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Sous la direction de Koffi Ganyo AGBEFLE

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1- Nature, champs disciplinaires et périodicité de la Revue

La revue DELLA se veut une revue scientifique pluridisciplinaire, mieux transdisciplinaire dont les principaux domaines d'intervention sont les lettres, langues, sciences humaines et sociales. En d'autres termes, cette revue est ouverte à la communauté des enseignants et/ou chercheurs en éducation, en linguistique et en didactique des langues qui sont en relation avec un large spectre de sensibilités scientifiques : histoire, sociologie, psychologie, littérature, pédagogie, philosophie, traduction, etc. donnant lieu à deux tomes par numéro depuis 2019.

DELLA est une revue semestrielle. Elle paraît deux fois l'an (en février et en Août). En cas de nécessité, elle peut se consacrer à la publication des numéros spéciaux. La revue peut aussi faire un appel à thématique définie.

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Revue Francophone par excellence, DELLA accepte et publie uniquement des textes écrits en français. Chaque article comporte cependant un résumé en anglais ou dans une langue nationale du pays de l'institution d'attache de l'auteur (voir les consignes aux auteurs). Dans des cas extrêmes, la Direction de la revue peut autoriser une publication dans une autre langue autre que le français. L'auteur devra donc faire préalablement la demande auprès des responsables de la revue.

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Titre- L'auteur formule un titre clair et concis (entre 12 et 15 mots). Le titre centré, est écrit en gras, taille 14.

Mention de l'auteur- Elle sera faite après le titre de l'article et 2 interlignes, alignée à gauche. Elle comporte : Prénom, **NOM** (en gras, sur la première ligne), Nom de l'institution (en italique, sur la deuxième

ligne), e-mail de l'auteur ou du premier auteur (sur la troisième ligne).
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Mots-clés - Ils accompagnent le résumé. Se limiter à 3 mots minimum et 5 mots maxi. Les mots-clés sont indiqués en français et en anglais.

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Introduction

- La problématique : l'auteur expose clairement la question abordée tout au long de l'article et justifie son intérêt. Il formule des hypothèses qui sont des réponses provisoires à la question.
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Développements

- Le contexte : l'auteur situe la question posée dans son environnement théorique en donnant des références théoriques et en évoquant les apports d'autres chercheurs.

- La méthode : l'auteur explique en détails comment il a mené son étude et quel est l'intérêt d'utiliser ses outils de collecte de données par rapport aux hypothèses formulées.
- Les résultats (si le papier n'est pas uniquement conceptuel) : l'auteur présente un résumé des données collectées et les résultats statistiques qu'elles ont permis d'obtenir. Il commente les tableaux et graphiques.
- La discussion : l'auteur évalue les résultats qu'il obtient. Il montre en quoi ses résultats répondent à la question initiale et sont en accord avec les hypothèses initiales. Il compare ses résultats avec les données obtenues par d'autres chercheurs. Il mentionne certaines des faiblesses de l'étude et ce qu'il faudrait améliorer en vue d'études futures.

Conclusion - L'auteur résume en quelques paragraphes l'ensemble de son travail. Il souligne les résultats qui donnent lieu à de nouvelles interrogations et tente de suggérer des pistes de recherche susceptibles d'y apporter réponses.

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Pour les actes de colloques, les références sont traitées comme les extraits d'ouvrages avec notamment l'intitulé du colloque mis en italique. Si les actes de colloques sont sur CD ROM, indiquer : les actes sur CD ROM à la place du numéro des pages.

Pour les papiers disponibles sur l'Internet, le nom de l'auteur, le prénom, l'année de la publication entre parenthèses, le titre du papier entre guillemets, l'adresse Internet à laquelle il est disponible et la date du dernier accès.

