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'Mantle of Expert (MoE)' in Kindergarten Education – "Let's Play Librarian!"

„Mantle of Expert (MoE)” w edukacji przedszkolnej –
„Zagrajmy w bibliotekarza!”

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

Mantle of the Expert – MoE,
playing library,
kindergarten,
complexity of skills,
interview research

In our study, the complexity of skill development of preschool children is presented through the Mantle of the Expert (MoE) method which is a specific type of education approach based on drama pedagogy. The adaptation of the method was developed by Dorothy Heathcote (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) and the development potential of the game in kindergarten is exemplified by the expert game of playing library in the Central Kindergarten in Jászberény, Hungary. The 'Librarian MoE' will be demonstrated with the help of the theoretical background of MoE and our empirical research based on a qualitative, structured interview method with parents (N = 11). Our preliminary research focuses on the experience of the parents of those children who are actively participating in the 'Librarian MoE' during the initiation, creation and operation of the special kindergarten drama game. Regarding the results of the research it can be claimed that "playing library" as a Mantle of the Expert method has positive effects on the children's social relationships, their ability to cooperate, moreover their digital competence and use of ICT tools has become more conscious.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

Mantle of the Expert – MoE, zabawa w bibliotekę, przedszkole, złożoność umiejętności, badania oparte na wywiadzie

W niniejszej pracy prezentujemy złożoność procesu rozwijania umiejętności dzieci przedszkolnych za pomocą metody „Mantle of Expert” (MoE, „Szaty eksperta”). Jest to specyficzna metoda nauczania oparta na pedagogice dramy. Opracowaniem tej metody zajmowała się głównie Dorothy Heathcote (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), a rozwojowy potencjał proponowanych przez nią zabaw można zaobserwować na przykładzie zabawy w bibliotekę przeprowadzonej w przedszkolu Central Kindergarten w Jászberény (Węgry). Zabawa w bibliotekarza (Bibliotekarz MoE) zostanie opisana po przedstawieniu teoretycznego kontekstu metody MoE, po czym zaprezentujemy badania empiryczne oparte na jakościowej metodzie wywiadu kwestionariuszowego przeprowadzonego z rodzicami (N = 11). Badania wstępne koncentrują się na doświadczeniu rodziców dzieci aktywnie uczestniczących w Bibliotekarzu MoE na etapie rozpoczynania, tworzenia i rozwijania tej specyficznej zabawy opartej na technice dramy. Na podstawie wyników badań można powiedzieć, że zabawa w bibliotekę wg metody „Mantle of Expert” wywarła pozytywny wpływ na społeczne relacje dzieci i ich umiejętność współpracy w innych. Ponadto ich kompetencje cyfrowe i umiejętność posługiwania się narzędziami ICT stały się bardziej świadome.

Theoretical background of the ‘Mantle of the Expert’ (MoE) drama pedagogical concept

In our study the main focus is based on the theoretical background of the method (Mantle of the Expert, MoE) and the special adaptation of the method as a “playing library” in a kindergarten, Jászberény, Hungary.

Mantle of the Expert (MoE) method, the so-called “expert game” is one of the pedagogical procedures of the last decade, but it is also one of the most consciously developed and detailed types and pedagogical concepts of drama pedagogy (Heathcote, 2002). The development of the method is primarily due to Dorothy Heathcote (29 August 1926 – 8 October 2011), a drama teacher and academic who invented many revolutionary dramatic-inquiry approaches to teaching and learning. Heathcote reformed English drama pedagogy with her instinctive and effective methods.

The special type of drama method – the so-called: Mantle of the Expert, MoE – was created by Heathcote and Bolton from the 1960’ (Farmer, n.d.). The method was designed specifically for teachers without little experience in drama education, but using MoE as a “technique” in the teaching-learning process they are able to use imaginary contexts to generate motivating and suggestive activities for successful learning (Heathcote, 2002).

