

# Comparison between childhood and adult education

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**Abstract:** It is commonly accepted that learning and education are linked, since maximizing the efficiency of learning is achieved through education (Kokkos, 2005). Education in recent years has ceased to be a privilege of the younger aged groups and has expanded beyond the age of eighteen, the age that marks the passage from childhood to adult life. The adult trainees have formed their own methods of learning which result from their experiences and ethics, and in turn, this has led them to develop defense mechanisms whenever their knowledge is being underestimated (Kokkos, 2005). These obstacles may be generated by anxiety, fear of failure and the lack of self-esteem (Rogers, 1999). To learn is something personal and each individual has developed a unique way of to learn and of how to perceive the learning process. The ways and perceptions of each era play an important role in how the teaching methods are formed. There are three main learning theories, the Behaviorism, the Constructivism and the Sociocultural theories of learning. However, this differentiation lies not only in the educational time-step, but also in a number of other factors resulting from different and often opposing educational conditions.

**Keywords:** childhood education, adult education, learning theories

## 1. Introduction

It is known that through learning, change and adjustment is achieved both on already acquired knowledge and experiences of the learner, and on his behaviour and personality. But the very process of learning requires personal motivation from the individual, ie his intention to engage in the learning process in order to achieve a series of goals and objectives that serve his needs.

Maslow placed the human needs hierarchically, presenting it as a pyramid, at the base of which are the most important needs concerning survival and development and, subsequently, those which meet the further emotional, personal and social requirements, putting on top the need for self-realization and self-fulfilment of the individual, thus ensuring its personal and social recognition (Rogers, 1997).

Pursuing the satisfaction of his needs is what guides an individual's behaviour, actions and efforts, i.e. the general path that he follows in his life. It's the intention, the personal motivation that directs a person's actions. In the same way, education and learning motivation and interest are presupposed and then converted into intention and

achievement of specific personal and socio-cultural objectives.

## 2. Learning theories

Learning is a personal practice and each person has their own way and perception of learning. Existing perceptions of learning greatly influence teaching methods. There are three major theories of learning:

- Behaviorism
- Constructivism
- Sociocultural theories of learning

These theories are summarized below.

### 2.1.1 Behaviourism

This theory argues that learning is the result of creating connections between stimuli that one encounters and responses caused. It maintains that learning is a change in the behaviour of the learner and a description of behaviour is what is of interest not on explanation. The main theoreticians who have dealt with this approach are J. B Watson, I. Pavlov,

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o Ed. Thorndike and B. F. Skinner. Behaviourism as a didactic approach is often referred to as directed teaching. Pavlov founded, through the study of reflexes in dogs, the idea of dependent reflective learning (classical conditioning) (Pavlov, 1927) while Watson extended the above model to people, arguing that the learning process is the result of conditioning reflexes (Watson, 1924). Learning under Thorndike is based on trial and error, and considers the relationship between stimulus and response as a nervous bond (Connecting learning theory - Associationism) (Thorndike, 1931). According to Skinner (1968), learning is derived from behaviour and is followed by reinforcement. This is the basic principle of the theory of operant conditioning which he suggested.

### 2.1.2 Constructivism

This theory holds that all people have the ability to build knowledge through exploration, discovery and problem solving. According to Constructivism the main purpose of education is to help learners build new knowledge on that already gained. Some theorists who dealt with the specific learning theory are J. Dewey, o L. Vygotsky, o J. Piaget, o J. Bruner, o S. Papert and M. Resnick. Constructivists believe that the application of behaviourism in the educational process leads to a teacher centered approach focusing on individual work rather than team work. The teaching-oriented theory of constructivism is based on five stages (Tolman & Hardy, 1995):

- activating prior knowledge
- acquisition of knowledge
- understanding knowledge
- use of knowledge
- feedback on knowledge

One basic belief held by Piaget is that learning is not transmitted but constructed and therefore teaching should create conditions so that students can gain new cognitive abilities. To achieve this there should be active cooperation both between teacher and students and among students (Duckworth, 1964). Bruner's (1961) discovery learning theory argues that learning is a process consisting of experimentation, exploration, discovery and reconstruction of knowledge. According to Bruner there are three stages of cognitive development:

- enactive representation
- iconic representation
- symbolic representation

### 2.1.3 Sociocultural theories of learning

Sociocultural theories of learning argue that the development of knowledge is socially determined and occurs in collaborative environments with communication and interaction between individuals or groups and implementation of activities. Sociocultural theories of learning were influenced by Vygotsky's (1962) social development theory which maintains that social interaction has a primary role in the development of knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) coined the term 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) to describe that the level of development depends on social interaction and social learning and has resulted in the development of knowledge. Influenced by the above approach Lave (1998) proposes the theory of situated learning which argues that learning occurs in a specific context through autonomous activities with the help of social and mental support. A variation of the above theory is the cognitive apprenticeship of Collins, Brown and Newman (1989) according to which learning is achieved by means of work in the presence of the instructor who teaches the student how to achieve his goals.

## 3. Childhood and adulthood

It is difficult to separate and distinguish the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and the age at which a person is considered an adult varies from country to country. However, three features define and govern adulthood:

- maturity, the tendency of the individual for full growth, expansion and enhancement of his skills,
- the tendency of perspective sense, i.e. the possibility to take advantage of all kinds of experiences,
- the tendency of autonomy, i.e. the responsible decision-making and voluntary behaviour (Rogers, 1999).

The variety of needs that adult people want to meet through the process of education and learning, cover both the individual - personal, and social - economic - professional level. According to Houle (1961), there are three main directions of the adults who choose to engage in the learning process:

- Students focused on a particular purpose directly motivated by social – economic pursuits,
- Trainees focused on educational activities that meet individual needs,
- Students focused on learning.