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PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN BENIN: BETWEEN NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Preschool education takes place in nursery schools, whose main mission is to awaken and stimulate children. This mission is governed by regulatory texts and curricula that teachers are obliged to respect if the teaching-learning process is to run smoothly. But suspicions lead to the belief that teachers sometimes do more than what is expected of them, thus creating a gap between the normative framework and their practice. To verify this appearance, the present research has been initiated and aims to compare what is laid down in the texts and training programs that govern pre-school education and teaching practice in classroom situations. In order to achieve this objective, a methodological approach was followed, involving classroom observations during educational outing and interviews with kindergarten teachers. The results confirm our initial assumption that teachers sometimes go beyond the curriculum. Although we are in kindergarten, the density of the concepts taught makes us feel like we are in elementary school.

Key words: *preschool education, nursery school, practice, normative framework*

Résumé

L'éducation préscolaire se déroule dans les écoles maternelles qui ont pour mission principale d'éveiller et de stimuler les enfants. Cette mission est régie par des textes et des curricula réglementaires que les enseignants sont tenus de respecter pour la bonne marche du processus d'enseignement-apprentissage. Mais les soupçons font croire que les enseignants font parfois plus qu'on attend d'eux en créant ainsi un écart entre le cadre normatif et leur pratique. Pour vérifier cette apparence, la présente recherche a été initiée et vise à comparer ce qui est prévu par les textes et programmes de formation qui régissent l'éducation préscolaire et la pratique enseignante en situation de classe. Dans l'optique d'atteindre cet objectif, une démarche méthodologique a été suivie et se rapporte à des observations de classe effectuées lors de sorties pédagogiques et des entretiens avec les enseignants de la maternelle. Cette démarche a permis d'aboutir à des résultats qui confirment nos suppositions de départ qui indiquent que les enseignants vont parfois au-delà de ce qui est prévu dans les curricula. Bien qu'étant à l'école maternelle, on se croirait à l'école primaire du fait de la densité des notions qui sont enseignées.

Mots clés : *éducation préscolaire, école maternelle, pratique, cadre normatif*

Introduction

« A world fit for children is one where all children are assured of a good start in life. » (UN Declaration, May 2002). This good start is also ensured

by bodies that prepare the child for schooling and accompany him/her in the socialization process that begins in family. In this way, pre-school education has come to occupy a special place in the child's development process. Depending on the case and the country, pre-schooling starts at the age of two (02) and ends at 5 or 6, and is carried out in nursery schools under the supervision of teachers and according to an officially recognized program. Is the program being followed? In other words, what is the relationship between the curriculum and teaching practices in kindergarten classrooms? To address this concern, we will begin by reviewing the history of preschool education in the world in general, and in Benin in particular, before moving on to the configuration and analysis of pre-schooling in Benin.

1- History of pre-school education: from near and far

In many societies, children's education begins in family. But the outsourcing of educational practice was driven by the development of industrialization, which allowed women to work. So, women were just as much a part of companies as men, and that's enough to explain their absence from home. Women's work therefore has created a vacuum in the home, threatening children's education. A solution had to be found for childcare.

It was at the end of the 18th century that nursery schools began to be set up in Europe to cater for children aged between two and six, who were referred to as "toddlers". The aim was to get rid of these "toddlers", who appeared embarrassing for working-class families, but were considered at the same time too small to start school and too big to stay in the care of a nanny (Luc, 1999).

In France, this history dates back to 1770, when what are now known as "les petites écoles à tricoter" (small schools for kids) were set up to take in children from poor families who were left to fend for themselves. We then moved on to "salles d'asile" to continue the education of children aged 2 to 6. The names of these centers varied from country to country (Crook, 1999; Luc, 1999; Bédard, 2002; Budde, 1999; Depaepé and Simon, 1999; Ferrari, 1999; Colmenar Orzaes, 1999). Thus, we were talking about:

- "Salles d'asile" in France;
- "Kindergarten" in Germany: created in 1830 by Friedrich Frobel;
- "Infant schools" in Great Britain: created in London in 1819 by Henry Brougham, Lord Lansdowne and James Mill;

- "Scuole infantili" (infant schools) in Italy: founded in 1820 by Ferrante Aperti;
- "Bewaarscholen" (babysitter's school) in Belgium: founded in Brussels in 1827 by Englishwoman Caroline Colson;
- "Escuelas de párvulos" (nursery schools) in Spain;
- "Day care centers", "child care centers" or "family child care" in the United States, created in 1850.