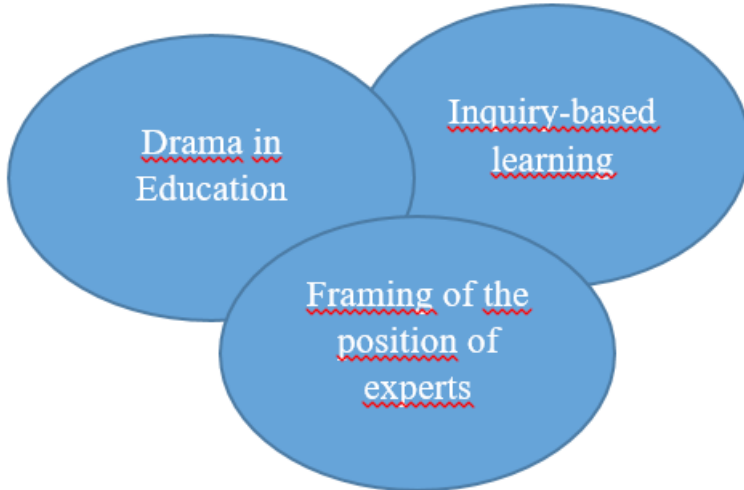
Heathcote's approach follows the pedagogy of John Dewey (1976), who believed that children should be prepared for life through real experience. School should be real life itself, drawing on the experiences that the child encounters in his natural environment. Rather than ready-made knowledge, school should be a place where children develop the skills to acquire knowledge. Additionally there is a parallel to Dewey's idea in the concept of the fact that children in the "expert game" confronted with concrete, action-based problem-solving and real problems that require actual solutions (Bernhardt et al., 2021).

As it can be seen in Figure 1, drama education, inquiry learning, and the situation involving children in the position of experts culminates into MoE method so it proves that MoE is a specific type of educational approach based on drama pedagogy (Aitken, 2013).

Mantle of the Expert does not mean the students are magically endowed with expertise. In the real world they are still children and it is only inside the fiction when they work as experts.

According to Abbots (2007, p. 23) "the teacher needs to be conscious of, and adept in, all three of these modes of teaching."

Figure 1. The three pedagogical approaches of Mantle of the Expert (adapted by Abbots, 2007)



According to Van De Water, McAvoy and Hunt (2015) the children's roles and duties in the process of MoE method involve to be responsible for their team as experts, to work on important assignments, to care about the things they look after and to be proud of their status. The "expert" children can focus on a real purpose in exploring together either in an interactive or in a proactive way. Through the expert game they

acquire skills and knowledge that they can apply in their everyday lives, moreover they develop commitment and increase their self-confidence. From the beginning of the expert game the children are aware that they are involved in a fiction of an expert team and they are aware that the fiction is something that can be stopped and started when they desire or as the teacher decides to do it. In the fictional situation the teacher and the students work collaboratively such as people make efforts for the same team on the same commission.

Mantel of the Expert (MoE) method in kindergarten education

According to Ledóné Dolmány and Szauder (2004, p. 9) the Mantel of the Expert method is like a task performance which is ‘not real but realistic.’

The “expert game” was therefore originally focused on typically school education and teaching-learning process, although, like any other effective pedagogical method and procedure, it can be freely adapted and applied to other age groups and educational settings. MoE is able to create an imagined context for the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge that is a necessity in kindergarten education. Furthermore new competencies can be improved like reading or digital awareness and competency (Szaszko & Sinka, 2019).

Such as László Kaposi (2011, p. 11) declared “[...] the children dealt as naturally as possible with questions for which, according to the ingrained practice of [...] education, their age does not predispose them.”

The adaptation of MoE in kindergarten education can be understood within the framework of dramatic play and it is justified by the following characteristics parallel with the National Basic Programme for Early Childhood Education in Hungary (Korm. rendelet..., 2012):

- in kindergarten education playing is the basic activity the children do and need;
- skill development is achieved through complex activities;
- experience and learning process is based on the children’s observations;
- everyday activities take place in group work and cooperation.

Empirical research regarding to the “Playing Library” as the MoE method in kindergarten education

Research background and procedure

The idea of a “playing library” was first implemented in 2019, during the pandemic, when external stimuli were reduced, external places of experience disappeared, daily walks and programs outside the kindergarten became scarce.

To compensate for the mentioned situations, a “playing” world (library) was created, in which children and kindergarten teachers set up a company as experts (librarians). The steps of the expert play were as follows:

1. The idea of running a kindergarten library was discussed with 8 pre-school children (3rd grade, 6 year-old kindergarten children).
2. Once the idea was accepted, a contract was signed: location, roles (as librarians) and tasks were defined and partnership was established.
3. The tasks were set in motion: collecting books, labelling, involving families in the progression, setting up shelves, borrowing process (using a tablet – e.g. taking and deleting photos).
4. They organised meetings to manage the process and to solve problems (e.g. reader behaviour, setting standards, organising, cleaning).

