

EXPLOITING THE EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP TO BUILDING EFFICIENT COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Venera-Mihaela COJOCARIU ^{a*}, Petronela LUPUȘORU ^b

^a “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău, Mărășești Street, 157, RO-600115, Bacău, Romania

^b “Lizuca” Kindergarden, Bucovinei Street, No. 10, Bacău, 600245, România

Abstract

The need to design and implement educational partnerships in pre-primary education is increasing, in the context of the growing tasks and exigencies related to the institution of the kindergarden, with a view to ensuring successful training for integrating preschoolers in the preparatory grade. Besides its obvious generally formative value, the educational partnership may be achieved so that it enables, in a non-formal way, a higher contribution to reaching the finalities characteristic of pre-primary education. Building efficient communication skills represents such a finality essential for the integration of preschoolers into primary education. This study aims at identifying the extent to which a systematic programme of educational partnerships conducted throughout an entire school year may contribute significantly, while completing the formal educational process, to building efficient communication skills at middle group preschoolers. Describing the categories of partnerships conducted is followed by the comparative analysis of the results obtained in the pre- and post-test stage of the research, with a view to drawing some conclusions for improving the formative kindergarden process.

Key words: communication, communication skills, educational partnership, educational partnership

1. Educational partnership – need and possibility in pre-primary education

The notion of educational partnership is not regarded by pedagogues as easy to define although, apparently, we would find ourselves in a context easy to theorize. Attempting rather to describe than define the concept, Bailey & Dolan (2011), argue that the term of partnership is very sensitive due to its connotations of *sharing and trust*. At the same time, citing Gutierrez (2008, p. 33), he claims that “*the term ‘partnership’ suggests equality, respect, reciprocity and ownership*”.

* E-mail address: venera@ub.ro

Referring to numerous bibliographical resources, the authors invoked conclude that partnership always expresses a *relation between people and organizations working together*, being supported by “commitment to common objectives, bonded by long experience of working together, and sustained by subscription to common visions” (idem). When we turn towards the particular aspect of the educational partnership, this is defined from the perspective of its efficiency by Cunningham & Tedesco (2002) as representing the “*active and mutual participation of the partners for achieving common goals*” (apud Cordeiro & Kolek, 1996). Meditating upon the complex structure of a partnership, Eisler (2001, p. 145) shows, based on the studies he conducted for more than 30 years, that “partnership in education integrates *three core interconnected components: process* – how we learn and teach; *structure* - where learning and teaching take place; *content* - what we learn and teach”.

At present, the kindergarten educational process from our country provides, through its curricular and formal organizational content, as well as its implicit non-formal possibilities, the conditions for an increasingly wider and advantageous organization and exploitation of the educational partnership, from the perspective of the three elements previously highlighted. As *process*, the partnership moulds very well on the activities learnt by the children in kindergarten and the yearly projects conducted within it; as *structure*, the partnership provides the opportunity to be conducted in various spaces, which are interesting and attractive to children, from the school yard and the community institutions to family; as *content*, the partnership provides the widest possibilities for consolidating, completing and developing the acquisitions obtained formally.

The new curriculum for early childhood education in Romania systematically promotes the idea of developing educational partnerships. Point 4 in the Methodology for applying the curriculum for children with ages between 3 and 6/7 years from the curriculum for early education emphasizes the *need for partnerships between kindergarten, family and community*, for the harmonious development of the child. Conducting learning activities “requires coordination of the *efforts shared by the three partners* of the teaching-learning-evaluation process, respectively: *teachers, parents, children*, but also of the educational collaborators and partners from the community whose involvement is equally important” (Curriculum for the early education of children between 3 and 6/7 years of age, 2008, p. 18). Moreover, it is highlighted the increasing role of parents in kindergarten education, with new accents related to their involvement in “the application of the curriculum for early inclusive education as *partner*” (Curriculum for the early education of children between birth and 6/7 years of age, 2008, p. 43). This hypostasis should materialize in the effective presence and participation of parents to the actually conducted activities.