However, it's worth noting the existence of a number of day-care centers that preceded the initiatives mentioned above, and which were known by different names in different countries. In addition, it was only that these kindergartens and day-care centers gradually became formal nursery schools. In France, for example, it was in 1848 that the term "salle d'asile" was replaced by "école maternelle". The focus thus shifted from care (safety and protection) to an accessible education to all children (Bédard, 2002).

To summarize the development of pre-schooling since its inception, the French Ministry of Education (July, 1981) distinguishes three periods. These are:

- the expansion phase between 1876 and 1901;
- the crisis period, from 1901 to 1946;
- the rapid expansion phase that began after 1946.

In Benin, the history of pre-schooling begins with the country's independence. Indeed, following its accession to independence, Benin had only a few pre-schools in its major cities. But the visibility of this education sector would only be remarkable in the revolutionary period that ushered in the Centres d'Eveil et de stimulation de l'Enfant commonly known as "CESE" (Compaoré and Dagan, 2014). But this visibility was only of short duration; because the adjustment measures resulting from the socio-economic crisis led to the closing of these CESEs. However, the reforms introduced in Benin's education system in 1990 finally led to the reopening of the CESEs, now known as "Ecoles Maternelles" (Nursery Schools) (Compaoré and Dagan, 2014).

A few years later, a cooperative project between Benin and UNICEF was launched. The implementation of this project, called "EDUCOM", led to the creation of several "Childcare Spaces" in Benin, notably in the northern part of the country.

Today, Benin has a number of public and private nursery schools, even if their absence in rural areas is regrettable.

2- Pre-schooling: issues and challenges

The nursery school is a stepping stone between the family and formal education, and thus a transition between family education and education in the community (Terrisse, 1998). In many countries, nursery education is compulsory. In this way, children's first steps in school take place in the pre-school sphere, which encourages their further socialization. In this dynamic, the importance of preschool education is undeniable. This is why Meunier and Sala (2019) declare that the nursery school is a construction framework that can be broken down as follows:

- Nursery school is a place for building citizenship (living together);
- Nursery school is a place for social life (living in society);
- Nursery school is a place for personal development.

In addition, studies have established a link between pre-schooling and schooling. Chetty *and al.* (2010), for example, deduce that learners are more likely to progress to university when they have previously benefited from pre-schooling. This finding is confirmed by Tchable (2013), quoted by Bawa (2020), who concluded that pre-schooled students perform better than non-pre-schooled students, particularly in written arithmetic, writing and sentence making. For Garnier (2009), when a child's schooling begins earlier, with entry to nursery school, he or she is not only more likely to succeed in school, but also in his or her future professional career. This pre-schooling is qualified as early by the author of schooling. Along the same lines, Leclercq (1995) believes that the effects of this early schooling are to be sought in the long term, and that the primary mission of nursery school is to adapt the individual to society. This adaptation is achieved through cognitive, emotional and social development (OECD, 2011).

Despite the proven importance of pre-schooling, it must be stressed that it can be detrimental to the children for whom it is meant to help. In fact, when pre-schooling is introduced too early, it is no longer able to guarantee the benefits for which it is intended. In such cases, it can compromise children's behavior by making them more aggressive (Magnuson and Waldfogel, 2005).

Drawing on the work of Hubert Montagner and François Testu on biopsychological rhythms, Sala and Meunier (2019) use a table to define the times of day when nursery school pupils are most likely to learn, and those when they are least likely to do so.

Table 1: Ideal times of day for learning

	Monday	Tuesday	Thursday	Friday
8: 30 a.m. – 9 a.m.	-	-	-	-
9 a.m. – 10 a.m.	-	+	+	+
10 a.m.– 11 a.m.	+	++	++	++
11: 30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.	-	-	-	-
2:30 p.m. – 4 p.m.	+	++	++	++

Source: Meunier and Sala (2019)

However, these so-called propitious times of day are only truly so when an appropriate pedagogy is used. Of the practices observed, game-based pedagogy seems to be the most popular. So how important is game in pre-school education?

