

A STUDY ON SOME CURRICULAR RECONSIDERATIONS AS A RESULT OF INTRODUCING THE PREPARATORY GRADE IN ROMANIAN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

The introduction of the preparatory grade in Romanian primary education has generated its first results. Considering the above, there arises the following question: Are the students from the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education properly trained for the challenges of the preparatory grade? To answer this question, our study relates to two perspectives: 1. theoretical – Investigating the preparatory grade as a research object, based on unmistakable psycho-pedagogical and didactic particularities. We have systematized several defining aspects of how the teaching activity is designed, organized and conducted in the preparatory grade (curricular design centred on competences, specific aims, integrated curriculum, the ludic dimension of the process, evaluation particularities), in order to trace the way in which the training of students is done according to these coordinates; 2. the curricular-pragmatic approach – in relation to the initial training of prospective teachers for primary and preschool education. By analysing the specialization curriculum and the syllabi for the specialty disciplines in the attempt to articulate their vertical and horizontal correlation, we have structured several proposals for improving the academic curriculum for the bachelor study programme The Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education. Our aim has been to enhance the correspondence between initial training in this domain and the quality of the beneficiaries' insertion into the process, at the level of the preparatory grade.

Key words: competence, curricular reconsideration, integrated curriculum, preparatory grade

1. The preparatory grade – a socio-economic and psycho-pedagogical challenge

As of the 70s, the concept of early education has been regarded as an “umbrella notion, used with different intentions by persons taking care of children of up to 8 years of age and dealing with their education” (Law, 1979, p. 200). According to the literature, it is currently understood, in the Romanian educational system, as representing the “pedagogical approach that covers the life interval from birth to 6/7 years of age, the moment of the child’s entry into the school and, at the same time, the moment of development transformations” (The Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, 2008, p. 2). Ensuring continuity between preschool and primary education, overcoming the synopes in the specificity of the teaching process characteristic of the two institutions, training the teachers who will work at all the levels of early education but, particularly, translating the moment of beginning the cycle of basic acquisitions in primary education into the form of the preparatory grade are several aspects with a relevant theoretical and practical impact on which trainers should focus. The quality of the early educational process is defining for the learning process throughout the entire schooling period. By September 1st, 2012, only 80% of the children aged between 3 and 6/7 in Romania attended preschool education, this being non-compulsory. The objective for year 2020 is to raise the rate of inclusion of children between 3 and 6/7 years of age in an educational form up to 95%. Achieving this objective requires the elaboration of a suitable strategy. Part of this strategy consists in establishing the age of 6 for starting compulsory education and including the preparatory grade into primary education by the Law of National Education no.1/2011. Enrolment into the preparatory grade will assist the 20% of the children in Romania who do not attend kindergarten. These children come from vulnerable socio-cultural environments, belong to minority ethnical groups and have special educational needs. On the one hand, granted access to education improves their school performance, as well as their subsequent social integration. On the other hand, there are also aimed the objectives of decreasing absenteeism and reducing school drop-out rates, given the fact that motivation for learning is more prevailing among children who attended early education (Manolescu, 2012, p. 29). In this context, the academic training of primary and preschool teachers should quickly integrate the elements of theoretical and practical novelty characteristic of the preparatory grade. The teachers teaching at this level have benefited only from two national trainings in the years 2013 and 2014 organized by the Teaching Staff Resource Centres.

1.1 The finalities of the preparatory grade

The finalities of the preparatory grade include forming and building children's key competences. We shall here elaborate upon six areas of key competences, as defined in the curriculum section of the Law of National Education no. 1/ 2011. These competences are built with the contribution of the entire activity conducted during the preparatory grade: 1. Communication competences (receiving and producing simple and usual messages; correct communication and production of simple and usual messages; correct communication at different school disciplines; active participation to dialogues using the mother tongue); 2. Basic competences characteristic of Mathematics, the sciences and technology (investigating elements/ phenomena/ regularities from the proximal environment; using simple methods to solve problems; identifying simple explanations for questions of the type When?, Where? and Why?); 3. Social and civic competences (complying with elementary behaviour rules in different situations; efficient relationships with the members of the school group; active participation in the actions for defusing conflicts); 4. Entrepreneurial competences (involvement in the process of achieving goals; solving shared work tasks in group activities); 5. Relationship-building and cultural expression competences (displaying curiosity about various forms of artistic expression; manifesting artistic sensitivity with the help of simple means; participating to sporting games in order to build self-control and self-expression); 6. Metacognitive competences (participating to the learning process under the teacher's guidance and by cooperating with classmates; doing research in order to solve work tasks; solving simple tasks along with manifesting discipline and perseverance; displaying self-confidence) (apud Manolescu, 2012, p. 33-34). This brief presentation highlights the considerable relevance of the preparatory grade for initiating the building of key competences at small students.