2. The research methodology

The research theme was achieved during the 2012-2013 school year, at the Kindergarten with Long Day Care “Lizuca” from Bacău. In agreement with the theoretical dimensions previously analyzed, we intend to verify the following hypothesis: *implementing a system of educational partnerships at the middle group from kindergarten determines a higher progress in developing efficient communication skills.*

To validate the hypothesis mentioned above we have established the following *objectives*:

- knowledge of the initial level of the efficient oral communication skills of preschoolers;
- designing a system of educational partnerships with a view to building efficient oral communication skills at preschoolers;
- effective achievement of the system of educational partnerships with a view to building efficient oral communication skills at preschoolers;
- knowledge of the final level of the preschoolers’ efficient oral communication skills;
- identifying the progress recorded by the preschoolers in building efficient oral communication skills.

The group of preschoolers investigated comprised all the 30 preschoolers from the middle group, 13 girls and 17 boys. Most children come from families with a good and very good financial situation. Most parents have only high-school studies, only 16 parents have higher studies. Nevertheless, all the parents are interested in the education of their children, guiding and helping them to enrich their own life experience and adjust to the kindergarten environment, manifesting an interest for their growth and educations, maintaining a permanent contact with the kindergarten, answering the demands of the teacher regarding the instructive-educational process.

In terms of motor skills, the children had a normal level of physical development. Intellectually speaking, we were interested in identifying what each child *knows* and *how he uses what he knows*, how he solves various problems (curiosity, learning method, verbal and non-verbal language, if he memorizes, puts things in order etc). The speech disorders encountered at a large number of children, approximately 20 preschoolers, did not need the intervention of the speech therapist, as these were remedied during the activities designed for this purpose. The vocabulary volume was reduced and this aspect was felt in interpersonal relationships, hindering communication and collaboration. Two children would refuse to communicate, isolating themselves from the rest of the group.

The research was conducted with the following *methods and techniques*: *experiment, pedagogical observation, test, analysis of the products of the activity, methods for measuring and processing the results* (tables, histograms, diagrams and the SPSS, a program for statistical analysis applied in the socio-human sciences).

The research conducted covered the following *stages*:

a. The stage of initial evaluation, October 1st-15th, 2012. At this stage, *psychological testing* tools were applied as evaluation tools:

a.1. The platform for evaluating the level of development of children with ages between 3 and 7 (PED^a) elaborated by the Society of Cognitive Sciences of Cluj – this consists of a series of questionnaires regarding the domain of social competences, emotional competences, cognitive competences, motor competences, personal autonomy competences and the prerequisites of the subjects filled in by the preschool teachers after the initial evaluation period of the 2012-2013 school year. From the multitude of the data obtained in relation to the research we have proposed, we have selected only the cognitive, social and emotional competences.

a.2. The test for establishing the psychological linguistic (adapted after Alice Descoendres) may be applied to children between 2 and 7 years of age. It consists of *seven sub-tests*, which aim at the following aspects related to the development of thinking and language at children: 1. Establishing the similarities/differences between the various objects or pictures of certain objects; 2. filling in the gaps in a text; 3. knowledge of 6 subject matters; 4. determining the level of understanding of some familiar words; 5. establishing opposites without objects or pictures of objects; 6. naming certain colours; 7. knowledge of the meaning of verbs (Dima, S.,1997, p. 292).

b. The stage of ameliorative intervention, October 15th, 2012 – May 15th, 2013. During this interval, there were systematically conducted activities integrated into educational partnerships organized with the family, the County School Inspectorate of Bacău, the Kindergarten with Normal Day Care of Coman, the Middle School “Ion Creangă” of Bacău, the Middle School of Sănduleni, the County Police Inspectorate of Bacău, the Medical Care Office and the General Practitioner, the County Hospital of Bacău, the County Children’s Library.

c. The stage of final evaluation, June 2nd-5th, 2013. During this interval, the same tests from the stage of initial evaluation were applied to preschoolers.

3. Possibilities to design and achieve the educational partnership in kindergarten, the middle group

Introducing the progress factor consisted in achieving non-formally seven *partnerships* which we shall further present from the perspective of their essential aspects.

3.1. Together for the child – partnership with the family

Brief description: time interval: October 2012 - June 2013; *location:* the “Lizuca” Kindergarten with Long Day Care of Bacău, the Psychopedagogical Assistance Office; *aim:* Streamlining the relation family-kindergarten by counselling and supporting parents with a view to understanding the responsibility of being parents of children aged 5-7; *activities:* informing the parents with regard to the age and individual particularities of preschoolers, ludic activities, instructive-educational activities performed by parents with the preschoolers, games, viewing educational videos, visits, exhibitions.

