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Effects of implementing the preparatory grade in Romania on school organization

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Abstract

The preparatory grade was introduced in our educational system in 2012 and it has the role of a linking bridge between kindergarten and school, facilitating the child’s adaptation and integration in the school environment.

The purpose of the study is the investigation of the impact of implementing the preparatory grade in the primary education system on the management of these institutions, as regards the adjustment of the ergonomic framework, the timetable, curricular management, the continuous training of the teachers who teach preparatory grades.

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1. Rationale

School organization is an organization which finds itself in a state of continuous adaptation to the new requirements of the social system. Thus, in the Romanian educational system there have been implemented a series of reforms in order to meet these requirements. One of the most important elements of the reform is the change of the structure of the educational system itself, by introducing the preparatory grade in primary-education system. From the perspective of the Law of Education, the preparatory grade has the role of preparing a quality school debut, by early

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institutionalized education and by creating the educational premises for a school integration characterized by limited items of school abandonment and high chances of future integration on the labour market of current generations of preschoolers.

2. Theoretical foundation and related literature

The change of the education system structure reflects the essential mutations registered at the level of pedagogic finalities, assumed at an education policy level. The creation of new structures for the system organization and functioning aims at solving the unbalances cyclically generated by the pedagogical and social crisis phenomenon. Such functional unbalances may occur: (Cristea, 2002, p. 328)

a) at the level of the material structure (the unbalance between demand and offer, between the quantity and quality of human, financial, informational resources);

b) at the level of the management structure (unbalances between the managerial and administrative management, between the pedagogical and bureaucratic management);

c) at the level of the relationship structure (unbalances between the demands and offers of the school and the demands and offers of the environment/family, social agents);

d) at the level of the internal adaptation structure (unbalances between school levels, steps and cycles, expressed at a curricular and psychosocial level).

Schools and school system in many countries face considerable pressure for change, partly for government directive but at least significantly from a changing social context (Levin & Riffel, 1998). In the book *Managing change in school*, Newton & Tarrant (1992) presented a coherent framework from which major and minor change strategies can be planned and carried out, taking account of the links between objectives, policy, professional development, consultation, support and evaluation. Southworth (1999) made an historical analysis about changing nature of primary school management and identifies some of the major emphases and issues during the last 50 years on culture, leadership and community.

Harris (2008) approach the school change through development and research networks of schools that are committed to innovation and the exploration of new professional practices. They all focus on the development of next practice that is integral to system-wide renewal and transformation. These networks provide opportunities for teachers to interact and to reach beyond their own experience and knowledge by working collaboratively.

Silins, Mulford & Zarins (2002) examines the nature of organizational learning and the leadership practices and processes that foster organizational learning in high schools and the importance of reconceptualizing schools as learning organizations to promote successful school change. Schools that engage in organizational learning enable staff at all levels to learn collaboratively and continuously and put these learnings to use in response to social needs and the demands of their environment.

To turn schools into learning organizations (Coppeters, 2005) explored a new view, in which schools are seen as dynamic, unpredictable and complex social organisms the development of which depends on complex adaptation systems based on knowledge management and learning. The approach of schools as learning organizations offers more possibilities for guiding and stimulating its development by increasing its learning capacity.

According with the new Romanian National Law of Education, enrolling children in the preparatory grade is conditioned on turning 6 until the start of the school year. Lowering the age for starting mandatory education is based on studies made both at a national and European level. The data provided by Eurydice regarding mandatory education in the 2012-2013 school year indicate that, in most European countries, the start of scholarship occurs at the age of six (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Island, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, Norway, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey), but there are also countries where the school beginning age lowered to five and even four (4: Northern Ireland, Luxemburg; 5: England, Czech Republic, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Scotland, Wales, Hungary), and countries where mandatory education starts at 7 (Finland, Sweden).

As regards the curriculum, the education law specifies, on the one hand, the orientation of the national curriculum for the primary and gymnasium education depending on the eight fields of key skills and, on the other hand, the specificity of the curriculum for the preparatory grade pursuing the physical, socio-emotional, cognitive development of the language and communication and the development of learning capacities and attitudes, while

ensuring the bridges to the development of the eight key skills. In this context, understanding the structure of evaluation in the curricular approach of education (Soare, 2013, p. 777), becomes one of a big importance as the evaluation connects the entry elements of the educational system to the process of instruction carried out in order to obtain certain effects related to a set of criteria and standards.