1.2 Curricular design centred on competences

Competence is the complex and integrated result of training, composed of the symbiosis of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and values articulated, sometimes, on aptitudes and manifested as efficient conduct. Competency-based education approaches the theory of pedagogical objectives from an integrative perspective, according to the principles of formative education that responds to the social-economic expectations in relation to school. The three major objectives of competency-based education are (ibidem, p. 23):

1. Focus on the competences that the student needs to acquire by the end of each school year and by the completion of compulsory education;

2. Give meaning to learning; the student should be constantly aware of the usefulness of what he learns in school;
3. To certify the student's acquisitions by asking him to solve concrete situations instead of reproducing knowledge without the task of applying them to everyday active life.

For these reasons, the curricular design centred on competences focuses on the student. The school syllabus for the preparatory grade suggests examples of learning activities and gives teachers the freedom to select/ create situations where the student may activate his resources in order to overcome obstacles.

1.3 Integrated curriculum

Integration implies conducting actions that are more complex than the mere joining of the parts of a whole. The whole obtained through integration is the result of relating, coordinating and optimally combining the constituent elements. A new element becomes part of an already constituted whole as a result of integration and the obtained product is the product of integration. For example, once formed and built, the competence of receiving and producing a message is integrated into the mental and behavioural structures of the human subject. The integrated approach highlights the following characteristics: a. it enables the combination, relating and correlation of educational disciplines, as well as concepts, phenomena and processes belonging to different domains, the results of learning and everyday life situations; b. it manages school time more appropriately through flexibility and the use of acquisitions acquired in a curricular area that acts as a support for another area; c. the teacher has a multitude of possibilities for grouping students; d. it relies on thematic units approached from the perspective of several disciplines; e. the teacher designs, for each student, an instructive-educational process, adapting the teaching style to the students' learning style; f. the teaching strategies used are modified according to the promoted type of learning and the organization of the learning experiences in the context of curricular integration (Manolescu, 2012, p. 5). Its advantages are closely connected to thematic training, with which it is consubstantial. Briefly, this is characterized by the following specific elements: 1. it implies the organization of the curriculum around certain macro themes, representing an efficient way for curricular integration, which removes the isolated approach to human knowledge; 2. it investigates a theme by relying on the integration of several distinct disciplines; 3. it relies on the idea that learning is productive if it occurs in a context that connects the learning processes with the dimensions of the surrounding reality; 4. it is achieved through a practical and creative-exploratory process inside which the students' cognitive and instrumental competences are practiced by solving problems in the context of immediate reality (ibidem, p. 100).

For example, the thematic unit 'The Universe' may be designed for a period of 2-3 weeks and may constitute the frame for practising and building competences characteristic of several curricular areas.

1.4 The ludic dimension

From the pedagogical point of view, early education means, decidedly, a time and a space of playing and learning (Law, 1979). That is why the learning activities in the preparatory grade occur more like a game than like learning exercises, in agreement with the psycho-pedagogical characteristics of the six-year old child, willing to act playfully, openly, curiously, attractively, getting naturally involved in the proposed processes according to his own powers. The repeated imitation of a situation within the game represents, for the child, a real action where he acquires behaviours of relationship building, handling objects, affective-motivational emotions according to the roles and where he builds his communication skills. We shall further illustrate several games used in the instructive-educational process at the preparatory grade, highlighting the correspondence between the educational discipline, the competences aimed and the type of the game: 1. Mathematics and environment exploration – reading and writing numbers in the concentre 0-31, Didactic game: Find the classmate whose birthday is the same as yours; 2. Visual arts and practical skills – transforming a material through simple techniques, Role play: At the Tailor's, At the Baker's; 3. Music and movement – executing movements suitable to the text's content of ideas, Role play: At the Miller's; 4. The morning meeting – knowledge, interknowledge and communication, Socialization game : I know you ... you know me! (Annex no. 2 to the order of the Minister of National Education no. 3418/19.03.2013, School syllabi)

1.5 The particularities of evaluation

By the end of the preparatory grade, the primary school teacher draws, for each student, an evaluation report. It is structured so as to ensure correlation with the evaluation from the end of kindergarten, on the one hand, as well as the subsequent evaluations from grades 1-4, on the other hand. There are no marks during the preparatory grade and no averages in the register, which supports learning in a detached atmosphere, without the constraints of marks, beneficial for the 6-year old child. There is maintained the evaluation in terms of achieved behaviour and developing behaviour, characteristic of preschool education, the preparatory grade being a period of transition towards the mark-based evaluation from grades 1-4. This is one of the aspects that gives the preparatory grade the role of supportive factor in the students' school adaptation. The individual evaluation report includes the results of formative evaluation on different domains – physical, cognitive, language and communication, socio-emotional development, attitude towards learning etc. The teacher evaluates: a. knowledge – about objects, animals, phenomena; b. skills

and abilities – motor skills, investigation, practical skills; c. capacities – communicative, focusing attention, putting knowledge into practice, perseverance in accomplishing tasks; d. attitudes – towards learning, activity, others, self, work; e. abilities – intellectual, emotional, social; f. aptitudes – school, motor, artistic, the ability to think independently. At the preparatory grade, the evaluation aims at “recording the progress of each child and contributing to improving the teaching-learning activity” (Manolescu, 2012, p. 95-96).