3.2. There’s a place in the sun for everyone – partnership with the County School Inspectorate of Bacău, the Centre of Books and Educational Resources for Preschool Education of Bacău, the Association Open Windows of Bacău, the Kindergarten with Normal Day Care of Coman, the Middle School “Ion Creangă” of Bacău, the Middle School of Sănduleni.

Brief description: time interval: April - May 2013; *location:* the “Lizuca” Kindergarten with Long Day Care of Bacău, the Medical Care Office, the County Hospital of Bacău; *aim:* Educating children by building proactive attitudes with a view to maintaining one’s health and preventing illnesses; *activities:* evaluation of the children by the doctor – training on various themes; visits to the Medical Care Office and the County Hospital; creating artistic products following the visits; debates with the preschoolers and parents; exhibition of the photos taken during the project and of works made by the children from the group.

3.3. Police—a reliable friend – partnership with the County Police Inspectorate of Bacău.

Brief description: time interval: March – June 2013; *location:* the “Lizuca” Kindergarten with Long Day Care of Bacău; *aim:* Traffic education of preschoolers by teaching them and having them apply the main traffic rules, raising their awareness of the risks implied by ignoring or not obeying these rules; *activities:* observations, visit to the County Police Inspectorate of Bacău, the Day of Open Gates, competitions.

3.4. Healthy, happy, strong – partnership with the Medical Care Office and the family’s General Practitioner.

Brief description: time interval: October 2012 – June 2013; *location:* the “Lizuca” Kindergarten with Long Day Care of Bacău, the Kindergarten with Normal Day Care of Coman; *aim:* Educating children by building positive attitudes of social responsibility, tolerance, solidarity, protection towards the others, in relations with people with various social problems, persons with disabilities, etc.; *activities:* Artistic show performed within the commission from the calendar of the continuous training activities through the methodological committee; charity actions towards the children from the Coman Kindergarten.

3.5. *Today we are small, tomorrow we will be small students* – partnership with the school.

Brief description: time interval: October 2012 – June 2013 – prolonged during the 2013-2014 school year; *location:* the “Lizuca” Kindergarten with Long Day Care of Bacău, the Middle School “Ion Creangă” of Bacău; *aim:* building a sustainable, durable and efficient connection between the preschool and primary school teachers with a view to promoting inter-knowledge and the rigorous application of the two curricula; *activities:* competitions, mini-shows, exhibitions, dramatizations, exchange of manufactured products, debates conducted by the preschooler and pupils together with the teachers involved in the partnership.

3.6. *The book – our friend* – partnership with the County Children’s Library

Brief description: time interval: October 2012 – June 2013; *location:* the “Lizuca” Kindergarten with Long Day Care of Bacău, the County Children’s Library, in the family; *aim:* teaching the Romanian and world literature (for children) by using various communication methods and involving the parents in achieving the children’s reading activities; *activities:* visits, presentation of titles for children, carols’ show, reading fairy tales and poems, presenting pictures, debates on the texts, drawings, paintings, collages – with suggestions for book covers created by the children, auditions, dramatizations, preparing and performing an artistic show based on readings, creating and presenting an album with aspects from the conduct of the project, a round table involving the participation of children, parents, teachers, library staff, mass-media and community representatives.

3.7. *June 1st – The Childhood Carnival* – partnership with the County School Inspectorate of Bacău and the Association Open Windows of Bacău.

Brief description: time interval: June 1st 2013; *location:* the “Lizuca” Kindergarten with Long Day Care of Bacău; *aim:* Preservation of the traditions and customs related to the Child’s International Day, promoting volunteering among young people and adults, stimulating artistic creativity and the spirit of sports competition; *activities:* dances, parades, face-painting, inter-group competition of song interpretation, sports games, asphalt drawing, cartoon drawing.

4. Results

We shall further present the results obtained pre- and post-test after applying the *two categories of tests*, collecting the data and analysing comparatively the data.

a. Using the *Platform for evaluating the level of development of children with ages between 3 and 7 (PED^a)* elaborated by the Society of Cognitive Science of Cluj has enabled us to select and present the data related to the aspects which constituted the interest of our study, respectively the data illustrating only the cognitive, social and emotional competences of preschoolers.

