resolution for the improvement of the services provided by kindergartens, the Greek Ministry of Education stresses that "*it is necessary for children in kindergarten to move freely and a lot. It is therefore necessary for us to provide the children with opportunities at physical activity, taking into account the needs and the abilities of their age*" (Official Gazette 18/10/01). Without giving specific examples for the educators, it mentions that they should organise "*physical activities aiming at the child's all-round mobility and promoting... the child's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development*" (Official Gazette 18/10/01).

2. METHOD

Thus we began a long-term research project in the field of preschool education, which consists of three major sections/surveys, focused on three main objectives:

- 1) to prove, through research and experimentation, the contribution of motor activity to the development of children;
- 2) to record the situation prevailing now in preschool institutions as regards the types of motor activities implemented, as well as their frequency;
- 3) to develop a complete educational programme of motor activities for preschoolers and to find ways of effectively training preschool educators in its implementation.

The first survey (Riga, 2004) was based on a comparative study of the results of two experiments conducted in two European countries (France and Greece) and was completed in 2001. Based on the theory of the transfer of learning we investigated the hypothesis that teaching body expression to preschoolers actively contributes to the learning process and the child’s cognitive development.

Body expression is a method of motor education that approaches the child as a whole. It is focused, that is to say, on the child as a person and not on knowledge; on the child’s entire “being” and not on its body or its mind; on the moving child, and not on the evaluation of its motion (Riga, 2001). It does not take into account only the characteristics of the child’s motor activities, but also the level of the child’s cognitive maturity and as well as the changes taking place in the emotional and social aspects of its personality.

Over a year, in both countries, we taught body expression to the five-year-olds in the experimental groups. In the beginning and the end of the school year, the experimental groups, as well as the corresponding control groups were tested in the acquisition of specific cognitive and psychomotor skills (see Table 1). We also observed and studied the development of these children over the next years, when they were in primary school.



Table 1. Comparative results of the two studies, in France and in Greece

The results of these two surveys enhanced our belief that motor activity plays a very important part in the cognitive and general development of the child and that it is necessary to integrate it in the everyday schedule of preschool institutions.

These conclusions led us to the decision to conduct our *second survey* and to record the organised motor activities implemented by preschool educators at present. We selected organised activities as opposed to free activities (i.e. those activities initiated by the children themselves), because the former have specific objectives as regards both physical and social-emotional and cognitive development (Van-der-Mars & Butterfield, 1980).

The Ministry of Education (Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 1994) defines organised activities as activities organised and directed by the educator in order to achieve specific curriculum aims. The educator encourages the children's active participation and often involves them in the selection of the activities' themes.

The survey began in 2003 and is still under way. It is a field survey, i.e. uses the technique of studying human behaviour as it appears in its natural context; that is to say, the subjects are observed in the place where they live and work. In our case the survey is conducted in kindergartens and daycare centres.

The method that we used was on-site non-participant observation. The presence of the researcher was as discreet as possible; he/she sat in a corner of the classroom and was never involved in the institutions' everyday schedule, so as not to influence the flow of the scheduled activities, or the behaviour of the children.

We used three techniques of data collection: coding tables, a journal of personal observations, and interviews with individual educators.

The results presented in this paper concern only two regions of Greece where the survey has been completed. These are the greater area of Athens, in the South of Greece, and the city of Veria, in the North.

Our sample consisted of kindergartens run by the Ministry of Education, daycare centres run by local authorities and private daycare centres. All three types of institution provide preschool education.

In the city of Veria, a student researching her degree assignment included in her sample all the kindergartens of the city (a total of 17 institutions), providing education to children between 4 and 6 years of age, and observed 17 preschool classrooms. The average number of children per kindergarten was 17.4. A striking fact about the educators in this sample is that most of them were approaching retirement age.

In the greater area of Athens 36 daycare centres (28 public and 8 private) were selected at random. These institutions cater to children aged from a few months to 6 years, and 69 classrooms were observed. The average number of children per daycare centre was 20.