2. How can the academic curricula be improved in relation to the particularities of the preparatory grade?

The starting point is represented by the professional competences that need to be formed at graduates as well as the new realities characteristic of the preparatory grade that have been briefly invoked and analysed above. Our question is whether the academic curricula for the bachelor study programme The Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education is currently appropriate from the perspective of training teachers for the preparatory grade? Being aware of the relative slowness with which training systems react to novelty, as well as the paradox that school practice has got ahead pedagogical theory in this case as well, we assume, as a general line of intervention, the idea according to which the modification of the academic curricula – in the sense of assimilating the pedagogical aspects characteristic of the preparatory grade – may contribute to improving the initial training of teachers for primary and preschool education. The study of the curriculum for the mentioned bachelor study programme, as well as our teaching experience, provides opening towards a series of suggestions through which the pedagogical aspects characteristic of the preparatory grade may be integrated into the process of the initial training of this category of teachers. In our view, there are *two such possible ways*:

1. Analytical integration (step-by-step) – this refers to integrating the theoretical and practical problematic of the preparatory grade in all the specialty courses, including in the teaching practice, unit by unit, chapter by chapter, correlating each of them with the general problematic of the pedagogy of preschool and small preschool age. This version is extremely useful for all the students, but especially for that category who benefited from no psycho-pedagogical training prior to the bachelor study programme and also have no teaching experience whatsoever. These would manage to acquire, explicitly and gradually, the authentic psycho-pedagogical and teaching particularities of this grade from the structure of compulsory education. Directly interested are those who will work in primary education; nevertheless, the training of prospective preschool teachers should not be neglected either. These will understand exactly what is expected of

children upon graduating the big group, thus diminishing the pre-schoolers from overstraining as a result of the misconceived idea about the first grade of compulsory education.

This suggestion exploits a series of opportunities, but is also faced with other difficulties. Some of these are: *a. opportunities*: the introduction of the specificity aspects of the preparatory grade is done gradually, in agreement with general pedagogy; the gradual introduction is constantly correlated, subchapter by subchapter, with general psycho-pedagogical training; content elements intermingle and contribute to the global, interdisciplinary and integral understanding of the curricular and psycho-pedagogical specificity of pre-schoolers and small schoolers; *b. difficulties*: the gap between the time designed for the assimilation of some general contents (teaching methods, teaching design, for example, 2nd year, 3rd semester, The Theory and Methodology of Training) and the moment of introducing the topic of the preparatory grade (1st year, 2nd grade); the different approach to the assimilation of contents, namely either simultaneously (the finalities of the preparatory grade, integrated curriculum, the method of the games – 1st year, 2nd semester, at different educational disciplines), or successively and in a circular way (The ludic dimension of the teaching process at the preparatory grade, the specificity of the evaluation at the preparatory grade, the curricular design centred on competences – 1st year, 1st semester – The Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education; 2nd year, 3rd semester – the Theory and Methodology of Training – and 2nd year, 4th semester – The theory and Methodology of evaluation); the novelty of organizing and managing the teaching process at the preparatory grade; the reluctance of some educational agents: parents, teachers, trainers.

2. *Synthetic integration* (cumulative) – this covers designing, structuring and achieving a specific module/ independent learning units that may accumulate the topics of the preparatory grade with all its components. This version also has its strong and weak points. We shall here highlight some of them: *a. strong points*: by cumulating all the contents characteristic of the preparatory grade in one module/ learning unit, these will gain unity and continuity, will no longer be dissipated across different moments and educational disciplines; a unit for approaching and presenting contents, a single teacher transfers these contents, provides a single integrated, accurate and definite view; there are presented, in a unitary whole and once, all the aspects characteristic of the preparatory grade, ensuring the building of a complete, monodisciplinary (pedagogical) and correct representation; *b. weak points*: it is difficult to identify the educational discipline where this unique module/ learning unit could be introduced for the best results; it is difficult to establish the best time for studying these topics (year, semester); the reluctance of some students, already teachers, regarding the ludic and apparently liberal specificity of the teaching process at the preparatory grade (respectively, the relatively disinterested attitude towards the topics from preschool education, regarded as known or irrelevant, because there are no handbooks, no marks

