
Alternative and Authentic Evaluation: (De)build the (Un)enchanted World of Evaluation in Pre-School Education

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Abstract: It's essential to (de)construct the (de)enchanted world of assessment! This investigation essay pretends to study the implementation of an alternative and authentic assessment in preschool education. We will try to find answers to the following objectives: to deepen the assessment concepts and also alternative and authentic assessment; to understand how to build a portfolio in preschool education; to identify and to learn different assessment tools; to learn how to implement an authentic & alternative assessment resorting to the portfolio; to consider an alternative and authentic assessment practice, experienced in a Preschool education context. We are dealing with a qualitative essay of a schooling portfolio build up in a research action with a child's and family interaction. The collected data was transcribed and subjected to content analysis, namely interviews. It was also done a documental analysis to the built a portfolio. Although the investigation is not yet concluded. We understand that the proposed assessment in the theory of reference doesn't match what really is applicable in the context we know. We also found that the portfolio reviews the development and learning of the child's evolution, in different domains, in an authentic and systematic way. The educator reflects, questions and rebuilds his educational action.

Key words: preschool education, assessment, alternative and authentic assessment, portfolio

1. Introduction

Assessment. A word that for many causes discomfort, but for some it is the basis of authentic and rigorous work. A dynamic enchanted for some and disenchanting for others! This article arose from an investigative essay, within the scope of the training of Kindergarten Educators, implemented in a Kindergarten in the coastal center of Portugal. It was our intention to implement an alternative and authentic assessment in a context where it is usually traditional and innocuous.

Throughout the experience, the evaluation was seen as a challenge, essentially because it is a problem unknown and because it generates some insecurity and anxiety when discussed by early childhood educators. "Is there no charm in this disenchanting world of evaluation?" Was the question that triggered this investigative essay? After all, what is to evaluate? Why does evaluation create such anguish? How do you rate yourself in Childhood Education? Why do you evaluate yourself? What is the evaluation for? How is the evaluation recommended in the reference theory operationalized? This constant questioning and the desire to deconstruct the present investigation

focused on assessment in Preschool Education. The main focus was and is to (re) discover meanings in order to know and apply a contextualized and participatory assessment in the context of Kindergarten. Our intention is that sharing the lived experience can infect and challenge future and current education professionals, not just educators, to (re) discover and (re) signify the evaluation and its charm.

2. Assessment in Preschool Education

Assessment in Preschool Education, for Zabalza (2000), is as or more important than in any other educational stage. It is a “fundamental part of the work of good education professionals”. However, it will have to move away from the traditional and reductive assessment in which “to evaluate is to grade, to evaluate is to examine, it is to measure children, to evaluate is to compare and to introduce differences between small children” (Zabalza, 2000, p. 30).

A few years ago “the question of evaluation was a matter that was ignored, diffuse and only marginally addressed; nowadays the evaluation is already one of the main issues on the agenda” (Cardoso, 2013, p. 82). For a long time the evaluation, although considered an important practice for the development of pedagogical work, was optional and linked to quantification and measurement practices (Cardoso, 2013; Castro, Hernández & Galbarro, 2016). The term evaluate, in the etymological sense, refers us to the attribution of values and, therefore, the evaluation is often understood as the classification of children’s learning. However, this conception does not apply to Preschool Education (Silva, Marques, Mata & Rosa, 2016). The assessment is defined by Circular No. 4/DGIDC/DSDC/2011 like a “continuous record of progress made by the child over time using descriptive and narrative procedures, focused on how the child learns, how he/she processes information, how he/she builds knowledge or solves problems”.

2.1 Purposes of Assessment in Preschool Education

The Preschool Education assessment has a “formative function and never a promotional function nor qualified one for student” (Castro, Hernández & Galbarro, 2016, p. 222). By evaluating in a reflective and sensitive way, the kindergarten teacher collects information and makes informed decisions that allow him to adapt, reformulate and improve his educational practice and manage the curriculum. This management is done through “planning, organization and evaluation of the educational environment, as well as activities and curriculum projects, with a view to building integrated learning” (Decree-Law No. 241/2001, of 30 August).

The assessment is essential to help the educator to understand each child's development and learning. When assessing, you will recognize the interests, difficulties, needs, fears and progress of the children (Parente, 2012b; Cardona, 2007; Cardoso, 2013; Mendes & Cardona, 2012; Silva, Marques, Mata & Rosa, 2016; Zaragoza & Muñoz, 2014). In this process, the child “is subject to his or her own learning” (Circular no. 4/DGIDC/DSDC/2011 — Assessment in Preschool Education).

2.2 Alternative and Authentic Evaluation

The concept of an alternative and an authentic assessment refers to all assessment practices used as an alternative to traditional assessment. This type of assessment runs counter to the use of formal and standardized assessment tools, as they reflect in a very reductive way the essence and competencies of each child. Some authors also report that standardized tests are very limited because they require children to perform in artificial situations, disrupting their educational process (Cardoso, 2013; Shores & Grace, 2001; Gonzalez-Mena, 2015).