The needs, therefore, leading one to participate in training programs are related to social, individual-personal, professional, financial incentives and criteria, ensuring personal satisfaction and momentum for learning, acquiring a certain qualification, integration in a wider social and professional environment, improvement of the quality of life, increase of financial resources, social recognition and prestige, enhancement of ones self-esteem, and the further enhancement and development. There is also a close correlation and connection between the social and economic needs and the policy requirements that lead to the implementation of educational programs. The state's objective is the education of adults so that a cooperation conjugation can be achieved as well as an implementation of joint objectives with the EU.

#### 4. Comparison between juvenile and adult learners

1) Minors, when entering the learning process, are not characterized by maturity and adulthood, but from the lack of autonomy in decision making and self-management. No conscious sense of perspective is observed, as they are in the on-going development process. Finally, their inclusion in the learning process does not always require the selection of action and their active participation.

In contrast, adult learners consciously choose their place in the learning process and aim for certain purposes. They are characterized by mature thoughts and actions; they meet their respective needs and actively participate in the process.

2) Minor trainees do not have shaped attitudes towards learning and experiencing and cannot easily assimilate new knowledge, since they do not possess many experiences. From an educational and learning point of view, they have not conquered the upper level of intellectual development and thinking. Finally, they have not conquered all stages of development by Piaget (sensory kinetic, symbolic, energy thinking, specific and local actions).

Adults, on the other hand, are at the highest stage of intellectual development, they have formed attitudes, opinions, experiences, values and knowledge. The adaptation of their already formed structures to assimilate new knowledge is relatively an easy process, which makes knowledge accessible and learning assured.

According to Rogers (1999), learning

- is the dynamic rather than passive acquisition of knowledge and skills,
- is personal in the sense that changes in behaviour and growing knowledge is always a

personal conquest,

- is voluntary and intended by ourselves.

3) Juvenile education has adopted the traditional learning model, which does not encourage the child's active participation in the educational process but it is based on strict discipline and sterile memorizing, on the accumulation of knowledge and information, but also on the containment of human initiative and spontaneity.

Adult education on the other hand, is based on a modern model of learning that enhances and encourages the initiative and the individual's action, decision-making and active participation. The way to search and acquire knowledge, the experiential approach towards the learning object, tackling and solving problematic situations ensure interest and creativity in learning, self-criticism, self-assessment and ultimately, self-education.

4) Furthermore, in the case of minor trainees, many are the factors that hinder the development of a "contract", which would act as a driving force both in the learning process and the relationship between teachers and learners. The characteristics of childhood and the obstacles they create in the learning process are enough to understand the difference between the two cases.

Adult learners are willing to enter into a flexible "contract", based on an unambiguous, widely accepted and recognized framework, which is a rib point and it ensures the educational process.

5) The various learning barriers that are occasionally observed in the case of underage learners are related both to lack of experience, and with their whole attitude towards teaching and the learning process. Fear of failure, the stress of school performance and acceptance by peers, the reluctance of cooperation and acceptance of new learning methods, low self-esteem are just some of the daily battles required for a child to give, developing his so-called defence mechanisms (Rogers , 1999).

Such barriers certainly are faced by adults too, but to a much lesser extent. Besides, it is easier for them to adapt to new conditions and situations, to adjust their already acquired cognitive structures so as to be enabled to assimilate new experiences and knowledge, but also to change any misconceptions and prejudices, ie to proceed in the process of unlearning easier from the underage students.

6) It would be wrong to argue that there is identical incitement to underage and adult learners with regard to the learning process and the process of acquiring new knowledge. On the adoption of specific strategies in order to achieve the maximum effectiveness of the learning process, the fact that younger pupils use techniques based on memory

and not on experience or testing, leads to perpetuating the problem of sterile storage and accumulation of information without any effective learning to occur.

In contrast, adults make use of analogue thinking, trial and error, constantly adapting existing knowledge and searching for new approaches and new acquisition.

7) It is commonly accepted that the learning process is closely linked to the design of the curricula, but may be based on different learning theories. Children's education is based mainly on behavioural theories, where their role is passive, motivated and directed by the teacher-authority, which does not promote individual initiative and provides feedback as being detached from the learning process and taking place after it. In contrast, adult education is based on cognitive and humanitarian learning theories. Emphasis is given in the processes relating to the creation of reactions, the organization of perception and the development of insight, while stimulation mechanisms are being investigated. The active participation of learners is vital; emphasis is on the desires and impulses of personality, on autonomy and impetus for development and growth, which ultimately ensure the effective.

## 5. Discussion

Through the approach of the main features of adult education, we outlined its importance and displayed the main differences which separate it from the training we knew until recently. So we are given the opportunity to extract conclusions by comparing juvenile and adult education and to distinguish points of convergence and divergence. It is important to bring some differentiation in the role of trainers and trainees regarding their motives of learning, the objectives and expected results. The educator's role is to guide, to encourage, to coordinate, to help in approaching the matters he suggest, he encourages the heuristic course to knowledge, he is constantly interacting with the trainees, he offers them stimulus, he creatively cooperates with the. Also, he gives the ability of free participation in solving matters by giving time, sometimes limited, for discussion, questions and doubting a response. Through the teams in which the educator has places the trainees, the adults solve the specific matters, developing their critical thinking applying techniques in a friendly way, which encourage the trainees to complete the educational process. Conclusions can be drawn on study programs starting from different learning theories and have different effects. The concept of adulthood has already been understood as well as how it affects the course of learning. Finally, it should be noted that the learning process in adult education should be characterized by interaction, active participation and collectiveness, cause

knowledge is built and created with free choice, autonomy and research.

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