

THE APPLICABILITY OF CONTEXTUAL LEARNING IN INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION: CONDITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Contextual learning is a process that connects theoretical knowledge with real-life situations. It provides greater readiness of teachers to apply knowledge in the practice and to overcome the gap that arises between theory and practice in the so-called academic knowledge. According to modern pedagogy, academic knowledge is not acquired through academic and ex cathedra approaches to learning, but through active, participatory-experiential and continuous learning - learning that develops abilities for independent creation of a system of academic knowledge, according to the individual needs and specificities of the person. Namely, contextual learning enables the future teacher to understand the individual specificities of each child in different life contexts and, accordingly, to encourage the application of a learning model based on individual and experiential approaches to learning. This paper provides an overview of the views of student-future educators on the applicability and efficiency of contextual learning in their initial education as a basis for quality professional and personal development among them. Special emphasis was placed on the obstacles and opportunities for the implementation of this modern learning concept in the initial education of teachers. For this purpose, a research was conducted that included a sample of 56 student-future teachers through surveys and unstructured interviews and was analyzed the programs intended for the initial education of these personnel. The results of the research are statistically and qualitatively processed and the obtained knowledge is not optimistic enough regarding the applicability of this learning concept in the initial education of future educators.

Keywords: Contextual learning preschool teacher, constructivism, initial education, modern educational concept

Introduction

Contextual learning is a process that provides access to natural learning, learning through experience, learning in the context of real life and surroundings. Contextual learning is the modern concept of an integrated and active educational process that is the opposite of academically organized education. It is explained by inclusion in the processes for which new truths are to be learned, by entering the situation in which and about which one learns. This, the so-called natural learning, requires the simultaneous engagement of all functional, socio-emotional, physical, cognitive and intellectual processes, which implies an integrated approach to the development of the child. New understandings for the contextual learning and the individual potential of the individual are based on congruent discourses in several theories and movements, such as Jean Piaget's Constructivist Theory, Abraham Maslow's Humanistic Theory, Carl Rogers's and others, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Holism as a Direction, Dewey's Pragmatism, Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning and others. According to these theories, learning is seen in a broad social, cultural and life context and with it academic knowledge is not acquired through academic and scholastic approaches, but through active, participatory-experiential and continuous learning - learning that develops learning abilities for the formation of academic knowledge. Based on these

theories, the word "context" appears as a term that is included in scientific interpretations related to cognitive processes and fully corresponds to the modern learning process. In its essence, this term represents a key to connecting the common components of all humanistic theories, that is, it marks the process of experiential natural learning and learning in real life situations. It is about learning that needs to be felt and experienced, learning in which the activities of learning and teaching represent a single process of development and change (Koteva-Mojsovska, 2023).

This learning process provides freedom to the person in every respect and especially freedom of cognitive-intellectual and socio-emotional expression, which is of particular importance for respecting the child's partner position in the development processes (Koteva-Mojsovska, 2017 ; Nutbraun, 2006). Based on the meaning of this term, "...Hans Reichenbach introduced the contextual approach to the epistemology and methodology of science; he coined the term "context of discovery" to denote a dynamic situation, when new scientific laws are discovered and theories are formulated. He also proposed the term "validation context" to describe the process of testing and verifying knowledge" (Andrey A. Verbitsky, Vitaly G. Kalashnikov, pp122) The contextual approach to learning is a way of making learning aware in which the interests and needs of the learner are the focus of the design of learning and teaching processes. It is understood as providing conditions for the learner to experience himself as an integral part of the changes and developments in nature and the environment. "According to Purković and Bezjak (2015), the philosophical basis of the contextual approach to learning is based on the need for self-realization of each individual who, understanding the content being learned, strives to incorporate his ideas into his environment." (Koteva-Mojsovska, 2023, p.324) The contextual approach, accordingly, has become the essence of the individual's existence, not only in the learning of the young child, but also in the overall functioning of the personality, and of course in the learning process of adults. Hence, it is very important to understand the process of contextualization, especially by educational staff who need to apply it throughout the educational processes with preschool and early school children. It is also of particular importance to develop greater awareness of the needs and strategies of contextual learning, in order to ensure congruence between the processes of learning and teaching (Kolb, A.Y. & Kolb D. A, 2009; Mahmoudi, Jafari, Nasrabadi, & Liaghatdar, 2012)