The alternative and authentic assessment is based on observation records and evidence gathered in a particular context or situation and at any time in the daily routine. The child is observed countless times in various contexts, so he/she will have several opportunities to reveal his/her skills. The child is an integral part of his/her evaluation process, encouraged to reflect and evaluate his/her work, leaving the passive attitude (Parente, 2004). It is a type of shared assessment, as it involves the participation of various stakeholders, the child, the educator, the family and the community. The child's family should be informed about what happens in kindergarten and should also have the "opportunity to make contributions that enrich the planning and evaluation of educational practice" (Silva et al., 2016, p. 16).

2.3 The Portfolio: More Than An Assessment Tool!

We believe that the portfolio tells a story, the story of the child who acts and interacts in the world. The portfolio is a reflection of the child, its path, its learning, its difficulties and its overcoming. The portfolio, in addition to reinforcing the child's uniqueness, gives him an active voice and assigns him a decisive role in this very important stage of his life: childhood. It is also a frontier object, which includes reports from different voices — the child, the educator and the family. Its construction allows a more real approach to the child's daily life, in the school and at home. In short, we see the portfolio as a differentiated resource for teachers and families and a record that reflects, through evidence, and faithfully, significant moments of childhood, in the educational context, of each child. For some authors, the portfolio must represent the child and is therefore closely suited to his/her needs and specificities. It reflects and highlights, in a very particular and personal way, their experiences, their unique achievements and their process of development and learning. Through the portfolio, the child is encouraged to develop numerous skills, such as self-concept, self-confidence and reflection about himself/herself, what he/she did, why he/she did it and how he/she did it. With these reflections, it will acquire more autonomy in decision making, especially in the moments of selection and organization of resources to put in the portfolio (Pinto & Santos, 2006; Silva & Craveiro, 2014; Parente, 2012a; Fernandes, 2005; Arends, 1995).

The content of each portfolio makes it a unique piece, since this uniqueness translates into "the particular character of the experiences described and reflected in it". During the construction of the portfolio, the child is invited to "build a story" (Sá-Chaves, 1998, p. 146). There is no single way to build portfolios and as such can be presented with various structures. The structure and content depends on the educational objectives and goals, which should be clear to all stakeholders (Parente, 2004; Parente, 2012a; Shores & Grace, 2001; Cardoso, 2013). It is crucial that children participate in decision making so that their portfolio is quick and easy to use. The process of evidence selection should be shared by the child, educator and family. Selecting content for the portfolio gives stakeholders the opportunity to know and learn more about the child and the curriculum (Parente, 2004). The portfolio "opens the windows of kindergarten to all those interested in the education of children, in a collaborative and participatory way" (Parente, 1996, cited by Costa de Sousa, 2008, p. 21). It is considered much more than an assessment instrument; it is understood as a tool of the educational process of the child with all stakeholders (Costa de Sousa, 2008). This shared action makes children, families and educators contribute to the construction of the portfolio, expanding the evaluation and promoting a kindergarten-family partnership (Gonzalez-Mena, 2015).

Once the evidence has been gathered, the educator must interpret it. By interpreting the records, you interpret the information collected and what it reflects on the child's learning. This interpretation must be rigorous and careful. It is also relevant to specify the skills and learning evidenced by the child, as well as the content areas

present in each evidence (Cardoso, 2013; Silva & Craveiro, 2014; Parente, 2004). The analysis and interpretation of the portfolio contents should not be viewed as an end in itself, but as a means to an end — full assessment of the child. In this way, the educator knows what the child knows and what he does, but also helps to favour and stimulate his development and learning process (Parente, 2004).

3. Research Methodology

With the main focus to deepen, to experience and to reflect on an alternative and authentic assessment in Preschool education, the following research question arose: *How can the kindergarten teacher implement an alternative and an authentic assessment in the context of Preschool education?* To find answers, we have outlined some objectives: to deepen the concepts of evaluation and alternative and authentic evaluation; to understand how to build a portfolio in Preschool education; to identify and to know different assessment instruments; to understand how an alternative and authentic assessment can be implemented using the portfolio; to reflect on the practice of an alternative and authentic assessment experienced in an Preschool education context.

We chose to conduct a qualitative case study, focusing on understanding problems through the analysis of behaviours, attitudes and values. This study focuses more on processes than on research results. We chose action research because it enables practical problem solving, change production and the opportunity to build scientific knowledge. The researcher collected systematic information on what he studied and also directed his action to improve practice. The researcher was a participant in the whole process and played an important role in data collection, as their quality, validity and reliability depend on the researcher's sensitivity and knowledge (Carmo & Ferreira, 2008; Sousa & Baptista, 2011; Silva, 1996). In addition to the researcher, the child studied (six years old António), his parents, the educator, Isabel Lopes da Silva (author of the Portuguese curriculum for Pre-School Education) and Maria João Cardona (distinguish Portuguese investor in the scope of assessment in Pre-School Education) participate in the investigative essay. The investigation focused on the analysis of the child evaluation process, for which the opinion of the parents and educator regarding the whole evaluation process was collected.