In an ample study made by the Romanian Education Science Institute (2013) which pursued the assessment of the degree in which these novelty elements proposed through educational policies have a creative and efficient applicability at the level of each preparatory grade, a series of benefits regarding the participation of the child in the preparatory grade resulted from the opinions of the parents and didactical staff:

- getting the child used to school, to the school environment and exercise of the scholary aptitude, in a friendly manner for the child: the unbusy work schedule, the absence of grades, the absence of manuals (factors leading to the easy accommodation of children);
- better preparation for school: practical, concrete activities, important for acquiring fundamental acquisitions;
- increase of the self-esteem and of the motivation for learning– children feel “important” to be “pupils”, win in terms of autonomy, responsibility, communication and building relationship with the others.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the study is the investigation of the impact of implementing the preparatory grade in the primary education system on the management of these institutions, as regards the adjustment of the ergonomic framework, curricular management, the continuous training of the teachers who teach preparatory grades.

The main questions of the study refer to:

1. Are there differences between teachers in the rural environment and those in the urban environment as regards the curricular management for preparatory class?
2. Are there differences between teachers in the rural environment and those in the urban environment on the continuous training of the teachers who teach preparatory grades?
3. Are there differences between teachers in the rural environment and those in the urban environment on the ergonomic framework of preparatory class?

The methodology of the scientific research integrates the quantitative approach with the qualitative ones. The quantitative approach was based on a questionnaire applied on a group of 45 teachers from 8 primary schools in urban and rural areas of the Arges County. The principals of these school units have taken part in a focus group centered on the management perspective on the implementation of the preparatory grade in primary education system.

Table 1. Sociodemographic variables of study participants

Variables	M (SD) or %
<i>Professional status</i>	
Primary teachers	45
School manager	8
<i>Teacher's gender</i>	
Male	14
Female	39
<i>Area of residence</i>	
Urban	26
Rural	27

4. Results and discussion

In order to observe if there are significant differences between teachers in the rural environment and those in the urban environment as regards the curricular management for preparatory class we applied *t test for independent*

samples. According to the results obtained (table 2), there are not significant differences between in the rural environment and those in the urban environment [$t(43) = 0.488, p=0.628$], this hypothesis is not confirmed. All the questioned teachers consider that disciplines are organized in balanced curricular areas and with a profound concrete intuitive nature. The preparatory grade programs brought a new animation to primary education as regards the creation of an educational environment adequate to the training needs specific to the 6 year old children. Through the integrated approach to contents and through the use of the ludic context in children activities, the spontaneous learning and the learning through play are stimulated.

Table 2 Results of the t test comparing the averages of the variable adequacy of the curriculum for the preparatory grade to the training needs of the target group depending on the variable residence area of the schools where teachers activate

Independent Samples Test							
Adequacy of the curriculum for the preparatory grade to the training needs of the target group	Area of residence	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t	df	p
	Urban area	22	3.14	0.640	0.488	43	0.628
	Rural area	23	3.04	0.638			

In order to verify the second question there are significant differences between teachers in the rural environment and those in the urban environment as regards the continuous training of the teachers who teach preparatory grades, the data was analyzed through *t test for independent samples*. According to the results obtained (table 3), there are significant differences between teachers in the rural environment and those in the urban environment as regards perception on the continuous training of the teachers who teach preparatory grades [$t(43) = 3.857, p<0.01$]. Thus, the teachers in the urban environment pay higher importance to this type of shaping specific skills to teach preparatory grades ($M = 3.32$) as compared to the teachers in the rural environment ($M = 2.57$) having a lower access to this type of course, the main reason being the distance to the training centers in the cities and a series of problems related to the use of the learning platform due to the more limited internet access. The didactic staff who participated in such training courses appreciated the connection of theory to the educational reality and the high degree of activity applicability.

