

## AN INTEGRATED APPROACH OF ACHIEVING CIVIC EDUCATION IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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### Abstract

*The subject of Civic Education deals with forming the young person both as a citizen of the state he is part of, as a member of the various social groups, and as a unique and dignified being. It includes the fundamental rules of living in society, cultivating respect towards oneself and others, the taste of independence, responsibility and cooperation, recognition of the rights of others, human dignity, equality between races, sexes. A first step of the study consisted in identifying the main difficulties encountered in implementing Civic Education at the level of the second grade. Based on this, it was proposed an experimental project which shall be described and which started from the central idea of training by means of a relatively integrated approach to the lessons of Civic Education for the third grade, the lessons of Romanian literature, and the second grade non-formal activities, organized systematically from this standpoint. From this perspective, the study's hypothesis aimed at validating the way in which the integration and conducting of lessons of Romanian language and literature with non-formal activities with the purpose of building the main civic skills shall induce a progress in their formation. Illustrating how the experiment was structured and conducted may provide numerous suggestions to those interested in preparing this difficult process of learning in primary education.*

**Key words:** civic education, integrated approach, non-formal activities

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### 1. Civic education – challenge and necessity in the Romanian primary education

Most of the teachers in the Romanian education did not study civic education as students, and the opportunities to come across such content are significantly reduced in higher education. This means that, except for certain training courses that some of them have attended, the majority had

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no relevant scientific school contact with the spirit, finalities and methodology of Civic Education. Historically speaking, Romanian democracy is a recent phenomenon. As a result, the civil society in our country is not powerful enough to promote the democratic values and practices. To this effect, the role of school is crucial and the role of teachers is essential in educating young people in the spirit of active democratic citizenship.

School should cultivate the students' sensitivity towards human issues and moral-civic values, ensuring the cultivation of love for the country, the historical past and the traditions of the Romanian people by means of modern training and educational strategies and techniques based on acquisitions in the field of sciences of education, as well as appropriate school practice.

Forming students' personality has been the educational ideal of every teacher since the oldest of times, undergoing annual adjustment according to the priorities of education. From this perspective, forming the students' personality is not important only by itself alone, but by the way in which it is consciously and creatively placed in the service of the Romanian nation, a criteria in evaluating its value being, to a large extent, the way in which it is reflected in the civic attitude and behavior.

In the primary cycle, the curriculum for the discipline "Civic Education" responds to the demands formulated by the National Education Law (2011, p.2), especially by articles 3 and 4 that clearly state the importance of the "principle of assuming, promoting and maintaining national identity and the cultural values of the Romanian people" (Art. 3, g), as well as the desideratum of "social integration and active citizen involvement in society" (Art. 4, b).

The processes of Civic Education proposed by the existing curriculum in primary education are also consistent with the spirit and recommendations contained in the final Communiqué adopted at the fourth Conference of European Ministers of Education that took place in Bucharest, during 18-20 June 2000, and in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. The place of Civic Education in primary education is justified by the need to initiate lower-elementary students in practicing civic behavior in a democratic society: a civic, free, responsible, tolerant, open, communicative, reflexive, self-evaluative behavior.

Teachers, primary school teachers first of all, should take into consideration and discuss with children, according to the particularities of each topic approached, some basic concepts of democracy. These concepts and values are: authority, power of rights, duties, responsibilities, tolerance, respect, diversity, equality, communication, justice, liberty, ownership, friendship, public space, private space.

## **2. Socio-cultural, school and experimental context**

This paper started from the assumption that it is timely and possible to systematically achieve civic education by an interdisciplinary, non-formal approach starting with the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, although the formal approach for realizing it begins in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Civic education is a complex, long-term process, and the lower-elementary student is involved in social life through several levers: by belonging to a family, playing and learning groups, but also by the particular relationships that he may establish with various institutions and organizations from his community (school, church, city hall, nongovernmental organizations, etc), that is why, the process of socialization can and should start early.