and the teaching is predominantly ludic in nature). Based on the presented data, we believe that the best approach would be a combined, mixed one. The start may be the synthetic introduction of a specific module/ learning unit that should present the psycho-pedagogical specificity of the preparatory grade at the discipline The Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (1st year, 2nd semester, 6c/4s). We believe that its introduction may be made, according to our present organization of the curriculum at this educational discipline, as a component of the description and analysis of the specificity of the teaching process in primary education, as a connection element between kindergarten activity and the activity from grades 1-4 (Cojocariu and Mățã, 2011, p. 127). Complementarily, the identity aspects of the preparatory grade could be repeated, applied, explained, developed through analytical, linear or circular approach, at least with 1-2 lecture hours, respectively 1-2 seminar hours, at all the consubstantial educational disciplines that provide, by their content, this possibility. Table 1 illustrates our view regarding the 2 ways of curricular integration of the contents characteristic of the preparatory grade.

Table 1. Systematization of some suggestions for the initial training of students, for knowledge of the specificity of the preparatory grade

No.	Content elements	Discipline	When? How much?
<i>a. Analytical integration</i>			
1.	The concept of preparatory grade, specificity, particularities	The Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education	1 st year, 2 nd sem./ 4c/2s
2.	The finalities of the preparatory grade	Curriculum Theory and Methodology	1 st year, 2 nd sem./ 1c/1s
3.	Integrated curriculum – the specificity of the preparatory grade	Curriculum Theory and Methodology	1 st year, 2 nd sem./ 2c/2s
4.	The ludic dimension of the teaching process from the preparatory grade	The Psycho-pedagogy of Games The Theory and Methodology of Training	1 st year, 2 nd sem./ 2c/2s 2 nd year, 3 rd sem./ 1c/1s
5.	The specificity of evaluation at the preparatory grade	The Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education The Theory and Methodology of Evaluation	1 st year, 2 nd sem./ 1c/1s 2 nd year, 4 th sem./ 1c/1s
6.	Curricular design centred on competences	The Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education The Theory and Methodology of Training Specialty Didactics	1 st year, 2 nd sem./ 2c/2s 2 nd year, 3 rd sem./ 1c/1s 2 nd year, 3 rd , 4 th sem., 3 rd year, 5 th , 6 th sem., 2c/2s each
7.	All aspects	Teaching practice	3 rd year, 5 th sem. 3h/4 weeks
8.	All aspects	Specialty Didactics	2 nd year, 3 rd year, all semesters, at least 2 hours/ seminar/ Didactics

<i>b. Synthetic integration</i>			
1.	The preparatory grade – specific psycho-pedagogical dimensions	The Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education	1 st year, 2 nd sem./ 6c/4s

3. What are the conclusions?

The microstudy conducted on the academic curriculum as well as its corroboration with the theoretical, psycho-pedagogical dimension of the preparatory grade highlights the following:

1. Reconfirmation of the epistemic reality of the fact that the object of study of pedagogical sciences is extremely dynamic, constantly troubled by new evolutions and with continuous openings towards developing research along new coordinates;
2. Reconfirmation of the gap existing between the school, educational reality and the process of training for the teaching career, a gap within which the school recuperates slowly and with delays what society develops more dynamically and faster;
3. The insufficient explicit adjustment of the academic curricula to the novelty generated by the introduction of the preparatory grade in the compulsory education from Romania;
4. The need to introduce the psycho-pedagogical topics of the preparatory grade in the segment of initial training of the teachers for primary and preschool education;
5. The existence, in the curriculum, of the specialization of some real opportunities for introducing the problematics of the preparatory grade and of ensuring its proper articulation with the other contents, both on the theoretical dimension and that of pedagogical practice;
6. The reality that each teacher will make this effort individually and at a personal pace, an effort that, in the absence of an integrated process, remains inefficient;
7. The need for a coherent, convergent, team and interdisciplinary effort for the identification of the best paths for updating the curricula of the analysed programme of study (analytical, synthetic, mixed), by adjusting the traditional approaches and the productive assimilation of novelties, from the perspective of making the initial training for the teaching career efficient;
8. The need to eliminate duplication and content overlapping of some of the courses (based on the principle of epistemic or chronological primacy!), as well as the unjustified loading with inconclusive contents with the aim of building the possibility for efficiently achieving the imposed innovations;

9. The obligation that, in the absence of this effort conducted as a part of the process of initial training, much of the training of teachers along the dimension of the preparatory grade may be translated in their effort of continuous training;
10. The need and possibility to transform the essential aspects of the preparatory grade in an object of proper pedagogical (observational, experimental) research, to ensure a better knowledge of it (an aspect insufficiently developed prior to the introduction of the preparatory grade as a first grade in the compulsory education from Romania!), with a possible feedback effect on initial training.

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