3- Game and pre-school education

A number of studies have demonstrated the importance of game in the child's harmonious development. Whether on a physical, cognitive, affective or motor level, game appears to be an indispensable "activity" for the child's overall development. It is through game that children can explore and understand the universe, and that their integration is also dependent on it (Hohmann *and al.*, 2000).

Game has an even more decisive role when it comes to school, especially when it comes to learning. Indeed, the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (April, 2016) recognizes the importance of learning through game from the earliest years of school life and states that game is a vehicle that promotes learning through the opportunity it offers children to acquire their own knowledge. Thus, he agrees that learning should begin with game. The same is true of Manitoba Ministry of Education and Training (2019), for whom game is not only the cornerstone of learning, but also the anchor of young children's overall development.

For Marinova (2011), game promotes learning in three ways:

- through game, children appropriate their civilization by practicing learning in a human way;
- game gives meaning to learning in a cause-and-effect relationship;
- game enables the child's overall development through the acquisition of cross-disciplinary skills.

Taking these advantages into account, the author concludes that game gives children a taste for school from nursery school onwards. Moreover, according to the Quebec Ministry of Education (2021), children have several learning strategies at their disposal, such as imitation, observation, experimentation, and game. But of all these strategies, game seems to be the most privileged, as it guarantees the development of his full potential by offering him the opportunity to explore, create, improvise, and manipulate on the one hand, and to make decisions, discoveries, and imagine scenarios on the other. From all the above, it should be recognized that game-based pedagogy should be favored in children's education, as it is a vector of dynamism and stimulation (Coutou, 2015).

4- Methodology

This research involved a search for information on pre-schooling in books and specialized collections, and an analysis of this information, including empirical data (collected through a survey). It is therefore a question of documentary and analytical research. The main target of this research is the teachers responsible for the pedagogical supervision of nursery learners. Data collection took place in two stages. Firstly, information was gathered from specialized collections and books on pre-schooling in general, and from documents specific to pre-schooling in Benin (laws and regulations, training curricula, etc.). Secondly, other information was gathered on the basis of exchanges with nursery schools teachers.

In fact, we took advantage of pedagogical visits made to three nursery schools (two private and one public) by students in their second year of training in educational science to collect empirical data from the teachers. As the students were assigned to all the classrooms, the exchanges took place, under our supervision, with all the teachers, who by chance were all female and numbered 12. In other words, all the teachers in the classes assigned to us during our visits were systematically taken into account for the interviews, which took the form of a focus group. It should be pointed out that observation was of paramount importance during the classroom visits. The reports produced by the students also served as a data base for the present research. All the pieces of information gathered were based on three tools: a reading sheet, an interview guide and an observation grid.

5- Results

5-1 Overview of preschool education in Benin

Formal education in Benin is governed by a number of texts, the most fundamental of which are Law No. 2019-40 of November 07, 2019 revising Law No. 90-32 of December 11, 1990 establishing the Constitution of the Republic of Benin, and Law No. 2005-33 of October 6, 2005 amending Law No. 2003-17 of November 11, 2003 establishing the orientation of National Education in the Republic of Benin. It should be noted that there are several implementing decrees governing the education sector.

According to the Constitution, which is considered to be the fundamental law, "The State and public authorities guarantee the education of children and create favorable conditions for this purpose" (Article 12). This provision, which is repeated in the law of orientation, specifies that: "In respect of the principles defined by the Constitution of December 11, 1990, education, in the Republic of Benin, constitutes and remains the first national priority" (Article 1).

Accordingly, education is subdivided into three levels (Article 14):

- the first level comprising :
 - nursery education ;
 - primary education.
- the second level, which includes :
 - general secondary education ;
 - technical and vocational secondary education.
- the third level, which includes :
 - higher education;
 - scientific research.