In the first grades, the lower-elementary student has to start the process of *becoming consistent with the terms characteristic of civic language and to use it in specific learning situations*, such as: recognize and describe their meaning through expressions that match a series of images; express orally and in writing simple statements referring to different life situations with a civic content; elaborate stories, dialogues, conversations on civic topics or fill in sentences of this type; identify the universal rights of the child by recognizing in images situations of complying with and violating these rights; identify rules regarding a person's relationships with objects and beings through role-play on given topics; identify the social groups he belongs to: family, group of friends, fellows, by discussing upon different groups starting from given images; to discover and describe clearly and concisely various social group relationships by using composition, storytelling, acting. The child should display a desire to participate in the activity of some groups by imagining certain activities for the members of the group that he is part of.

The formal study of certain notions, situations and attitudes related to the discipline of Civic Education may be systematically prepared, we believe, *in two ways*: during the *lessons of Romanian Language and Literature by using modern, interactive methods* and through *non-formal actions*, activities that may contribute to initiating moral-civic education, ensuring a real contribution to the later study of some themes. Building a moral-civic behavior is a complex, fine and lengthy process which requires an appropriate, complex, varied and dynamic methodology adjusted to the many components that have to be formed.

The modern didactic methodology, in agreement with the objectives of current education, demands a reconsideration of the learning methods and means so that they may trigger the optimal activation and involvement of students on an intellectual level – by cultivating a heuristic investigating attitude and initiative, as well as on a socio-moral level, by forming the spirit of collaboration, mutual help and/or competition, based on compliance with rules and values. The modern methods provide the student with the opportunity to realize his acquisitions through a

personal effort of investigation, sometimes making use of high technology (computers and simulators). The modern methods that we have used most frequently during the activities performed include: Thinking hats, Cluster, Gallery tour, Mosaic, Brainstorming.

Civic Education textbooks are books about people, their way of being and the problems they are faced with; about famous people, common people, their rights and the laws they must obey; about individuals and the society in which they live, as it is and as we would like it to be. Civic culture is transmitted through a complex process that includes training within several social institutions: family, group of equals, school, work place, the political system itself. A democracy cannot function on its own, without the contribution of citizens. In school, civic education may be achieved through all the activities related to school life, from organizing a festivity to involving students in the representative management structures. We appreciate that by the contexts identified, created and valued from a moral-civic standpoint during the lessons of Romanian Language and Literature as well as through the system of activities and relationships generated in non-formal activities, we may contribute significantly to the systematic initiation of the process of civic education.

A first step of the study consisted in *identifying the main difficulties* found in achieving civic education at the level of the *2<sup>nd</sup> grade*. Starting from this, an *experimental process* was proposed and conducted, focusing on preparing, by a relatively integrated approach to the lessons of Civic Education for the *3<sup>rd</sup> grade*, the lessons of *Romanian Literature* and the *non-formal activities for the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade*, systematically organized from this perspective. Thus, the *hypothesis* of the study aimed at validating the way in which integrating and conducting some lessons of Romanian Language and Literature with non-formal activities in the direction of forming some basic civic skills would lead to progress in building them.

This paper represents only one part of the study that shall illustrate the way in which the experiment was structured and carried out, precisely because this may provide multiple suggestions to those concerned with preparing this difficult learning process in primary education.

The research was organized as an ascertaining-formative psycho-pedagogic experiment throughout the *2<sup>nd</sup> semester* of the 2010-2011 school year. The group consisted of the 20 students from the *2<sup>nd</sup> grade*, from the School with grades I-VIII Hăghiac, Bacău. The group of students taking part in the research undertaken is relatively homogeneous in terms of age and relatively non-homogeneous in terms of school results, level of intellectual development and background.

### **3. Curriculum for the discipline Romanian Language and Literature for the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, a favorable frame for sensitizing children on issues of civic education**

The discipline of Romanian Language and Literature is a very good frame for transferring and strengthening knowledge of moral-civic education. By the very rich content of this discipline, the child comes into contact with *moral values* (good, honesty, dignity, duty, responsibility, altruism, politeness, respect, solidarity) that make the basis for a healthy moral-civic education. The variety of the learning units from the level of the second grade creates the context for developing the *moral traits* of the person (kindness, trust, honesty, modesty, courage, etc.) and cultivates a positive attitude towards nature, society, the others, oneself, work, etc.

