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**PSYCHOLOGICAL PARTICULARITIES OF CHILDREN AT
SCHOOL ENTRY. CASE STUDY IN ROMANIAN SCHOOLS**

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Abstract

Preparing children for school ("school readiness") implies an appropriate level of training, stage of development, and amount of physical, social, emotional and cognitive capabilities (Blair, 2002, Lemelin & Boivin, 2007, Booth, 2008). This state is determined by the interdependence between internal and external factors, in the socio-familial and educational-institutional environment. The research aims to capture the perceptions of 84 pre-school teachers on the children's abilities to meet the required activities. The analysis undertaken offers a profile of the children characteristics as perceived by teachers and suggestions for adapting the curricular offer to the individual features and age of children, in order to ensure a harmonious cognitive, psychomotor and socio-emotional development. The main results show that: • Only 10% of teachers believe that all the children were prepared, at the beginning of the preparatory grade, to face the challenges of the school curriculum, while 50% of teachers believed that not all but most of the children were prepared in this respect. • Teachers appreciated that most of the children have a good level of cognitive and affective – motivational skills but are not able yet to comply with the discipline rules (Sign Test < 0.05); • Overall, teachers appreciate that most children are not prepared in terms of compliance with the classroom rules. Teachers have proposed several solutions: focusing the activity on the socio-emotional development of children, renewing the curriculum by reducing the number of hours and simplifying the content, allocating additional human resources (psycho-pedagogue, doctor).

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1. Introduction

Since 1990, there have been significant changes, at the international level, in the policy on early education. Romania resonated with this movement, adopted its principles, ratifying its documents and generating a series of institutional and legal acts and documents. All these paved the way for the legislative changes from 2012, namely a new National Education Law. Among the important provisions, this stipulated the moving of the last year of kindergarten (“preparatory group”) to primary education, naming it the “zero” or “preparatory” grade and considering it a compulsory step in the transition from kindergarten to school. This shift has generated, in the education system, among those directly involved (parents, teachers) and not only, an ample debate about the appropriateness, benefits, efficiency, and costs of its implementation. Our research was carried out in this dynamic context and aimed to identify how this phenomenon was reflected in the consciousness of the teachers directly involved, specifically how they perceive the readiness of children to meet the challenges of school life.

2. Problem Statement

In the field of early education a special place is occupied by preparing children for school (“**school readiness**”), a process which should foster the acquisition by the child of those physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills that a child needs to successfully adapt to the school environment (Lemelin, & Boivin, 2007). School readiness should be appreciated not only as a process but also as a result that the school institutions, the child’s family expect of the child, often placing an excessive burden on their shoulders (Rafoth, Buchenauer, Crissman Kolb, & Halko, 2004).

Sociologists and psychologists have unanimously found that the variables that determine the differences in children’s school readiness are social, economic, psychological, biological resources, health, the range and quality of experiences held/gained by children together with their parents. Specifically, the families where the level of poverty is high, dysfunctional in terms of social issues that have psychological difficulties, few personal and institutional possibilities to deal with them register higher rates of failure in achieving this type of training (Farkas, & Hibel, 2008).

Research on the parent-child interactions and their impact on preparing children for school showed that, in general, maternal interactions characterized by positive emotions, reduced criticism, control and excessive authoritarianism are associated with higher school performance, without any connection to the family’s socio-economic status and mother’s intelligence level (Estrada, Arsenio, Hess, & Holloway, 1987; Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997; Pianta, Smith, & Reeve, 1991 as cited in Connell, & Prinz, 2002). Moreover, it was found that mothers who show an interest in the verbal expression of the child in terms of correct speech, use of accurate language, helped develop the children’s subsequent oral and written communication skills (Connell, & Prinz, 2002).

Assessments of the level of school readiness frequently performed by measuring basic cognitive skills such as recognizing numbers, colours, shapes and spatial orientation showed significant differences at the expense of children from socio-economic vulnerable environments. This relationship is particularly strong not only in the cognitive domain of academic readiness (Ramey & Ramey, 2004), but it is also important for the dimensions of language and social skills development.