Hence, the need to be a participant presupposes new approaches to the teacher-student relationship, based on constructive interaction with peers and adults. This requires the teacher to know, understand and be able to apply the model based on individual and experiential approaches to learning for themselves. Accordingly, it is of great importance for educators to apply contextual learning as a personal learning style throughout the process of their initial education. In the context of the initial education of teacher, contextual learning: enables students to connect theoretical knowledge with real situations in the kindergarten; increases motivation and activity in the learning process; encourages the development of reflective, critical and practical competencies and contributes to the teacher's easier and better understanding of the child's nature and the child's need to learn to build their own learning style.

Methodology

The subject of the research in this paper is *the students' perception of the application of contextual learning in the initial education of teachers - conditions and perspectives*. The paper addresses this subject through the analysis of several key aspects and questions, namely:

- How do students understand and how much do they use contextual learning throughout their initial education,
- Is there a connection between the understanding and using of contextual learning in the initial education of teachers
- How do students perceive their readiness for the practical implementation of contextual learning with children after achieving the professional integration
- Do students recognize the significance and need for the application of contextual pedagogical approaches and strategies that promote active and experiential learning

In the research and in the analysis of the problem posed, the descriptive and analytical-synthetic methods were used, with the help of which the connections and relationships between the phenomena throughout the research are interpreted.

The research techniques used were:

- Unstructured interview with students – future teachers
- Survey and scaling for students – future teachers

The research instruments used were:

- Unstructured interview notebook
- Questionnaire-scaler

The survey and scaling were carried out using a created questionnaire-scaler via the Google form and, accordingly, statistically processed through the same platform. The questionnaire-scaler contained 12 closed and open-ended questions and with it we examined the students' opinion related to the understanding and application of contextual learning during their initial education. In accordance with the significance of the topic, we also conducted an interview with focus groups, consisting of questions that were structured according to previously given topics. The answers obtained with both instruments were processed qualitatively and quantitatively.

The survey was conducted on a sample of 56 students at the Faculty of Pedagogy "St. Kliment Ohridski" in Skopje. Of these, 40 were included in 8 focus groups with five students each. For the needs of the interview, 15 more students who did not participate in the survey were included and distributed in three more focus groups (which means a total of 11 focus groups organized for the interview).

Analysis and discussion

The first question that was about defining the concept of the contextual learning was in open type and students gave very short a different answer. The most representative ones in terms of our expectations, however, when processed together, give the completeness of the concept of contextual learning. These answers (as: "Contemporary school", "Continuous learning", "Interaction between students and teachers"...,"Learning through experiences in a certain context"...,"Learning in a natural way"... etc.) partially represent the essence of the researched question, but they still show an authentic interpretation of the process of contextual learning. In other words, it is evident that contextual learning is defined as a natural interactive process in which the child learns experientially and authentically in the context of real life events. We can say that students - future teachers have an appropriate (although incomplete) idea of what this type of learning means. The results of the unstructured interview, however, show that the respondents, in most cases define contextual learning only from the aspect of its application in practice with preschool and school children and not from the aspect of its application in their own learning

throughout initial education. These answers still do not confirm that students successfully define contextual learning and unreservedly use it in their learning practice during their studies.