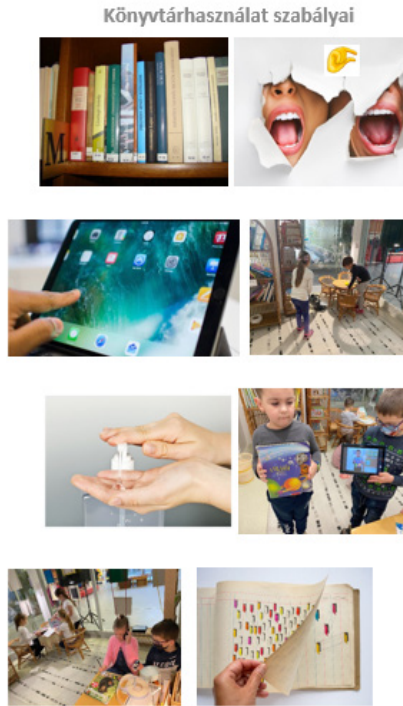
Figure 2. The process of discussing and deciding about the contract (the photo was taken by Anikó Darók Kunné)



Figure 3. ‘Reading corner’ (the photo was taken by Anikó Darók Kunné)



Figure 4. Rules in the “Playing Library” (the photo was taken by Anikó Darók Kunné)



Our *research aim* was to reveal parents’ experience and views about the “playing library” in Jászberény. The parents’ children are the ones who were actively participating in the ‘Librarian MoE’ (durig the initiation, creation and operation process).

Qualitative method was used as the *research method* and we made structured interviews with 11 parents. In the *sample* there were parents (N = 11) both having kindergarten child or previous kindergarten child (currently 1st grade primary school pupil). The research took place in Central Kindergarten (Jászberény, Hungary) in February 2022.

The *aim of the research* referred to getting the views and experience of the parents of those children who were actively involved in the “playing library” initiative.

Twelve questions were asked during the interviews, first concerning to some introductory questions where we were interested in that who the parents heard about the „playing library” from; what kind of benefits and values they could describe; what role their child plays or has played in the library, and how they were involved in the organisation and operation of the library.

In the main question part of the interview research the parents were informed about their views on the impact of the “playing library” in terms of developing skills and abilities. Finally, according to the last data of the research some information was gathered from the parents of those children who attend school this year and the aim was to highlight the benefits or advantages and knowledge their child has already gained in their school life thank to the “playing library” as a pre-school child.

The results show that twice as many parents heard about the initiative of the “playing library” from their child’s kindergarten teacher (N = 7) than from their own child (N = 4).

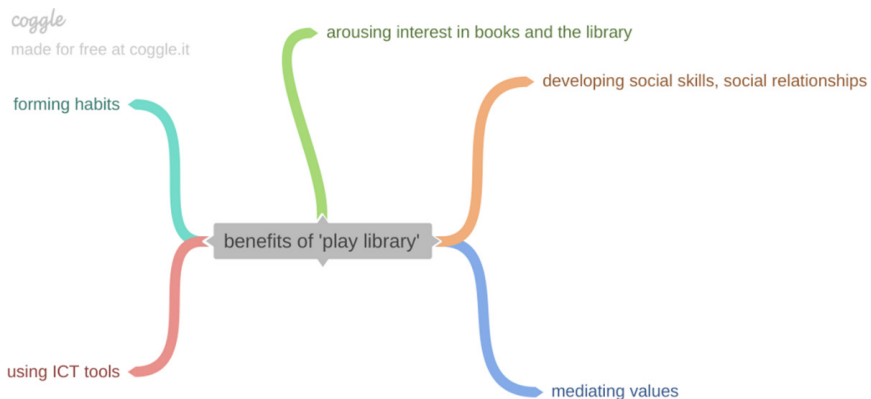
“It’s a very innovative idea. The kindergarten makes good use of its facilities, many young children attend here, and it is good for them to have the concept of a ‘library’ integrated into their daily lives” (P9).