The reference literature from Canada identified strong links between the school readiness of children and their school adaptation and the quality of later school performance. For example, children who are less prepared upon school entry are more likely to manifest problems in learning and difficulties in acquiring social skills (Connell & Prinz, 2002), show signs of failure to socially adapt subsequently, all these generating, in the school career, rejection and victimization from peers (Guay, Boivin, & Hodges, 1999 as cited in Lemelin, & Boivin, 2007).

For the purposes of identifying the impact of early preparation for school on later school acquisitions, a number of 6 longitudinal studies identified and hierarchized the strongest predictors of school performance, namely good mathematical training, reading skills and, finally, attention. Instead, socio-emotional behaviours of internalizing and externalizing problems were generally insignificant predictors of later academic performance, even among children with relatively high levels of problematic conduct. This pattern of association was similar for boys and girls regardless of the socio-economic background (Duncan et al., 2007).

Over the past few years, researchers have analysed in detail the impact of children's social and emotional abilities on their early academic acquisitions (Wentzel, & Asher, 1995 as cited in Raver, 2003). Thus, children who have difficulties in focusing, complying with rules, collaborating with other kids, controlling negative emotions, anger and stress are less adapted to school (Arnold et al., 1999; McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000). The results demonstrated that academic achievements in the first few years of school seem to be built on a solid basis of children's socio-emotional skills (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997, O'Neil et al., 1997 as cited in Raver, 2003). Thus, the relationships that children build with their classmates and teachers rely on the ability to regulate emotions in a prosocial way, these becoming a "source of provisions" helpful in academic activities (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999, p. 1375). Psychologists found that children who are antisocial in their behaviour are less accepted by peers and teachers (Kupersmidt, & Coie, 1990; Shores, & Wehby, 1999, as cited in Raver, 2003), participate less frequently and often deficiently in the classroom activities compared to their counterparts with a pro-social conduct. However, we should mention the fact that the relationship between the early academic skills of children and their socio-emotional adaptation can be bidirectional, meaning that those children who struggle with early learning difficulties could grow increasingly frustrated and aggressive (Arnold et al., 1999).

Another predictor of school adaptation was long considered to be intelligence. Research has shown, however, that the indicators of the self-regulating capacity, whether it is defined as the ability to control emotion in an effort to socially respond adequately or adjust attention and use of the selective strategy in performing cognitive tasks are independent predictors and, perhaps, equally relevant for school adaptation. Much of the literature points to the role of self-regulation (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Normandeau & Guay, 1998; Wentzel, Weinberger, Ford, & Feldman, 1990, as cited in Blair, 2002), clear relations between school acquisitions and the percentage of time that students spend in academic activities being demonstrated both at the preschool and elementary levels. The aspects of social and cognitive self-regulation, such as those involved in establishing friendly relations (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999) and in the perceived control over learning play a key role in the development of behavioural self-regulating capacities of children in the transition to school (Blair, 2002).

Researchers (Fertig, & Kluve, 2005) also studied the role of age in influencing the preparation of children for school using the data set collected on children who entered school between the late 1960s and until the late 1970s in Germany. The empirical results suggested a negative qualitative relationship between the school entry age and educational outcomes, both in terms of education level and the probability of repeat, estimating that there is no effect of the school entry age upon school performance. More recent surveys (Fredriksson, & Öckert, 2006) who resumed this issue have not reached more conclusive evidence, although the procedure for gathering data was slightly different, consisting in comparing student school results based on the month of birth. These studies have concluded that the youngest student in a class obtained performances slightly below those of older colleagues, but the differences were small and transient. The conclusion was that the bio-psychological maturity level, and not the chronological age, plays a part in the school entry success.

Another study (McClelland et al., 2000) attempted to examine the predictability of labour skills for academic achievement at school entry and at the end of the second grade and identified the characteristics of children with low levels of these. The results indicated that these skills have continued to support academic skills at the beginning of school and favourably influence the reading and mathematical skills from the end of the second grade. Among children with poor skills related to work there were identified children with significantly lower IQ levels, behavioural difficulties and medical hearing and speech problems.

