

## The Implications of the Elements of Outdoor Education in the Preparatory Class Curriculum

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### Abstract

The introduction of preparatory class, as a part of compulsory education, leads to a lot of contradictions, one of them being authorized, and the others not.

Those who agree with this, are sustaining that a lot of children who are living in the country, don't graduate the kindergarten, so they are going in the first class without having the basic skills and knowledge. The others sustain that the educational spaces are not suitable for the little ones.

Here comes the importance of outdoor education that refers to the learning activities that the teachers organize with his students in different spaces for developing social abilities, emotional and moral skills. For curriculum of the preparatory class, these type of activities can be organized in the Mathematic and Exploring the Nature, Communication in Romanian Language, Visual Arts and Manual Crafts and Music and Moving. All these lead to the developing of the well-known eight key-competences.

The outdoor education is very important in the developing of the 6 years old children, because they have to be able to apply the knowledge and abilities in real life.

**Keywords:** outdoor education, preparatory class, experiential education

### The preparatory class<sup>1</sup> between necessity and constraint

The opportunity of introducing the preparatory class, as a component of compulsory schooling, has created and creates epistemic disputes, confusions, for or against opinions, some being more or less authorized. Nevertheless, starting with 2012-2013, the preparatory class was introduced in the educational system as a consequence of the implementation of the National Law of Education no. 1/2011. Article 23(1, b), states that primary education „*includes the preparatory class and classes I-IV*” and article 29 enforces the organization and the age of children who can attend this preparatory class: „ (1) *Primary education is organized and usually functions after a morning schedule. (2) Children who have reached the age of 6 until the beginning of the school year register in the preparatory class. Children who turn 6 by the end of the calendar year may be registered in the preparatory class with a written request from parents, tutors or legal providers, if their psycho-somatic development is accurate. (3) Children with special educational needs who turn 8 by the beginning of the school year can be enrolled in the preparatory class. Through a written form of request from parents, tutors or legal providers, children with SEN with ages between 6 and 8 may be enrolled in the preparatory class.*”

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<sup>1</sup> We consider that this is the most appropriate term for defining this stage in the education system, even if, in UK, we found out that the term is *reception class*. We discovered “preparatory class in France.

The specific curriculum for this class is mentioned in article 68.(4): „ The curriculum for the preparatory classes follows the physical, socioemotional, cognitive, linguistic and communication development, as well as the development of the learning capacities and attitudes, ensuring at the same time the bridges towards the development of the 8 key competences.”, established in the Program of the European Commission „*Education & Training 2010*”, workgroup „*Basic Skills Entrepreneurship and Foreign Languages*”.

The definition of the key competences, in the opinion of the specialists of the European Commission is the following: The key competences represent a transferable and multifunctional bag of knowledge, abilities and attitudes that all people need for personal accomplishment and development, for social inclusion and professional insertion. These must be developed until the end of compulsory education and must act as basis for continuous learning, as part of life-long learning.

The eight key competences that European education systems must focus on are:

- *Mother tongue communication;*
- *Foreign language communication;*
- *Mathematical literacy and basic competences in science and technologies;*
- *ITC competences;*
- *Learning how to learn;*
- *civic and interpersonal competences;*
- *Entrepreneurial competences, sensibility to culture.*

The reactions to the opportunity or lack of opportunity of introducing the preparatory class are different, according to each actor's perception in this approach. Therefore, the advocates of the preparatory class call the following arguments:

- ✓ in the rural area many preschoolers don't attend kindergarten, reaching grade 1 with an extremely low level ( the forming of the skills is desirable, there is a low level of knowledge, secondary socialization is lessened by content)
- ✓ in the urban area the number of places for children in long-term kindergartens is far less by comparison to the parents' requests, in this case the groups are oversized, from 30 to 40 children per group;
- ✓ at the age of 6 children are physically, cognitively and emotionally developed to handle schooling successfully;
- ✓ in most European countries the beginning of schooling is made at 6;
- ✓ the introduction of the preparatory class contributes to the decrease of absenteeism;

The arguments supported by those who are either against the introduction of the preparatory class, either for organizing it within kindergarten are:

- ✓ teachers who teach at the preparatory class are not formed enough and there is no unitary approach regarding the putting into practice of specific programs, each teacher follows customized approaches, according to their initial training, according to personal experience or randomly;
- ✓ some of the children at this age require surveillance during recess and at the restroom;
- ✓ in many school space is improvised, inadequate to age, many labs being replaced to arrange rooms for the preparatory classes;
- ✓ The current syllabus specifies the mixing of classes with games, or this cannot be accomplished in schools, where there are no specially designed playgrounds and where the restrooms are not separated according to gender.

