

CENTRALITY OF THE STUDENT IN THE INSTRUCTIVE – EDUCATIONAL PROCESS – A METHOD OF OPTIMISATION OF THE SCHOOL ADAPTATION

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Abstract: *One of the periods in which frequent difficulties of school adaptation are registered is preadolescence, especially the beginning of preadolescence, which coincides in students with the passage from elementary to middle school and which, on the foundation of a fragile emotional and psychic balance, as well as a personality in formation, numerous adaptation behaviours are assimilated and long lasting behavioural patterns are formed, which will be transferred to future activities. The requirement of placing the student in the centre of the educational process, of adapting all activities to his capabilities and interests, is an approach to education proper to the constructivist paradigm, which, by comparison with the traditional paradigm presents a number of significant changes in design, strategy and action. The results from evaluating the risk of the school maladaptation for preadolescent students require the adoption of new preventive measures for the difficulties in the school adaptation to this age. The adaptation of the school, of the educative strategies, in fact the adaptation of the entire instructive and educative process to the individual needs, capacity and learning particularities of the students may represent a preventive solution for the abovementioned difficulties.*

Keywords: *constructivist paradigm, adapting school to the possibilities of the students, the paradigm of education centred on the student, educational policies, preadolescence*

1. Paper Rationale

The problem of students' school adjustment is a fundamental aspect of the educational activity, being present in school life, the everyday concerns of teachers, but also in many national and international investigations. One of the periods in which frequent difficulties of school adaptation are registered is preadolescence, especially the beginning of preadolescence, which coincides in students with the passage from

elementary to middle school and which, on the foundation of a fragile emotional and psychic balance, as well as a personality in formation, numerous adaptation behaviours are assimilated and long lasting behavioural patterns are formed, which will be transferred to future activities.

The adaptation of the school, of the educative strategies, in fact the adaptation of the entire instructive and educative process to the individual needs, capacity and learning particularities of the students may represent a preventive solution for the abovementioned difficulties.

2.Theoretical foundation and related literature

The requirement of placing the student in the centre of the educational process, of adapting all activities to his capabilities and interests, is an approach to education particular to the constructivist paradigm, which, by comparison with the traditional paradigm, presents a number of significant changes in design, strategy and action.

The idea of the education centred on the student – as a person with individual characteristics that need to be valued and capitalized in education – is highlighted by the postmodern educational paradigm and by the constructivist approach of knowledge and education.

A series of documents from the international educational policies promote and sustain dimensions belonging to the paradigm of the educational process centred on the student and to the real accommodation of the school to the possibilities and the necessities of the student: The Convention on the Rights of the Child, The Framework for Action from the World Education Forum in Dakar, The Millennium Development Goals, UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy for 2008 – 2013 (J. Delors, 2000, G. Văideanu, 1996).

The necessity of adapting the school to diverse educational needs, to the learning and development particularities of each student is also reflected by the concept ‘education for all’ launched at *The World Conference on Education for All* in Jomtiem (1990). Guaranteeing good quality elementary schooling for all the people, recognizing the diversity of the educational needs, the commitment to a pedagogy centred on the child, the right of all children to a complete cycle of primary schooling are part of the recommendations formulated in Jomtiem to grant the access of all to a basic education (T. Vărășmaș, 2001, p. 22).

The flexibility and individualization of the curricula, through the adaptation of the educational offer to the individual needs, is one of the priorities of the Romanian pre-university education reforms, representing an essential aspect of the curricular system reformation. A new type of curricular culture is generated and is characterized by: transforming the school centred on the teacher into a school centred on the student, using

interactive learning methods, a flexible curriculum and an inter- and cross-disciplinary approach of the curriculum. This new type of curricular culture is in accordance with the paradigm of adapting the school to the needs and possibilities of the students, ensuring that all the students have the opportunity to have their interests identified and their aptitudes and capacities are capitalized to their fullest.

The national documents of educational policies, which strive for a harmonization between internal priorities and the European ones, stipulate the following objectives and lines of action, converging with the paradigm of school readjustment to the student's needs:

- Ensuring equality of opportunity and the growth of participation to education, through stimulating the participation of all young people to compulsory studies, post-compulsory and academic studies (centring the teaching – learning process on the students; ensuring the equality of opportunity to the admission to pre-academic studies; eliminating any form of discrimination; specific programmes to prevent and fight school abandonment);
- Ensuring basic education for all citizens; forming key-competencies (ensuring continuation for the objectives and the content of the curricula for pre-school, elementary school and gymnasium; the usage of modern and interactive teaching methods; promoting modern study techniques and methods and also efficient learning styles as 'learning how to learn', 'learning how to do', 'continuous learning');
- Founding the educational process on the needs for personal and professional development of the students (analysing the field of interest and the educational needs of the students; developing flexible and individual learning and professional routes; offering school and professional counselling and orientation).