More than half of the interviewees (63%) were actively involved in the „playing library” programme as a partner and two of them took part in the organisational tasks and process. Not many parents (N = 2) were active in the creation process of the library (collecting equipment, books), but three of them were involved in the operational progress of the library.

Results – Views of the parents about the “playing library”

Parents’ views and opinions play a key role regarding to any kindergarten activity, as the constructive development of the child’s personality is supported by the family, the parents and the kindergarten teacher as well. In addition to positive opinions, the interviewees also reported on what they believe the benefits and values of a „playing library” can have. As it can be seen in the mindmap (Figure 5), the main concepts and ideas of the parents were the following:

Figure 5. Benefits of “playing library” according to parents’ views



Also taking the opinions of the parents into account, it can be claimed that the most important facts and opinions were focused on the basis of reading and library going and skills or habits like cooperation skill, responsibility and handling tablets or any other ICT tools.

- a) Parents felt that their *child's interest in books was aroused*:

An interest in books is very important, they will help you to read and then to know later (I3).

The children are introduced to the concept of the library from preschool age, they can come in every day to browse and look at books, and the older ones can even read (I5). Children are made to love books and reading, they can become real librarians (I2).

- b) *Forming habits* was established by the „playing library”:

They get to know and learn library routine: taking care of books, meeting deadlines, increasing their knowledge, vocabulary, etc. (I2).

They develop a love of books and learn to know them. If they only went to the municipal library occasionally, it would not shape their attitude to books to such an extent (I6).

- c) Being involved in the MoE method children could *develop their social skills and strengthen social relationship*:

Children are a reflection of the adult world. They learn to cooperate with colleagues, develop a sense of duty, responsibility and helpfulness. They learn to deal with different situations (I6).

The “playing library” is in fact a very complex role play for the little librarians, everyone has their own tasks to perform, but it is not a burden for them, they are “playing,” but they learn many important things, it becomes part of their personality, which will be useful for them later. For example, communication with each other, polite behaviour, division of labour, all these are things that I find extremely beneficial... (I7).

- d) *Digital competency* could be developed by using tablet as an essential tool in the library (see also Molnár, 2020):

I also think it's a good thing that children can use ICT tools, because today's children can't do without these equipments, they are born into this environment, and they have to learn everything about the world around them. To use it in a meaningful way, the “playing library” has a very important role (I7).

According to the results, the children of our interviewees were active as librarians and readers in the „playing library.” They were involved in library activities every week, and many of them on a daily basis as well.

Asking about the *child's experience of the 'playing library,'* parents were positive and satisfied:

- The most frequent response was that the child ‘loved’ it and enjoyed being a librarian, furthermore the activity like working in a real library was a huge pleasure for them. Kindergarten children felt that being a librarian gave them a sense of responsibility and status, as well as more ‘entitlement’ than those who only entered the library as readers.
- Through their task as librarians, children were able to gain an insight into the profession, and to get to know life ‘behind the scenes’ in a library.
- It was an evidence that the children became much more interested in reading and books, the world opened to them, and the experience in the kindergarten motivated them to become members of the municipal library. There were also children who wanted their parents to buy them books as a result of their library experience.
- They were also motivated by meeting deadlines, they enjoyed using tablets, and they experienced reading as useful activity, because it gave them much knowledge and experience.

Further results and consequences of the MoE method and the research

The “playing library” has also provided other opportunities than the traditional “playing dressed up as an expert” situation. The children and the kindergarten teachers have already initiated and maintained contacts with the Jászberény Municipal Library. They have participated in online “inter-library conference” and they have shared their experience and knowledge with another library and kindergarten in Budapest.

As the “playing library” in Jászberény is located in a room separated by glass walls in the corridor, the MoE can be operated on and work on a long-term basis and fortunately it can serve nearly 200 children of the 8 kindergarten groups with 225 books.

Referring to the mentioned interview research, due to the “playing library” as a Mantle of the Expert method, the children’s social relationships have been strengthened, their ability to cooperate and compromise has been activated. Their digital competence and use of ICT tools has become goal-oriented and conscious. However, in contrast to the general characteristics of the age group, there was a stronger increase in engagement with and respect for the library.

In the light of our findings above, in our paper a certain example of the expert game have been demonstrated – in order to revive one of the special types of the dramatic play (MoE) and demonstrate the variability of the possibility of playful learning in kindergarten education.

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