Primary education and lower secondary education constitute basic education. With regard to nursery education, article 23 of the orientation law stipulates that: "Nursery education is essentially aimed at stimulating the physical, psychological and mental functions of the child. It lasts two (02) years and is open to children aged two and a half at least. It is taught in French, English and a local majority national language, or any other language. In Benin, nursery education is provided in both public and private schools. "The "Nursery education" program aims to (i) improve access to preschool through the creation of public preschools and support for private initiatives, (ii) ensure the quality of early childhood

care and (iii) promote well-being in the pre-school environment" Benin Ministries of Education, 2013).

5-2 What do the training curricula include?

On the basis of the annual planning of nursery school learning activities (2022-2023) for the Abomey-Calavi 2 constituency, under the responsibility of Pedagogical Region No. 12 (Abomey-Calavi 2), which is part of the Atlantic Departmental Directorate of Nursery and Primary Education, the following can be noted:

pre-school education is subdivided into two sections: the toddlers' section and the older children's section;

There are five (05) learning areas, spread over three terms;

each area is associated with activities as shown in the table below

Table 2: Kindergarten learning areas

N°	Fields	Activities	Examples of practices
I	Health and Environment education	Home, Practical activity, Health education, Going to the toilet, Handwashing, Snack, Bedtime	Learning to welcome your friend, learning to discover your new surroundings, acquiring good hygiene habits, etc.
II	Body expression	Movement training	Learn to snake walk, walk on heels, etc.
III	Pre-learning and technological activities	Pre-reading Pre-writing, Pre-mathematics, Sensory education, Observation, Handicrafts	Learning to read the image of the human body, learning to draw sticks, left and right lateralization, color discrimination, limb observation, etc.
IV	Emotion and feeling	Emotional expression, Plastic expression	Learn how to calm down your anger and that of your friends, congratulate your friends, etc.
V	Relation/reflexion/Social and Socio-Affective	Oral communication or language, storytelling, poetry, singing, rhymes, riddles, etc.	The implementation of these activities must take into account the topic under the supervision of the Director

Source: Planning for the Abomey-Calavi 2 educational district

- The activities in this table are reinforced as we move from one trimester to the next, and from one section to the next.

Note that each activity lasts 20 minutes in the junior section, and 25 minutes in the senior section.

5-3 Classroom observations

First and foremost, it should be pointed out that there is no harmonization in terms of learning times or periods. In some nursery schools, classes start at 8:00 a.m. and finish at 3:00 p.m., with recess between 9:30 a.m and 10 a.m. and a break from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.: this is the continuous day system. For others, as is the case for public schools, classes start at 8:00 a.m and end at 11:30 a.m. in the morning, with a break between 9:30 a.m and 10 a.m. In the afternoon, class resumes at 3:00 p.m. and ends at 5:00 p.m.

In the various classrooms we visited, we were able to observe so-called "corners of life" representing different activity sectors. These include the hospital corner, the pharmacy corner, the kitchen corner, the hairdressing corner, the shopping corner and the sewing corner, to name but a few. These different corners are all learning workshops.

In terms of ergonomics, the establishments we visited are more or less well-equipped. Classrooms are relatively widely spaced and equipped in places. The two private schools had a TV screen in each classroom, which is also used for learning. These screens were not available in the public school. There were also game areas and child-friendly toilets. The two private nursery schools were better equipped in terms of infrastructure and appeared more attractive than the public nursery school.

In addition, the various areas covered by the program are carried out under the banner of well-defined activities. In most cases, each activity begins with the performance of a song. Sometimes, these songs serve as channels for learning certain notions. This is what a group of students try to explain in their report:

« The English teacher sang an English song about the different parts of the human body, and as the children performed the song, they touched the relevant parts of their bodies. A song about the different seasons (rainy season, dry season) was also sung ».

Observations also show that many games and sports activities are organized for children. On the other hand, some observations leave

something to be desired. Some teachers' initiatives are tantamount to exaggeration. The following statements from the reports speak a lot:

« As soon as we entered the classroom, we noticed that learners were counting from zero (00) to fifty (50) in English and French ».

« Many students were able to recite the 26 letters of the French alphabet, much to their teacher's satisfaction ».