*The themes of the learning units for Romanian Language and Literature 2<sup>nd</sup> grade* are very diverse and approach topics opening towards the field of civic education: Book; School; Family; Autumn; Traditions, customs, celebrations; Winter; Country; Friendship; Spring; Childhood; Animal world; Summer. In fact, each learning unit provides the teacher with the possibility to transfer not only the scientific part of each lesson but also the *most basic notions of civic education* to the young generation, through mastery, dedication and skill.

For example, the learning unit *Book* correlates the main idea of the text with the *right to education* and the real situation in Romania. This right is respected in our country because the state ensures compulsory and free access to education for all children. Here, reference can be made to the fact that there are countries, especially in Africa, where not all children have access to education. The learning unit *Family* includes the texts *Amintiri din copilărie/Childhood Memories* by I. Creangă, *Cheile/The Keys* by T. Arghezi and the poem *Bine e la noi acasă/It feels so good at home* by Elena Farago. Here, the children may become consistent with another right, the *right to have a family*. Based on this, the children's personal experiences and the idea of coexisting with other persons may be integrated. Issues of family relationships, degrees of relationships based on love, understanding, respect and help are clarified.

Some lessons with historical content *Moștenirea urmașilor/The Descendants' Inheritance* adapted after P. D. Popescu, *Ștefan cel Mare și Vrâncioaia/Stephen the Great and Vrâncioaia* adapted after D. Almaș, *Țara mea/My Country* by Gh. Tomozei, *Deșteaptă-te, române!/Wake up, Romanians!* by A. Mureșanu, constitute the subject of the learning unit *Country* during which lower-elementary students learn the meaning of words such as *courage, honor, brave, inheritance, descendants, patriot*. Courage is the power to behave properly no matter how scared one may be. It lies within every one of us, as of childhood. It only has to be brought to the surface, overcoming any possible fears. The learning unit *Childhood* teaches students about the fact that play and children are closely related. By play, all children learn about *tolerance and*

*respect*, about living in a *collectivity*, and *team spirit* is formed. A play group may consist of classmates, neighbors or friends of similar ages. Like in any group, there are *rules* and a *leader* that must be followed. The support consists of the texts *Cel mai bun prieten/Best Friend* adapted after V. Sivetidid and *După faptă și răsplată/By Deed and Reward* adapted after I. Pas.

The unit *Animal world* brings into discussion the *existence of plants and animals and the need to protect and to approach them positively*. Texts such as *Dumbrava minunată/The Wonderful Grove* adapted after M. Sadoveanu and *Puișorul și vulpea/The Chick and the Fox* adapted after I. Pas may trigger discussions about the fact that animals and plants are vital for the existence of man on earth. They constitute the main source of food and other basic products. Plants produce oxygen and herbs are used to cure diseases. Like plants, animals provide humans with other things that facilitate living and many human activities.

During the 12 units from the Romanian Language and Literature textbook, the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders would thus be guided by their teacher towards supplementing their knowledge with information related to their own person, family, surrounding environment, the need for objects, plants and animals. Students would find out that they have rights and duties that they should know, assume and respect and which would guide them in life along a better, more durable and safer path.

#### **4. Non-formal education – lever for achieving civic education in primary education**

*Non-formal education* integrates most of the conscious, systematic, optional or elective educational influences that are organized, projected and conducted outside the classroom. School education has been regarded as *formal education*, whereas educational activities organized by other institutions, museums, libraries, students' clubs, church, etc., form *non-formal education*. Spontaneous or unorganized influences from the environment, the family, group of friends, mass-media join the formative range as *informal education*. Their delimitation is purely theoretical as they function practically like a complex whose borders are dynamic, interwoven and difficult to trace. Moreover, we are now witnessing a development and *formalization of non-formal education* that draws increasingly nearer to the school space. The school has responded to social challenges by broadening the sphere of activity and initiating partnerships with the civil society, local community or different cultural institutions. This was because learning “is not related only to school or other organized contexts. (...) A large number of our learning experiences have taken place outside the system of formal education: at the work place, in the family, in different organizations and libraries” (apud Velea S., Istrate, O., 2007, p. 1).