We underline the fact that the national educational policies sustain and promote the principle of school readjustment to the needs and to the capacities of the students, at the level of objectives and courses of action contained by the aforementioned documents, trying to create a qualitative education, especially through: the reassessment of the role of the student, the placement of the needs, interests and requirements of the student as the top priority of the educative activities, and the assurance of equality of opportunity during the entire educational route.

Adaptation, generally speaking, designates the fundamental characteristic of an organism to modify itself structurally and functionally according to the demands of the surrounding environment, according to the quantitative and qualitative changes of it. The organism is considered to be adapted if it has a normal functioning following exchanges between it and the environment. Adaptation has also been defined as being 'an array of

processes and activities through which the move from a less stable equilibrium between the organism and the environment is done, toward a more stable equilibrium' (P. Popescu-Neveanu, 1978, p. 24).

In specialized literature, most of the times adaptation has been analysed as a concept that is preponderantly biological, psychological or sociological. From a biological perspective, adaptation represents 'a process of modification of live organisms, the result of which is a correlation of the morphological structure and physiological functions of beings in relation to the surrounding environment' (DEX, 1975, p. 10). It consists of ongoing exchanges between the organism and the surrounding environment, with the purpose of maintaining the internal balance of the organism, but also maintaining the balance between the organism and the external environment. It is a change in the structure or functionality of the organism when it interacts with its surrounding environment, with the purpose of placing it in an optimal position in relation to the environment and of having a normal function.

Psychological adaptation is considered to be the modification of the individual's behaviour according to the demands, the requirements of the socio-cultural environment, but also the modification of environmental factors according to the aspirations and goals of the individual. It is about the achievement of the two dimensions of adaptation: accommodation and assimilation, which represent the processes of mental adaptation to the environment. The individual's adaptation, his psychological equilibrium depends on the manner in which the two processes are accomplished and interact with each other. Psychological adaptation implies not only the assimilation of knowledge, information, norms, values, the formation of aptitudes, skills, competencies, abilities, attitudes required by society, by the socio-cultural environmental circumstances, but also relinquishing rules of conduct, values or attitudes that are not desirable from a social perspective.

From a sociological perspective, human adaptation represents one of the stages in the social integration process, together with accommodation, participation and integration itself. Social integration represents the varied manners of interaction between an individual (or a group of individuals) that is looking to integrate and a certain social environment (the integrative environment) that have as a purpose the achievement of balance on the functional level (both in what concerns the individual, as well as the integrative environment), and through which the individual aims to occupy a certain status within this social environment and have it be recognized. Accommodation represents the first stage of social integration and is achieved through an informing of the individual about the characteristics and requirements of his new role or status that he will possess in the system he is about to be integrated into. In the second stage of the integration process, the

adaptation, the individual assimilates information, forms aptitudes and abilities necessary in order to meet demands and to comply with the requirements imposed by the new environment. The third stage is participation and implies the capacity of the individual to manifest and express his own initiatives when it comes to his assumed role and status, and integration itself is the last stage of the social integration process and is characterized by the fact that the individual that has been integrated has become a functional element of the integrative environment.

Relating the phenomenon of human adaptation to the particularities of the instructive-educational activity has generated the term school adaptation, which represents one of the facets of social adaptation and is considered to be both an autoplasic adaptation, as well as an alloplastic adaptation. School adaptation represents the consistency, the compatibility between requirements and exigencies imposed by the instructive-educational activity on the one hand and the personality of the student, his capacities and answers in relation to these demands (concretized by: knowledge, aptitudes, skills, abilities, attitudes, behaviours, etc.) on the other hand. The existence of a relation of compatibility between the two categories mentioned show that the student is adapted from an educational perspective, while the incompatibility, the disparity between them points to the establishment of the phenomenon of school maladaptation.