These two observations raise the question of whether such learning is necessary, or even indispensable, for children of this age group and level of understanding. We'll look at this further in the discussion.

5-4 Some clarifications from teachers

During the various interviews, teachers gave explanations for certain aspects observed in classroom situations. At the end of a sports activity, learners were called back to calm by lying down on mats, eyes closed, for at least five minutes. For the teachers, this return to calm encourages learners to rest, allowing them to concentrate and recover their "wits". Likewise, the use of castanets during lessons helps to capture learners' attention and prevent them from becoming distracted.

The use of living corners was also discussed. From the explanations given, it emerges that it's during moments dedicated to distractions that each learner deliberately chooses a corner where he or she is going to game.

Another recurrent practice in nursery schools is that the teacher who supervises the learners in the toddler section continues to supervise the same learners the following year, this time in the older children's section. A practice which, according to the teachers, avoids psychological upheaval for the learners.

We were also curious about the learning of numbers from 0 to 50 on the one hand, and the French alphabet on the other hand. The rationale is to better prepare learners for the next class, the Beginners' classes (Cours d'Initiation). According to the teachers, the pupils' parents are satisfied with their work, because their children are learning a lot and very quickly.

6- Discussion

The mission of the nursery school is primarily to awaken children. To achieve this, a set of skills to be acquired by the children is defined in a well-established program. In Benin, these skills are divided into five areas, each with its own activities. In fulfilling their mission, teachers supervise the young children entrusted to their care. Admittedly, this is no easy task

when you consider the whims and antics of the children they have to deal with on a daily basis. As Anton (2012) puts it, teaching requires the ability to change one's point of view, posture, and methods, in order to constantly adapt to the age, level, and even interests of the pupils. From an analysis of the results of our observations, we can affirm that, to a certain extent, teachers respect the program established to contribute to the stimulation of the child's physical, psychological, and mental functions, as indicated in the law of orientation. However, the teaching-learning process is not without its exaggeration. Asking kindergarteners to count from 0 to 50 seems an overestimate. The same applies to learning all the letters of the French alphabet, even though the program only calls for learning a few of them. It's worth pointing out that there's a gap between the normative framework and the practice of pre-schooling. It's as if the kindergarten learner absolutely has to have this knowledge in order to use it in the Beginners' classes. However, the Beginners' Classes are also a framework for learning this knowledge. This practice is indicative of a precocity of learning that can be harmful to learners (Magnuson and Waldfogel, 2005). In reality, teachers who engage in this practice ignore the didactic process that leads to curriculum development. The knowledge to be taught is defined according to the age of the children. Going beyond this produces harmful long-term effects; because the mental functions that are essential for learning these notions are not yet developed in children; although in nursery school some children may encounter fine motor difficulties (Louis and Ramond, 2013). Pre-schooling is not just about early entry into kindergarten. It also implies early learning of certain skills. It's clear that it's mainly private schools that are early, with the sole aim of showing parents that the school is doing a good job. This is a pity; because later on, teachers and parents will no longer establish a link between future learning difficulties and precocious learning at pre-school level. Contrary to what many teachers may think, pre-school is not designed for real learning, but for awakening and stimulating.

Teachers are doing their best to take the realities of learners' backgrounds into account when constructing knowledge. But they can do more to help the children develop their skills. As Paré-Kaboré (2013) points out, education systems must give priority to the use of tools rooted in the habitus of the community. This is what we are calling on teachers to do, by exploring children's living environments more in the construction of knowledge. It is therefore important to redirect approaches by moving

increasingly towards a "domestication of teaching or education" at nursery school.

Conclusion

The purpose of enrolling a child in nursery school is to prepare him or her for schooling through elementary learning. In this introductory context, which is designed to foster the child's development, game is essential: hence the frequent use of game-based teaching. But nursery education should not be confused with primary education. The former leads to the latter. In nursery school, children's development should be more important than instruction. And as Célestin Freinet once said, « It's not by pushing on the lettuce that it will grow faster ». Teachers would therefore do well to stay within the strict framework of the fundamentals, and not go beyond them in teaching knowledge, as can be observed in the classroom.

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