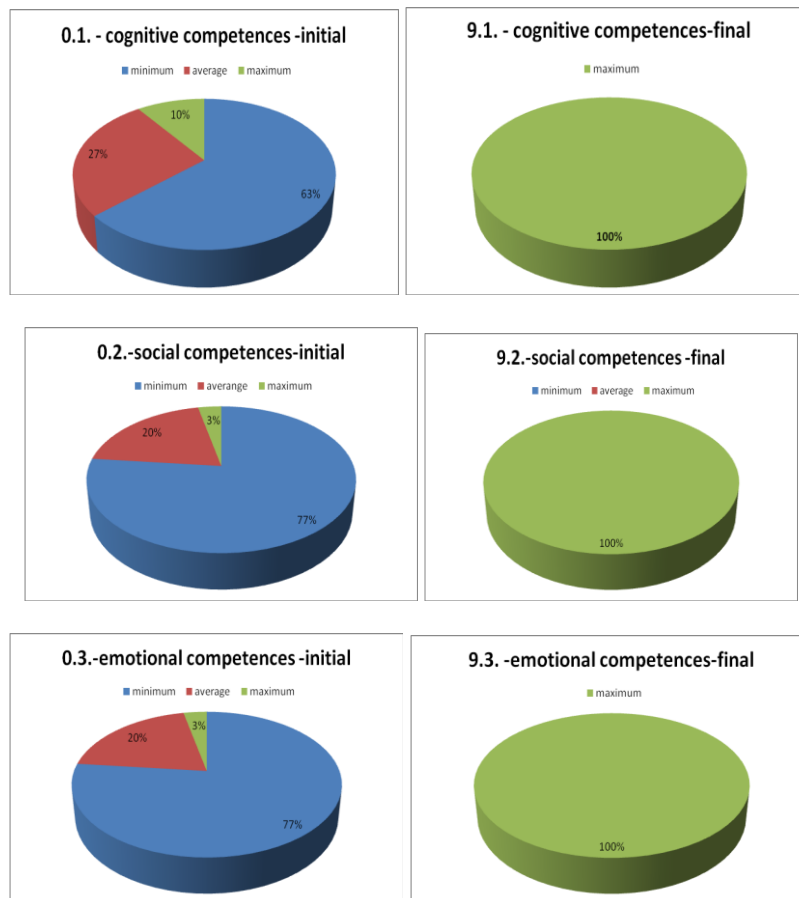


Figure 1. *Comparative results of the social and emotional competences of preschoolers*

All the data obtained and comparatively analysed from the competence areas aimed at point to a maximum progress following the educational partnerships realized, also as an effect of its non-formal impact. The social and emotional competences registered a higher progress (97%) compared to the cognitive ones (90%), in relation to their initial level (Figure 1). Developing them at this higher level may be the effect of conducting the partnerships and may constitute a clue of the evolution in the process of building efficient communication skills.

b. Using the *Test for establishing the psychological age of language* (adapted after A. Descoendres) has led to the following results (Figure 2).