The results of the above studies lead us to consider that preparing children for school begins in the family where its members understand that they are the most important people in the child's life, assume responsibility through direct, frequent and positive involvement to the best interest of the child. It also requires supportive communities able to provide support/institutional and logistic assistance to families, work together with them in their care and educational efforts on the short, medium and long term. Throughout all this course, a major role lies with the care and early education services (nurseries, kindergartens etc.) and schools that are prepared to accept any child regardless of his problems, and help families in the transition to a formal learning environment. Every child that benefits from optimal conditions ensured by this support network can gradually overcome vulnerabilities related to age, somatic and psychological constitution.

3. Empirical Study

3.1. Objectives

Our research had a dual purpose: on the one hand, we wanted to highlight the perceptions of teachers who teach at the newly introduced preparatory grade on the children's school readiness at the psychological levels: cognitive-linguistic, psycho-motor and socio-emotional. On the other hand, we aimed to collect suggestions for adapting the curricular offer to individual and age characteristics of the children in class "zero", for a balanced adaptation to school life.

Based on this general purpose, we outlined the following objectives:

1. analysis of teachers' perception on the main indicators of mental development of children;
2. description and analysis of the cognitive/intellectual, speech, emotional-motivational, psychomotor, social networking problems, of understanding and complying with rules of specific

activities characteristic of the preparatory grade identified by teachers from two different residential backgrounds (urban / rural);

3. description and analysis of the causes of these categories of problems;
4. identifying teachers' opinion on the degree of adequacy of the preparatory grade curriculum to the children's level of development;
5. proposals for the optimization of the curricular framework for the preparatory grade, depending on the area of residence (urban / rural) of teachers.

3.2. Research Methods

The research was based on a questionnaire consisting of 34 items applied and completed either online on the Google drive platform or on printed version, from November 2013 to March 2014. The questionnaire consists of 34 items (23 closed items – of the scale type and 11 open items). The total number of completed questionnaires was 84; of these, 43 were completed online, and 41 in printed form. The number of rural subjects who responded to the questionnaire was 43. The number of urban subjects who responded to the questionnaire was only 39. Two respondents did not declare their background.

Requests for participation in the study were sent to a number of almost 500 primary school teachers who have taught at the preparatory grade in the school years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, both in rural and urban areas.

3.3. Findings

In terms of identifying the level of the main indicators of mental development of children it was found that approximately **10%** of the teachers surveyed believe that at the beginning of the preparatory class **all** the children were ready to face the proposed school curriculum, whereas approximately 50% of the teachers believe that **most of the** children were ready to deal with the challenges imposed by the curriculum.

Table 1. The percentage level of the development of the main indicators of mental development of children in the teachers' opinion

Indicators of the children's development	All%	Most%	Few%
Classroom rules	0-10	30-40	40-50
Relationship	0-10	40-50	20-30
Psychomotor development	10	50	20-30
Affective–motivational development	0-10	40-50	30-40
Cognitive and language development	0-10	50	30

For the analysed dimensions, the most significant results show that:

- ▶ almost half of the teachers surveyed believe that most children are NOT prepared in terms of compliance with the classroom rules;
- ▶ most children are ready in terms of their psychomotor and cognitive development (Sign Test < .05) ;

- ▶ more children are more prepared at the relational and affective-motivational level than in terms of compliance with the rules necessary to conduct classroom activities (proper conduct) (Sign Test < .05);

The situation outlined above, although limited in terms of the number of respondents, is relevant in terms of preparing the observed children for school life. Thus, it is important to stress that the adaptation to a new way of activity is also determined by the subject's ability to comply with norms, rules specific to the environment that proposes them, in this case the school.

The second research objective was to identify the problems by development areas according to the teachers' background. Problems identified at children by the teachers from rural background, in order of frequency of occurrence, was:

- cognitive-intellectual: comprehension; motivational; speech;
- speech: communication difficulties; pronunciation; sound identification;
- affective-emotional: lack of emotional control (aggressiveness, impulsiveness) in relationships with others; sensitivity, shyness; isolation tendencies;
- psycho-motor: psycho-motor restlessness; problems of movement coordination; incorrect sitting posture;
- socio-relational: poor relationships with the other children; fear of the unknown; egoism.

Problems identified at children by the teachers from urban background, in order of frequency of occurrence, was:

- cognitive-intellectual: speech, comprehension, attention;
- speech: pronunciation (including language disorders), communication in simple sentences, poor vocabulary;
- affective-emotional: inability to manage one's own emotions, high emotional sensitivity, emotional disorders;
- psycho-motor: lack of self-service skills, lack of manual skills, movement coordination;
- socio-relational: reduced socialization, violation of rules, preferential relationships.