All motor and psychomotor activities implemented by the educators in their classrooms were recorded over a period of three months. At the same time, the educators were interviewed in order to detect their objectives for these specific activities and to establish how often they implemented such activities throughout the school year.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the results was based on the processing of the data collected through the observation of organised activities and the interviews with the educators. The data were coded and presented qualitatively and quantitatively.

In the kindergartens of northern Greece there took place an average of 1.8 organised activities per day, whereas in southern Greece the average number of activities was 2.3 per classroom. As regards the content of organised activities, we observed that the majority of the activities taking place in the kindergartens of northern Greece concerned the cognitive aspect (54.9% of the sample), and specifically Language and Mathematics. 38.7% of activities revolved around Art, and especially drawing. Only 6.4% of organised activities concerned the psychomotor aspect of development (see Table 2).

In the daycare centres of southern Greece the results differ somewhat. While the cognitive aspect is still the one considered most important by educators, with a percentage of 47.9%, educators also attach great importance to aesthetic education (43.4%). Finally, we observed a much larger number of psychomotor activities. Of course, in the three-month period of observation, these percentages break down into 6-7 motor activities per classroom over three months (with a slight differentiation of private daycare centres, where we recorded 9-10 activities over this three-month period).

Aspect of development	Organised activities in kindergartens	Organised activities in daycare centres
Cognitive	54,9 %	47,9 %
Aesthetic	38,7 %	43,4 %
Psychomotor	6,4 %	8,7 %
TOTAL	100,0	100

Table 2. Types of organised activities

Finally, we observed that most organised motor activities in daycare centres were offered to children aged between 3 and 4 years. In the ages between 0 and 2 years of age the educators' activities were usually initiated by the children themselves, as they tried to explore their environment and play. This is also the age for which we recorded the greatest lack of motor education material.

Age	General
0-1	7,6 %
1-2	5 %
2-3	21,8 %
3-4	37,2 %
4-5	16,9 %
5-6	11,5 %

Table 3. Motor activities by age

4. DISCUSSION

In spite of their important role in child development, motor activities are not often used in everyday educational practice as a factor in the development of the skills of preschool children.

One of the possible causes investigated through observation and interviews was lack of space, which restricts the children's ability to move around, and does not allow educators to organise games that would contribute to the psychomotor aspect of education. Schoolrooms were rarely spacious (they were either too small or cluttered with too much material), while some of the buildings had not been designed for use as kindergartens. Because of this lack of space the children were obliged to restrict their movements and often exhibited restlessness or over-excitation in class.

An equally important factor contributing to the minimal use of motor activities was the restricted knowledge of educators as regards psychomotor activities, visible in the confusion that we observed when we asked them to define them and specify their content. This may be due to their initial training, which is based, primarily, on the level of teaching methodology. However, we should not ignore the professional fatigue that ensues over the years, and that worries the educators themselves, some of whom try to renew their knowledge through short-term seminars. We should also note that in northern Greece the majority of educators were approaching retirement age. Finally, their lack of engagement in motor activities in their personal lives results in a lack of familiarity with motion and free motor expression.

The percentage and type of motor activities that we have recorded to this day show the educators' need for innovation in their pedagogical practices. We encountered habitual activities that many of them have been implementing over the years without interchanging them with more up-to-date ones. To our surprise, most of the organised activities that we observed in the 86 classrooms of the sample were the same. For instance, they either played "musical chairs" (a game where the children sit on chairs and move around them to the sound of music), or they would play a cassette with rhythmical music for walking and running, or a cassette of music for imitating the movements of animals.

From the research conducted so far and our informal visits in preschool institutions we have found out that the contemporary view of preschool education increasingly encourages the integration of school subjects at preschool level, while at the same time motor education tends to be assigned second place, as if it were a less important learning objective.

Our experience from this research leads us to the conclusion that motor education deserves further investigation. Its contribution to child development should be examined through new and often long-term research projects, so that we can become fully aware of its importance, and that both preschool educators and policy-makers can integrate it in a well-rounded preschool education. The educators should be helped particularly through in-service and long-term training programmes centered on the physical education of children and especially on their all-around development and education.

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