To improve all the issues related to the organization, implementation and introduction of the preparatory class in normal conditions it is necessary that all decisive factors, together with parents

and teacher reconsider their attitude, taking into account the specificity of the age of six, a period of transition, change on multiple plans: cognitive, affective and social.

### **What is outdoor education?**

Kurt Hahn (1886-1974), the founder of the first school of Outdoor Experiential Education (*Outward Bound*), was the one who substantially contributed to the development of experiential education, his own philosophy about education, who put the experiential education in the practical curriculum centered on the development of competences through learning activities based on practice, in this context students will find themselves in the situation of disciplining their urges by the help of educational experiences.

This theory stems from the ideas on education built on the primordial role of practical experience, which we find in the book *Emile or on Education* written in 1762 by Jean Jacques Rousseau. The educational ideal, in Hahn's opinion can be synthesized in the following quote: „*I consider that the main task of education is to ensure the survival of the following qualities: an innovative curiosity, an invincible will, tenacity in reaching the goal, self- renunciation and above all compassion!*”

*Outdoor education* is perceived differently in the educational context in our country, even if the interest towards it, of all the factors implied in the complex phenomenon of education has grown exponentially recently,

By and large, outdoor education can be included in the sphere of the new dimensions of education and attributed to nonformal education, seen as a form of education that adds and includes the extracurricular and extra school activities.

Moreover, in a restrained perspective, it circumscribes the learning activities organized under the guidance of teacher in a natural environment, in cultural locations (theatres, cinemas, museums etc.)

There are numerous epistemic beliefs and definitions for the term outdoor education. In some studies it is considered a new form of education: „*we can say that this form of education is based on outdoor learning. The term can include education for environment, recess activities, self-development and social programs, trips, adventure, etc...it offers the possibility of direct contact with nature, changing of attitudes and behavior towards the environment...it represents a strong source of learning experience- a relaxed and free environment, without the constraints imposed by the four walls of a school class, it can offer students various challenges, so that the educational process becomes powerful, inspirational and able to change behaviors.*” „ (<http://www.slideshare.net/primariacatunele/manual-de-educatie-outdoor>).

Șerban Derlogea defines outdoor education as *an organized form of schooling that can take place out in the open and gets students ready for life*. It develops students' self-esteem and understanding of others and nature, being and extension and enrichment of the school curriculum.

Cătălin Mîndru considers that outdoor education is *an organized form of learning that takes place out in the open and gets students ready for life outside, being based on the philosophy, theory and practice of experiential education and of ecological education*.

### **The applicability of outdoor education's elements to the curriculum of the preparatory class**

To support the introduction of outdoor education elements in the efficient application of the curriculum for the preparatory class, we can configure a series of advantages, that we can raise to

the rank of objectives or purposes and we can consider them vectors in the formation of competences specific to this level of learning:

- personal development, improvement of team work and improvement of social relations;
- understanding of people around and of the world and self-esteem;
- learning how to defeat difficulties in life;
- developing socio-personal abilities;
- providing an environment that stimulates learning;
- creating positive effects upon the health state;
- testing resistance to physical and mental effort of the body;
- developing personality and self-esteem;
- developing the creative imagination, creativity, the sense of responsibility and positive thinking;
- developing leadership abilities: organization, coordination, evaluation;
- forming the capacity to take suitable decisions, in accordance to managing priorities;
- developing curiosity and motivation to avoid boredom;
- promoting spirituality and the responsibility to protect nature;
- developing a closer relation to the environment;
- triggering more powerful and durable formative-educational effects regarding the direct and active implication in specific and complex situations;
- Developing perseverance, tolerance and fair-play spirit.