We also gained interesting insights from the responses to the question regarding the determinants by which respondents decide how and which pedagogical conception of learning and teaching they will choose to explain the process of contextual learning. This, in a way, was supposed to indirectly demonstrate their competence and acquired knowledge related to the definition and application of contextual learning, both in their learning style and in the practice in which they will engage after graduation. To this end, the question that read: What are the key determinants of pedagogical conceptions of educational leading that successfully explain the contemporary learning and teaching processes? was of an open type and offered opportunities for free answers. The responses yielded different but extremely briefly expressed thoughts on what the respondents use as a guide for connecting pedagogical conceptions with contextual learning. Of these, the following stand out as the most representative and most prevalent in percentage terms:

- The existence and application of the experiment,
- Use of observation,
- Emphasis on self-esteem,
- The opportunities offered for self-activation and self-education of children,
- The opportunity to be constantly confronted with what they are learning about,
- The realization of learning in natural conditions,
- The opportunity for interactive learning
- Full dedication to what is being learned
- The opportunity to freely and independently explore.

If the students' questions are carefully examined, it becomes evident that they are successfully recognize and determine the criteria and determinants for choosing a pedagogical concept with which they will apply contextual learning. However, their opinion on this issue is reduced to the application of constructivism in the lower educational levels (preschool and primary education) in whose practice they will integrate after completing their studies, which was confirmed by the interview conducted. The interview also, in this part of the research, leads to the conclusion that the students need additional questions in order to be able to discuss the appropriate issue more consistently and with more appropriate knowledge. Of course, this does not mean that they do not know the researched problem at all, but this still indicates that this problem does not fit into their comprehensive system of thinking, which should be related to the techniques and forms of effective learning for themselves and for those they are to teach after completing their profiling.

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In the question that referred to the respondents' opinion on the need to apply contextual learning in the initial education of future teachers, they had to choose between the answers "Yes", "No", "Partially" and "I don't know". From the answers, it is evident that 33.3% of them recognize the need for contextual learning, while 25% of the total number answered that they do not know the answer and 8.3% opted for the negative answer, i.e. that they do not recognize the need for this type of learning throughout their initial education. Taking into account the need for future teachers and educators to have practical experience of this learning model in order to be able to apply it in the process of their professional integration, it can be freely said that this percentage is not entirely satisfactory. The interview question that also referred to the need to apply contextual learning in the initial education of future educators and teachers received different opinions. The respondents in their discussions, within the focus groups, showed hesitation and opposition in the exchange of mutual statements - from categorical positions against the need to apply this type of learning to categorical positions in favor of the need to use it throughout initial education. The reasoning of the respondents who declared themselves "against" was mainly focused on the fact that adults certainly have a different way of perceiving, as well as a different way of processing information and knowledge and therefore should not use the same approaches to learning as children in preschool and primary education. This does not support the view that man is part of nature and any access to information in that context is more acceptable and easier to process.

The question with which we wanted to discover to what extent the respondents think that they use the contextual approach as their learning style throughout their initial education had alternative answers offered as: I use it completely; I use it occasionally; I do not use it; I use it partially; I do not need to use it; I do not think about this question. The largest number of their answers, 41.7% of the total, were distributed at the answer "I use it occasionally", 16.7% chose the answer "I do not think about this question" while 33.3% of the respondents answered positively, that is, that they use contextual learning completely as their learning style. Together with the answers of 41.7% who occasionally use this style, it can be said that the respondents think to a satisfactory extent that they use contextual learning as their learning style throughout their initial education. However, the answers in the interview, as well as the answers to other questions from the questionnaire that reflect the practical application of this type of learning, do not support the opinion expressed by future teachers. This indicates a certain disconnect between the opinions and attitudes of the respondents regarding the understanding and implementation of contextual learning during their initial education.

Namely, it remains unclear how the respondents are sure that they use it occasionally and that they use it completely if in defining contextual learning they give partial answers, i.e. they do not have a complete and thus clear picture of it.