We could see that most problems raised by both categories of respondents are related to speech and lack of emotional control.

Trying to get a picture of the depth of these issues, the respondents were asked to indicate the possible causes. Thus, for the cognitive/intellectual problems there were mentioned external causes such as: family problems, deficiencies in the kindergarten/non-attendance of kindergarten, and internal ones: attention deficit disorder, lack of motivation, intellectual deficit, immaturity. For speech issues there were mentioned external causes such as insufficient exercise and/or family support, and internal causes such as medical, emotional or age problems. Affective-emotional problems also have external determinations, namely those deriving from the family and/or educational kindergarten environment, together with immaturity and age particularities. It should be noted that the respondents in the two areas of residence have provided relatively identical answers which denotes the existence of poor socio-educational conditions that cannot ensure good training to children in order for them to be able to adapt to school life.

The fourth objective pursued by our study was to identify teachers' opinion regarding the appropriateness of the curriculum specific to the preparatory grade, in effect at that time, in relation to the

children's level of development. Most teachers surveyed considered that it answered, in the ratio of 90%, to the development needs in terms of the following dimensions:

- cognitive/intellectual structures of the students' personality,
- students' language,
- psychomotor structures of the students' personality.

On the other hand, there is less confidence of teachers in the curriculum adequacy in terms of the developmental needs regarding the affective-emotional and socio-relational aspects of the students' personality. Regarding these two aspects, the teachers appreciate the curriculum appropriateness in the ratio of only 70%. Considering the significant experience and expertise of teachers, we wanted to find, through our research, the problems contained by the valid school documents. Thus, the curricula present too many hours/week for contents that are too complex and inconsistent with the children's development level, plus the small number of hours for the discipline of Counselling and lack of textbooks. The school syllabi are too complex, they contain too much content, impose too many requirements, the disciplines of Mathematics and Environment exploration being inappropriately integrated. The auxiliary materials are conceived erroneously, do not comply with the syllabus, their level of complexity and difficulty being inappropriate for the students' age peculiarities, there being a too large amount of content and, even so, they are difficult to procure for financial reasons, especially by teachers in rural areas.

Our study was intended more like a reflection on the perceptions of teachers but also a way to harness their educational experience. Thus, at the end of the questionnaire we offered them the opportunity to make proposals to improve the curricular framework for the preparatory grade. Teachers in rural areas have come up with the following suggestions: providing schools with teaching materials, allocating additional human resources (psycho-pedagogue, doctor), simplifying content, whereas their colleagues from urban schools revised and reviewed the syllabus, reducing the number of hours but increasing the number of play and practical activities, and focusing the activity on the socio-emotional development of children.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was a prospective one, conducted in the context of producing major changes in the Romanian education system, more precisely one year after lowering the age for entry into the cycle of compulsory schooling from 7 to 6 years and transforming the final preschool year into the first year of school. At the macro-social level, this move was proposed in a socio-economic and institutional context unfavourable for early education and for preparing children for school in Romania.

According to the observations made by teachers, children are best prepared in terms of psychomotor and cognitive skills and least prepared in terms of the socio-relational and affective level, with regard to respecting rules, the possible causes of this situation being external determinations, namely those coming from the family and/or educational kindergarten environment, as well as immaturity and age particularities.

At that moment, the majority of the teachers surveyed believed that the curriculum specific to the preparatory grade responded, in a ratio of 90%, to the children's development needs in terms of the cognitive/intellectual, psychomotor dimensions and oral-written expression of the students' personality,

being inappropriate in relation to the socio-affective-emotional and relational aspects. The solutions proposed by the educational actors interviewed were organizational-institutional, namely providing schools with teaching materials, the allocation of additional human resources (psycho-pedagogue, doctor), but also curricular, such as simplification of content, with colleagues from urban schools revising and making additions to the syllabus, reducing the total number of hours, increasing the desired number of ludic and practical activities, and focusing on the socio-emotional development of children.

As a proof that things continued to change even after 2012 is the fact that since 2013 there has been introduced, in the curriculum for the preparatory, first and second grades, the discipline Personal Development.

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