Although the word “non-formal” is a logic and linguistic negation of the word “formal”, at the level of education, the relationships among them are complementary, to the extent in which what

is non-formally achieved has a less formal, official, coercive, standardized, technical but, due to its effects, strongly formative nature. The authors quoted above believe that non-formal education provides a set a necessary social experiences, useful to every child, young person or adult, supplementing the other forms of education by: formative use of the students' free time; opportunities for turning the students' life experiences through a more flexible and open frame and through diversifying the daily learning environments; voluntary, individual or collective involvement; flexible ways of responding to the students' interests – a wide range of activities that it suggests and proposes to each student; developing life competences and training young people to become active citizens; besides the information and skills characteristic of certain fields of activity that the non-formal projects or activities are part of, students also develop organizational, self-management, time management skills, critical thinking in making decisions or solving problems; a frame for practicing and cultivating the various inclinations, skills and capacities, for manifesting talent in arts, culture, music, sports, painting (ibidem, p.2).

*During the experimental interval (14.02.–27.05.2011) several systematic non-formal activities were organized with the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders: a trip to the monasteries from the north of Moldavia (Neamț, Sucevița, Moldovița, Putna, Voroneț) (26.03); a trip to Borzești, to the Church of Stephen the Great (16.04); a trip to Târgu-Ocna Salt Mine (23.04); a trip to Slănic Moldova resort (23.04); artistic program at Casa de Cultură on Easter holiday (24.04); a trip to the BWN Timber Factory, Dofteana (07.05); a trip to Dofteana Arboretum (07.05); artistic program on Heroes' Day at the monument erected in their honor (21.05); involvement in *A cleaner world!* – collection of waste materials (21.05).*

The students participated eagerly and enthusiastically to all these activities. The trips to the north of Moldavia and to Borzești contributed to a better understanding of the historical lessons on *Stephen the Great and Vrâncioaia, The Descendants' Inheritance, My Country* and of the civic notions of *patriotism, brave, courage, dignity*. The trip to the timber factory strengthened the students' *respect for a job well done, duty and responsibility*. They have actually seen how work is done in a factory. This will help them a lot in the future to understand the *close connection between theory and practice*. The trip to the Dofteana Arboretum provided the children with relevant natural experiences related to the environment, an important support for the assimilation of the content of the lessons *The Birds' Nest, The Ladybird, The Wonderful Grove* which will consolidate *respect for nature*. We may appreciate that the way in which the experiment involving the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders was structured and conducted aimed at responding best to their needs, and the acquisitions made on this occasion would be really useful in a successful approach to the discipline of Civic Education from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of the results obtained by the students during the psycho-pedagogic experiment highlights the progress recorded by them, supporting the role and contribution of the strategies for achieving civic education in primary education, which confirms the work hypothesis. Starting from the students' initial knowledge, completed during the entire second semester with data provided by the methods of observation and conversation, frontal, individual and group activities were designed and conducted to ensure the rhythmic covering of the curriculum by all the students as well as the initiation of building certain basic civic attitudes and behaviors.

The experiment highlighted the fact that civic education can also be achieved via the lessons of Romanian Language and Literature, that students can acquire civic knowledge, skills and abilities also during non-formal education, skills that will help them integrate in the modern society through thorough knowledge and firm compliance with norms regulating school life and activity, work safety and people's lives, environment protection. Using the interactive methods mentioned leads to an improvement of, on the one hand, relationships among students and, on the other hand, between students and teacher, by building a proper attitude towards work. We found that the students became more cooperative, more communicative, asking questions, adopting an honest and open attitude towards the teacher's and the classmates' appreciations. Increasing the weight of interactive methods does not mean reducing the weight of traditional ones but their harmonious interweaving in the didactic activity, thus contributing to enhancing the quality of the instructive-educational process. The students' interest in the lesson increases when the teacher engages every child in discovering knowledge. They become more motivated, more active, more self-assertive. The classroom atmosphere is both competitive and collaborative, as students sometimes turn into supporters or even critics of their fellows, according to the speed and scientific correctness of their answers. The diversity of the methods used in the didactic process responds to a fundamental need of variation, differentiation, coloring and particularization of the didactic activity. It also enriches considerably the teaching experience of students, providing comprehensive and more subtle action strategies for adjustment to the multitude of instructive-educational contexts. To reach the desired efficiency, the teacher should be an enthusiast, highly sensitive and dedicated, in search for the new, aiming at pedagogical and professional self-improvement.

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