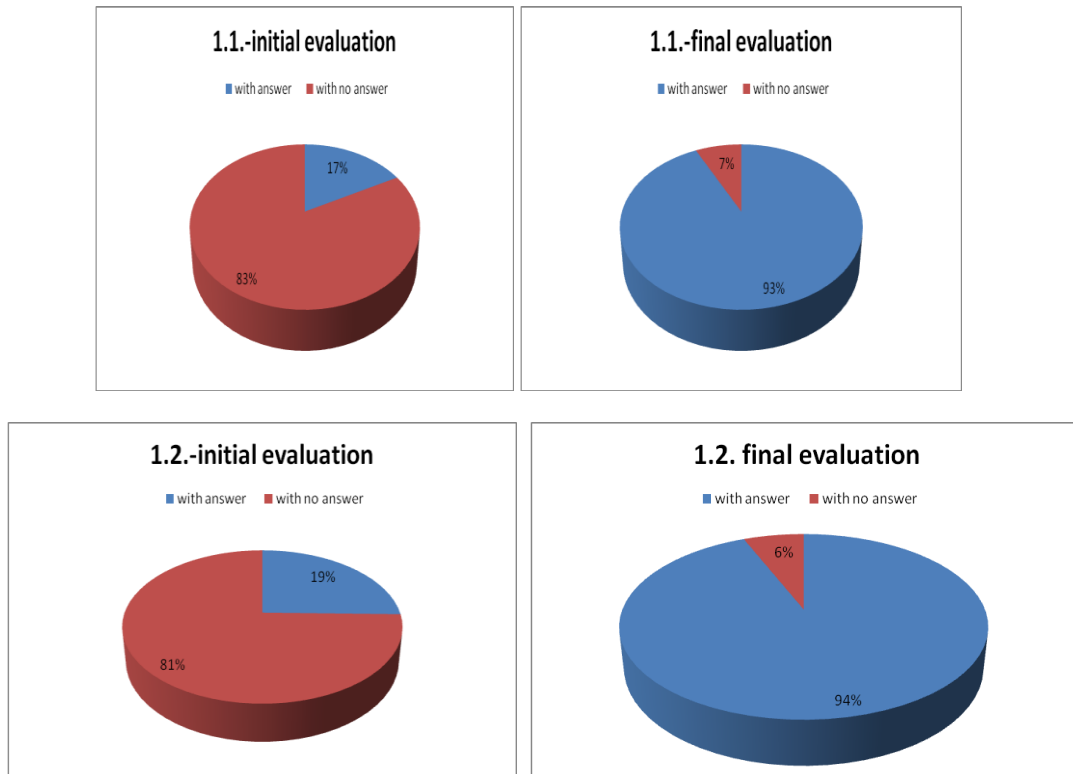


Figure 2. *Comparative results – initial and final – for the test of establishing the linguistic age: the test of opposites phase I and phase II*

The results indicate slight differences between the increase in the results obtained in the initial and final evaluation in the two phases in which the test was applied. In phase I, there was an increase by 76% of the answer rate in indicating opposites, but starting from a lower initial answer rate of only 17%. In phase II, the increase was 75% but the initial rate was 19%, which marks, on the overall, a higher result in phase II (Figure 3). In both situations, the percentage of the preschoolers' non-answers decreased accordingly. Their significant increase in solving tasks and the higher identification of opposites in the final evaluation may be the effect of the partnerships and an indication of the evolution in the process of developing efficient communication skills.

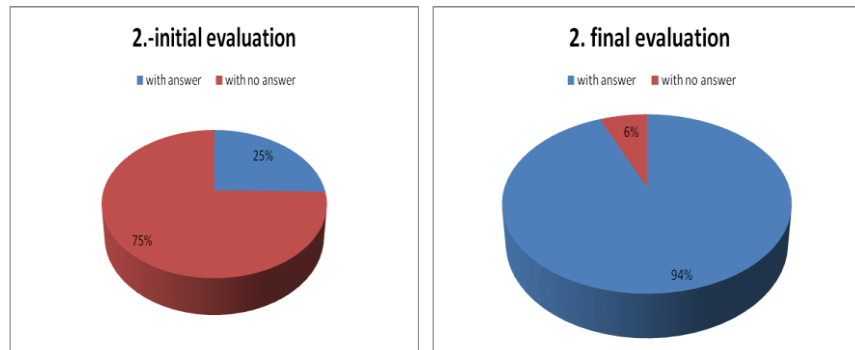


Figure 3. *Comparative results – initial and final – for the test of establishing the linguistic age: the test of the gaps in a text*

The results indicate the fact that there was an increase by 69% in the answer rate of the preschoolers in identifying the gaps in a text (Figure 4). The clearly higher involvement in searching for solutions and discovering the gaps may be the effect of the partnerships and may constitute an indication of the evolution in the process of building efficient communication skills.

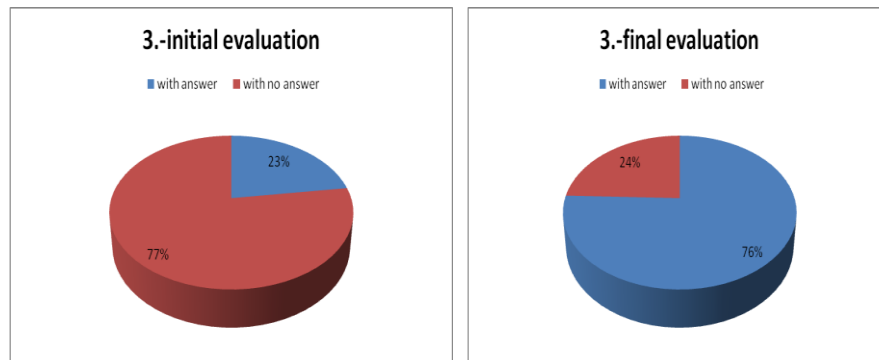


Figure 4. *Comparative results – initial and final – for the test of establishing the linguistic age: the test of knowing 6 subject matters*