The techniques used to gather information in order to develop the research was: the documentary analysis of the portfolio carried out during the pedagogical practice and the interviews. In total, seven interviews (I1; I2; I3; I4; I5; I6; I7) were conducted with the study participants and content analysis was performed.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

The data from this study were collected in stages. We can list two moments of collection: the before and after the construction of the portfolio.

Before the construction of the portfolio, we found that Antonio and his parents had never heard of a portfolio and therefore they did not know what it was or what it was for. The parents also mentioned that the assessment records they knew were “they are questionnaires that are made for all children and are always the same for all”; “It was always in a grid format” (I1: Pais do António). They also mentioned that they never got involved in Antonio's evaluations, “In the end we are made aware of the evaluation” (I1: António's Parents). When we interviewed the kindergarten teacher it seemed to us does not know the terms alternative and authentic evaluation, “Alternative evaluation? I don't know what you mean by that” (I2: Educator). He also understood that the assessment in Preschool education comes down to understanding how children “get involved in things, the motivation they have, what they want to do” (I2: Educator). We thus perceive some discomfort revealed by the

educator when addressing issues related to the evaluation and the portfolio.

António defines his portfolio as “dossier that has my little work, yours [of the participating researcher] and my mom and dad. The portfolio is in school, in my house, [in my village], and in your house. I really like my portfolio” (I5: António). António's parents were changing their conceptions of evaluation through what they were experiencing throughout the process of building the portfolio, “For me this type of evaluation and interconnection between the child, school, educator and parents is much more interesting. I would say it is a very complete and integrated analysis that looks at each child as unique as it is, and involves the family”, “I see the portfolio beyond an assessment, I see the portfolio as open doors and windows to meet my child” (I4: Antonio’s parents).

We considered that the interviews conducted with the teachers Isabel Lopes da Silva and Maria João Cardona, were an added value for the investigation, since, besides being two references of Portuguese childhood education, they helped to support the information present in the investigation. Isabel Lopes da Silva mentioned, in her interview, that the way the educator looks at and operationalizes the evaluation influences its quality, “The way the evaluation is practiced dictates whether it is a quality evaluation or not” (I7: I. L. Silva). He also noted that “a portfolio has a choice of what is most interesting”, “a choice that is also made by the child, in which she explains why she has chosen, becoming aware of her learning”, “there is no single way to make a portfolio, but it is essential to know what a portfolio is” (I7: I. L. Silva). In her interview, Maria João Cardona defended in the interview that “Evaluation must be a contextual, procedural, qualitative evaluation that supports work planning, helping to improve it” (I6: M. J. Cardona) and so that The evaluation is of quality “it should involve children and families, as defined in the Curriculum Guidelines” (I6: M. J. Cardona).

5. Discussion of Results and Conclusions

We consider it of utmost relevance to highlight some conclusions that emerged during the investigation and the process of the portfolio construction. During the literature review, reading numerous studies on Preschool Education evaluation and after the first data collection, before the participants started building the portfolio, we came across the Disenchanted World of Evaluation. A world is where the ignorance, the few or no involvement and the supposed lack of interest in the evaluation in Preschool Education prevail.

On the other hand, in the last collection, after starting the construction of the portfolio, we realized that the participants started to show knowledge and awareness about the evaluation in this context. Antonio and his parents were very involved throughout the process of building the portfolio. The sharing of moments, experiences and feelings was privileged. This climate of sharing, communication and partnership has triggered moments of reflection, learning, active listening and agency, both for children and parents. The Enchanted World of Appreciation appears. As for Educator, we did not identify any changes in her posture from the 1st to the 2nd collection. We consider that the interviews with Isabel Lopes da Silva and Maria João Cardona contributed to support and reinforce the importance of the evaluation in Childhood Education. Their sharing distinguished the decisive role that the child and family play in this process. They also pointed out that the way educators look at evaluation influences its usefulness and quality.

As we began our investigation, we realized that the evaluation advocated in the reference theory does not correspond to that practiced in the contexts we know. We have also found that when children are truly involved in their development and learning process, particularly in building an assessment resource, they are happier, self-confident, aware, interested, motivated, questioning and reflective. We consider the portfolio a differentiated

tool because gives the agency and voice to the child, making them aware of their learning, difficulties and overcoming. It also reflects the evolution of the child in all dimensions, in an authentic and systematic way. This resource can also be a powerful tool for the child's transition from Preschool Education to primary school. We realize that when parents know and become involved in the life of the kindergarten, particularly in the evaluation process, the approach, communication and collaborative work begin and continue.

In short, we consider that this route has triggered significant and enriching learning for all the stakeholders. Research has shown us that ignorance and disinterest, in an alternative and authentic assessment, can generate disenchantment. However, for us researchers, the assessment is contextualized and shared, because we will continue to look at it with enchanting and in a challenging way.

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