Through the construction of the learning framework, it has been taken account of the accomplishment of the intentions in the forming profile of the child graduating the second grade, appearing therefore new subjects that enable integrated teaching and include elements specific for outdoor education.

The curriculum areas specific to the preparatory class have been reorganized. The subjects Arts and Technologies have been reunited in one, with the disciplines Visual Arts and *Handicraft(Manual Work)*, *Music and Movement* and *TIC- Computer Game*. The suggested learning activities suggested by the school syllabi for the subjects related to this curriculum area are centered on integrated teaching, on the holistic approach of the two reunited disciplines and on an optimal mixture of indoor and outdoor education, such examples of learning activities are:

- Watching theater shows and puppet shows, adequate for the age;
- Participating at personal photo exhibitions with different themes, painting shows;
- Watching short excerpts from children movies or cartoons;
- Recognizing forms from nature;
- Visiting museums and art shows;
- Participating at meetings with craftsmen and popular creations specific to the area; stories about the tradition in pottery, making wooden and glass icons, painting eggs, popular sculpture, wood engraving, fabric and sewing;
- Participating at meetings with practical demonstrations of ancient crafts: loom, knitting, wool weaving, basket weaving;

Another integration is the one accomplished at the level of *Math and Environment Exploration* subject in the curriculum area Math and Sciences. The mathematical concepts and the conceptualization of learning gains accuracy and depth for the child, if they are exploited in real contexts by reference to the environment.

The area Counseling and orientation is kept through the introduction of the subject *Personal development*. This new subject goes beyond the principles of traditionalist pedagogy, centred on knowledge and oriented after the principles of pedagogy centered upon competences, towards formative education. The learning activities specific to the subject Personal development supports students in developing abilities and skills that allow the awareness of the transformation process of knowledge, abilities and skills in the behavior applicable in real life.

The curriculum claims that in the accomplishment of activities one must combine formal, nonformal and informal contexts and it is therefore recommended: visits at the library, museums, companies (firms, factories, shops, and offices), participation at theater shows, meetings with successful actors and sportspeople, doctors, psychologists, dentists, policemen or cartoon characters. When it is possible the activities will be carried out in an unconventional location (park, school yard). Children will be encouraged to participate and organized, under the coordination of the teacher, educational events (Fathers' Day, Grandparents' Day, Diversity Festival, Job Fair) exhibitions with the results of the activities (My first exhibit, spring came!). Partnerships with other classes or other schools are encouraged, as well as the organizing of charity and volunteering events.

For all subjects specific to the preparatory school it is recommended to organize mixed learning activities that can combine play activities, learning and school dominated activities, walks outside and discussions with the students in a relaxed and motivating framework.

The evaluation process can be contextualized through the combination of outdoor education elements and elements specific to formal education. In this sense, it is recommended to use the following evaluation methods: practical activities, individual and group project, carrying out projects that can make use of children's learning acquisitions and simultaneously stimulate the development of values and skills, expressing ideas and personal arguments through: posters, drawings, collage ( activity completed through the exposition of papers and the consequent inclusion of these papers in the child's portfolio), group discussions, using the learning circle ( what I liked, what I disliked, what I learned, what I will use), as well as individual charts of observation. (Completed by the teacher).

The evaluation will emphasize the recognition of the learning experiences and the competences acquired by students, both in formal and non-formal, respectively informal contexts.

The learning process centered on the preparatory class must consider and reconsider the fact that the 6-year old student comes to school with acquisitions and behaviors formed in completely different environments, with his/her unique personality and universe, specific to his/her age, with skills and affective dispositions of great variety. The construction of the teaching, learning and evaluation processes is accomplished through the following of the didactic principles, through the respect of the child's rights, the stimulation of learning based on innovative activities and strategies, through the evidencing of qualities and value of each student, so that he/she is ready for the development of the 8 key competences transferable and transversal, applicable in real life situations.

## Conclusion

Curriculum makers and teachers must focus on building a new architecture of the curriculum integrated in interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, pluridisciplinary and transdisciplinary levels, organized in the perimeter of integrating epistemic nuclei, so that the child can acknowledge the applicability of what he/she learns in school in real, specific situations and that he can show ability for cross-curriculum approaches.

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