The results indicate the fact that there was an increase by 53% in the answer rate of the preschoolers in demonstrating knowledge of 6 subject matters (Figure 5). The increased involvement of the preschoolers in providing answers and their level of knowledge of the 6 subject matters in obvious progress may constitute an indication of the evolution in the process of building efficient communication skills.

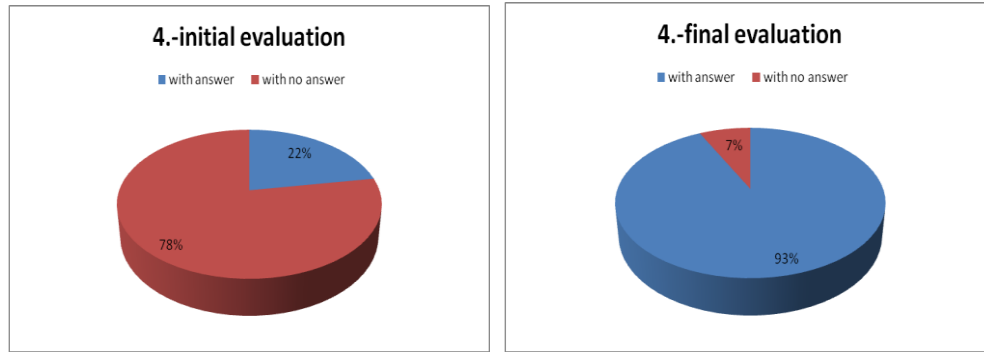


Figure 5. *Comparative results – initial and final – for the test of establishing the linguistic age: the test for determining the level of understanding certain familiar words*

The results indicate the fact that there was an increase by 71% in the answer rate of the preschoolers in determining the level of understanding certain familiar words whereas the rate of their non-answers decreased significantly (Figure 6). The clearly higher degree of understanding certain familiar words may be the effect of the partnerships and may constitute an indication of the evolution in the process of building efficient communication skills.

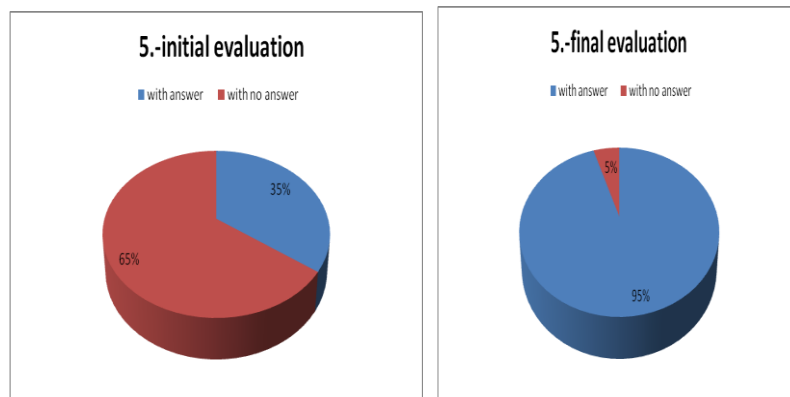


Figure 6. *Comparative results – initial and final – for the test of establishing the linguistic age: the test of opposites without objects or pictures*

The results indicate a growth by 60% in the answer rate in indicating the opposites without objects or pictures, whereas the rate of non-answers decreased accordingly. We believe it is interesting to correlate this result with the data obtained for test, which highlights an increase by 76%, respectively by 75% in the answer rate of the preschoolers in identifying the opposites, phase I and II (Figure 7). Although in the second case the percentage is smaller by 16%,

respectively 15%, the trend of the obvious increase in the results to both tests, the scale of the increase as well as the very high level of indicating the opposites without objects or images are definitely the effect of conducting the partnerships and may constitute an indication of the evolution in the process of building efficient communication skills.