The question that referred to which strategies for supporting contextual learning were recognized by the respondents as the most appropriate in the learning process they practice offered several alternative answers, namely: Natural learning; Active/interactive learning; Experiential learning; Collective learning; Cooperative learning; Situational learning; Other. From the analysis of this question, it is evident that, despite the fact that the offered answers are assessed as strategies for supporting contextual learning, the largest percentage (33.3%) of the respondents opted for active and interactive learning as a support strategy. However, the fact remains that the percentage who chose this answer is still small. For natural learning, the percentage is 25%, which together with

the percentage of the answer for active/interactive learning, provides a choice for over 50% of the respondents. It can be said that the selected answers (natural learning and active/interactive learning) are closest to the definition of this type of learning that is the subject of the research here, which is actually positive in terms of its understanding by the students. For experiential learning, 16.7% opted for it, while for situational and collective learning, not a single respondent opted. The data is surprising that despite the possibility of circling multiple answers, the respondents opted for only one of them. Namely, given the similarity of some responses that can be treated as a complete strategic composition for supporting contextual learning, choosing only one of them provides an incomplete picture of their thinking about the choice of strategies for supporting contextual learning that they practice.

Regarding the respondents' opinion on the question: "What is the best way to achieve the highest efficiency and quality in the learning process?", the majority of them believe that it is achieved by "involvement in the processes through which new truths are learned." This answer was chosen by 33.3% of the total number of respondents. The other percentages are almost equally distributed among the other answers, as follows: 16.7% of the total number each chose consistency and dedication in learning - which is not directly related to the definition of contextual learning; 25% of the respondents chose interaction with peers - which can be said to be satisfactory as an answer that is close to determining the essence of contextual learning.

The interview highlighted the respondents' opinions on the reasons why they believe that involvement in the processes through which new truths are learned provides the highest efficiency in learning. Namely, in this part, the respondents appreciate that the knowledge obtained in this way is more permanent, but, here again, they stated that the assessment they made give refers to the learning of children in early childhood development and not to their learning. When it comes to the efficiency of learning at their age, their assessment refers to maintaining consistency - continuity in learning, as well as dedication to learning, which in terms of involvement in the processes being learned has fewer points of contact with the concept of contextual learning. This again suggests that the respondents - future educators and teachers do not sufficiently use this type of learning throughout their initial education. Of course, this assumption lies in the perception of the inversely proportional relationship between the negative opinion about a process and the need to apply the same process in the practice.

Regarding the students' readiness to apply contextual learning after their integration into the profession for which they are preparing, the interview showed that the majority of them declared themselves partially prepared, which, however, coincides with the data that they partially correctly define contextual learning. The remaining respondents do not feel prepared because they have no experience in implementing this way of learning, neither in relation to themselves, nor in relation to the practice they have in the institutions during their studies.

Conclusion

From the data analysis of the research we found interesting insights and conclusions. At first, we found there is an evident discrepancy in the students' thinking about the definition and implementation of contextual learning in initial education among students - future teachers. The respondents recognize the need to use this type of learning (contextual learning), but their other answers that refer to definition speak of incomplete knowledge of this question. Namely, there is great divergence and difference among students regarding the definition that they give of contextual learning. It is interesting the results however, show that the respondents, in most cases

define contextual learning only from the aspect of its application in practice with preschool and school children and not from the aspect of its application in their own learning throughout initial education. Further, we found out that the student-future teachers show a partially positive perception of their readiness for practical implementation of contextual learning after their integration into the profession for which they are being educated. In the same time, they have shown are partially aware of the importance and need for the application of pedagogical approaches and strategies that promote active and experiential learning. Students have shown an incomplete picture of their thinking about the choice of strategies for supporting contextual learning that they practice. They chose consistency and dedication in learning as a best way to achieve the highest efficiency and quality in the learning process- which is not directly related to the definition of contextual learning

So at the end we can conclude the practice of contextual learning by students - future teachers do not meet the needs arising from scientific knowledge about its pedagogical efficiency. On the other hand, we also can say there is a certain connection between the way of understanding and the placement of contextual learning on the one hand and the percentage of its application in the initial education of teachers, on the other hand. Considering the opinion of students on the definition and application of contextual learning, we can conclude that the current state of the applicability of contextual learning is not at a satisfactory level, and considering the need expressed by the students, we conclude that a restructuring of the setup and of the programme structure of the faculty for teacher education is necessary.

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