Table 3 Results of the t test comparing the averages of the variable continuous training of the teachers who teach preparatory grades depending on the variable residence area of the schools where teachers activate

Independent Samples Test							
The continuous training of the teachers who teach preparatory grades	Area of residence	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t	df	p
	Urban area	22	3.32	0.568	3.857	43	0.001
	Rural area	23	2.57	0.728			

According to the results obtained (table 4) through the application of the independent sample t test for the verification of the third question, there are no significant differences between teachers in the rural environment and those in the urban environment as regards ergonomic framework of preparatory class [$t(43) = 2.572, p=0.014$]. The didactic staff included in the study highlighted that the classrooms destined to the preparatory grade were adapted in terms of the school furniture, the material basis specific to the training needs of small school age children. Also, the masters who took over the preparatory grade underlined the inconveniences the parents complained about: many schools did not organize the after-school system; the little concern for arranging the specific playing space; the holding of courses within the same hourly interval as the gymnasium cycle in certain schools.

Table 4 Results of the t test comparing the averages of the variable ergonomic framework of preparatory class depending on the variable residence area of the schools where teachers activate

Independent Samples Test							
Ergonomic framework of preparatory class	Area of residence	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t	df	p

Urban area	22	3.5	0.510	2.572	43	0.014
Rural area	23	3.04	0.767			

In the focus group organized with principals of these school units the discussions were centered on management perspective on the implementation of the preparatory grade in primary education system.

Upon implementing the preparatory grade, ensuring the physical space necessary to perform the activities specific to the preparatory grade within the school was a real challenge for directors. Most of them indicated the difficulty of finding adequate school spaces. In the rural environment, some preparatory grades perform their activity in kindergarten premises. Almost 2 years after this major change of the structure of the education system, all the directors participating in the focus group stated that the rooms destined to the preparatory grade are located in the school building. Considering that the classrooms for the activity of the preparatory grade are exclusively destined to this activity, directors indicated that the Ministry of National Education endowed preparatory grades with furniture and adequate didactical means. The classrooms were arranged according to the recommendations received by the didactic staff at training courses, creating a favorable environment for the quicker adaptation of pupils.

The preparatory grade activities are performed exclusively in the morning, concurrently with gymnasium pupils. In big schools, the directors facilitated the access of small school age pupils in school through a separate entry in order not to create agglomeration and avoid the possibility of such pupils getting injured.

Since the preparatory grade pursues, by its specific nature, the achievement of the child's adaptation to the school demands proposed by learning activities, the educational process centered on the child in the preparatory grade pursues the inclusion of all the important aspects of the child's full development according to their age and individual peculiarities.

Another positive aspect underlined by directors through the introduction of the preparatory grade in the primary cycle was the increase of the rate of including children in mandatory education, which contributed to the decrease of school abandonment. If in the urban environment the rate of including children in kindergarten is high, very many preschool children in the rural environment did not go to kindergarten at all and for this reason went directly to the 1st grade with an extremely low training level, so that the master had problems in performing the didactical process.

5. Conclusions

Learning activities may and must be adapted to the specific nature of every grade, including depending on the resources of each teacher teaching preparatory grades. The teacher must permanently pursue the achievement of connections among all disciplines, by offering learning contexts relevant for the daily reality of the preparatory grade pupil maintaining them in a known environment while being attractive, instructive and useful (Dumitrescu, I, 2013).

In the Methodological guide for assessing pupils in the preparatory grade, drafted within a project financed from European funds, the transition period from the pre-primary cycle to the primary cycle is seen for the pupils as a period of intense transformations activating considerable physical and mental energies. Thus, the school environment brings with it in the life of the pupil who is in this hypostasis for the first time a multiply dimensioned reality which is new, with a specific profile, different from that of the kindergarten environment, from various perspectives. The learning activity acquires a strong systematic nature, activating the entire personality of the small pupil, opening numerous possibilities for development, crystallization and assertion of more and more complex mental processes and functions. The phenomena taking place in this period, of passing from the preschool to the school environment, are accompanied by processes and realities described by a rich series of collocations and concepts in the psycho-socio-pedagogy scope, such as school adaptation, school achievement, school success, failure, falling behind with learning, learning difficulties, school abandonment, etc.

The implementation of the preparatory grade ensures equal chances for a correct start for all children, allows access to education irrespective of the environment of origin, offers parents the possibility to accommodate to the requirements of the educational process. The maintenance of the preparatory grade is advisable from a curricular, socio-emotional, cognitive and relational point of view. This change of system opened new ways for the pupil-teacher, parent-teacher, pupil-pupil approach, the parents building alongside the master the profile of the today pupil and tomorrow adult.

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