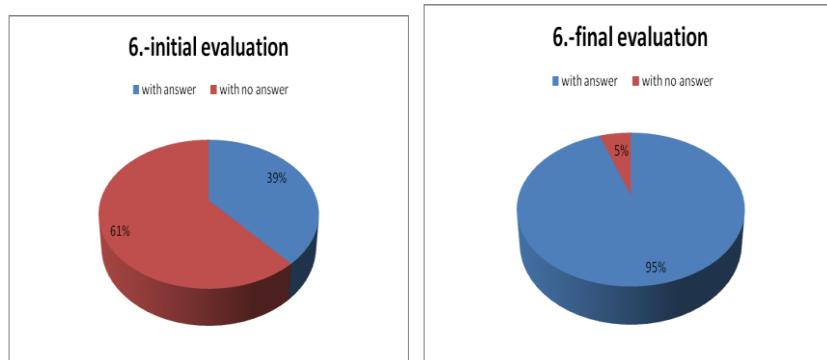


Figure 7. *Comparative results – initial and final – for the test of establishing the linguistic age: the test for naming 10 colours*

The results indicate an increase by 56% in the answer rate of the preschoolers in naming 10 colours whereas their percentage of non-answers decreased accordingly (Figure 8). We appreciate the fact that the major increase in the ability to name a relatively large number of colours may be the effect of the partnerships and may constitute an indication of the evolution in the process of building efficient communication skills.

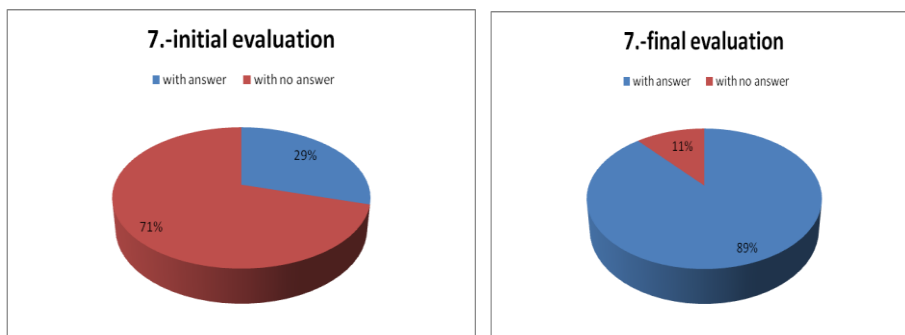


Figure 8. *Comparative results – initial and final – for the test of establishing the linguistic age: the test for knowing the meaning of verbs*

The results indicate an increase by 60% in the answer rate of the preschoolers in indicating the meaning of verbs, whereas the percentage of their non-answers decreased accordingly. The

obviously higher ability to demonstrate knowledge of the meaning of verbs is the effect of the partnerships and may constitute an indication of the evolution in the process of building efficient communication skills.

5. Conclusions

The entire approach conducted during the 2012-2013 school year from the perspective of introducing the educational partnerships as a vector of non-formal action had, simultaneously and in correlation with its dimensions and finalities, a *double nature: research and educational*.

As *research*, the presented action was an ameliorative psycho-pedagogical experiment whose objectives have been reached and whose hypothesis has been confirmed. All the data obtained for the two categories of tests applied indicate the fact that *implementing the designed system of educational partnerships in the kindergarten, at the middle group, has generated a higher progress in developing efficient communication skills*. The major progress recorded by the preschoolers is related both to the global component of certain competences, such as the cognitive, social and emotional ones (where the results indicate a very high increase occurred during the ameliorative intervention) as well as at the concrete level of acquiring efficient communication skills. The overall evolution of the preschoolers' linguistic age is the best argument to support this statement. Although at the level of each sub-test from the Test of establishing the linguistic age the values obtained indicate quite relevant differences among them (for example, the sub-tests 3 and 6 or 7) and between the initial and final evaluation (for example, the sub-tests 1, 4 and 2), relevant for our study is the *evolution of the preschoolers' linguistic age* during the interval to which we are referring. Table 1 illustrates the evolution of these data.

Table 1. *Comparative presentation of the evolution of the score and the linguistic age of the preschoolers pre- and post test*

Sub-test number	Values achieved initially	Values achieved finally	Evolution
1.	2	9	+7
2.	3	9	+6
3.	1	5	+4
4.	2	9	+7
5.	3	7	+4
6.	4	9	+5
7.	4	4	-
Linguistic age	2,7	7,4	+4,7

The data shown in Table 1 highlight the fact that in the initial evaluation, the linguistic age of the preschoolers' group was 2,7 years. This is smaller than the development age (in the middle group, the average development age is approximately 4,5 years), indicating a very low, even adverse level of the children's communication and language development, 1,8 years below the level of development, normal for the respective age.

In the final evaluation, the linguistic age of the preschoolers reached 7,4 years. Taking into account the fact that the average age of the preschoolers at the time of conducting the evaluation was 5,9, we may appreciate:

- the level of the preschoolers' linguistic age higher by 1,5 years compared to their biological age 1,5 years;
- the obviously higher level of the preschoolers' linguistic age in the final evaluation, 7,4 years, compared to the initial evaluation, 2,7 years;
- the significant leap produced in increasing the preschoolers' linguistic age and in developing their efficient communication skills, from 2,7 years to 7,4 years, representing a progress of 4,7 years, respectively an increase by 1,74 times.

Formatively speaking, the activities organized during the educational partnerships with the preschoolers have generated a strong impact upon their overall development, beyond the aspects aimed at by the hypothesis of the study, as well as upon their relations with their parents and the community. All the activities contributed to creating a positive emotional climate, stimulating and favourable to free and civilized communication among children, and consolidated the act of communication in its most varied forms, generated by the diversity of games, songs, shows, visits. Due to the harmonious conduct of the educational partnerships (with the family, especially, but also with the other institutions with a formative role) we have found a series of real effects: enriching the preschoolers' capacity to enter into a relationship with the other children and adults; developing the ability to interact with the environment, to know it and master it through explorations, attempts, exercises, experiments; obvious progress in each child's discovery of his/her own identity and in acquiring learning skills.

The collaboration between kindergarten, family, primary school, institutions of community interest and community, generally speaking, implies a unity of tasks and actions, to the child's interest, and is based on (but also produces) an effective and efficient communication. The parents, preschoolers and the other members of the community turn into actual educational

partners, a communion of support is built around the children, which may improve the formative process.

In conclusion, by relating to Eisler's point of view (2001) invoked at the beginning of this study, according to which "partnership education integrates *three core interconnected components*: 1. *process* – how we learn and teach; 2. *structure* - where learning and teaching take place; 3. *content* - what we learn and teach", we may further argue that: 1. the *process* is non-formal (and, implicitly, centred on the child, attractive, stimulating, collaborative and democratic to a greater extent than the formal teaching process); 2. the *structure* is dynamic, undergoing a process of becoming, the process may be implemented where it is efficient and in agreement with the themes and objectives, with the possibility of including it peripathetically; 3. The content is not predefined, but is rather flexible, at the teachers', the parents' and the children's choice.

Partnerships represent, according to this approach, an essential component in *improving the quality of formal education*. Maybe it is time that its *educational role and impact may be reconsidered* both in theory as well as, especially, in practice.

References

- Bailey, F. & Dolan, A. (2011). The Meaning of Partnership in Development: Lessons in Development Education. *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, Vol. 13, 30-48, <http://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue13-focus2> , accessed November 20th, 2012.
- Cunningham, C. L. & Tedesco, A. L. (2002). Mission Possible: Developing Effective Educational Partnerships. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 7, Numbers 1&2, 79-89, <http://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/index.php/jheoe/article/viewFile/216/204>, accessed November 30th 2012.
- Eisler, R. (2001). Partnership Education in the 21st Century. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 5(3), 143-156, <http://www.partnershipway.org/learn-more/articles-by-riane-eisler/education/partnershipeducation.pdf>, accessed November 15th, 2012.
- *** (2008). *Curriculum pentru educația timpurie a copiilor de la 3 la 6/7 ani*. M. E. C.T., București, http://proiecte.pmu.ro/c/document_library/get_file?p_1_id=16980&folderId=31565&name=DLFE-2701.pdf, accessed November 10th, 2012.
- *** (2008). *Curriculum pentru educația timpurie a copiilor cu vârsta cuprinsă între naștere și 6/7 ani*. M.E.C.T., București, <http://www.timtim-timy.ro/sites/all/themes/timtimtimy/pdf/curriculum.pdf>, accessed November 6th, 2012.