School adaptation may be defined, from a first point of view, as the process of transformation and adjustment of the student's behaviour in relation with the requirements and exigencies of the educational process, in order to better respond to these. Also, school adaptation includes the modification, the alignment and the adjustment of the educational process according to the potential and the individual psychological capacities of the students. The final aim of all the modifications and adjustments made on the two sides of the process is an equilibrium, an agreement between the requirements of the scholastic environment and the responsive behaviour of the student, but also between the needs and the capacities of the student and the adequacy of the process to these (A. Coaşan, A. Vasilescu, 1988).

From a second point of view, educational adaptation, aiming for the adaptation of the school, of the educational strategies, and of the entire instructive-educational process to the individual needs of the students, to their learning capacities and particularities, represents one of the paradigms of the postmodern view on education.

With the transition into middle school, the student is confronted with various modifications at the level of instructive-educational activities, represented by new requirements and demands, the contact with more diverse role-models and more differentiated lesson plans, that, in the context

of the bio-psychological transformations presented, can generate difficulties in school adaptation in some situations.

These changes refer to the following aspects:

- A new image of the teacher, which mainly refers to the alteration of the teacher-student relationship, in the way of the teachers' 'affective neutrality';
- Each subject being taught by a different teacher, each teacher having his/her own teaching/evaluation style;
- An increase in the number of subject matters and their difficulty level;
- A decrease in free time and an increase in the number of hours allocated to the individual study of the lessons;
- A shift in the grading system, from letter grades to numerical grades.

School adjustment difficulties that may occur at the beginning of the 5th grade may be caused by multiple, and sometimes sudden, changes that occur within the two levels: the bio-psycho-social development level and instructive-educational level. On the manner in which the interaction between the physical, intellectual, emotional and the personality of the preadolescent, on the one hand, and the requirements and exigencies imposed by the instructive-educational activity, as well as the quality of familial influences on school activity, on the other hand, hinges the student's ability to adapt.

3.Methodology

In a research conducted recently that was aimed at identifying and ameliorating difficulties in school adaptation in preadolescents of the 5th grade, we have evaluated the risk of complications in school adaptation through a E.R.D.S. (S.M.R.A.) questionnaire (School Maladaptation Risk Assessment), according to E. Albert-Lorincz, M.I. Carcea (1998, p.47-51), for assessing the factors that influence the educational adaptive behaviour.

The purpose of the research: assessment and identification of the risk of difficulties in school adaptation, as a premise for the realization of programmes for their amelioration;

The objectives of the research:

- The evaluation of factors that influence the educational adaptive behaviour of preadolescents;
- The identification of the risk for difficulties in school adaptation in the case of the evaluated students;
- The drafting of programmes for the amelioration of difficulties in school adaptation of preadolescents;

The hypothesis of the research: The assessment of the risk for difficulties in the school adaptation of preadolescents allows for the realization of programmes adequate to their amelioration and that are realized in accordance with the paradigm of student centrality in the instructive-educational process.

The description of the research instruments: in the purpose of evaluating the risk for difficulties in school adaptation, we have used a questionnaire comprised of 40 items, grouped in five categories of factors that influence the educational adaptive behaviour:

- *Self-perception:* consists of 10 items relating to the state of health of the student, the resilience to fatigue and the psychological particularities reflected in the educational activity;
- *The perception of pedagogical factors:* consists of 9 items aimed at the school subjects studied, the pedagogical methods used, the organization of school activities;
- *The perception of interpersonal relationships in school:* consists of 10 items that describe the relationships between teacher-student and student-student;
- *The perception of familial influences on school activity:* consists of 5 items aimed at the financial means and the attitude of the family in regards to the student's school activity;
- *The perception of influences outside of school:* consists of 5 items regarding the intensity of relationships with persons outside of school.

Following the processing of the data, we have conducted an overall assessment of the risk for school maladaptation for each student, the results being organized into the following three categories:

- *Negligible risk of maladaptation:* situation in which the student will adapt harmoniously to the educational context, situations and particular requirements, without an additional voluntary effort;
- *Slightly jeopardized educational adaptive behaviour:* situation in which the educational adaptive behaviour is slightly jeopardized in terms of performance, of the affective-motivational and attitudinal states. In this case, it is necessary to take certain measures according to the distribution of scores in the five categories presented above.
- *Major risk of maladaptation:* situation in which the identification of the relations between the five factors that influence the educational adaptive behaviour and the assessment by the school counsellor of each case is necessary.

Target group: the questionnaire was administered to a sample of 100 students of the 5th grade.

4.Results and discussion

After the administration of the questionnaire for the assessment of the risk for school maladaptation, we have recorded the following results (Table no.1):

Table no. 1: Risk of school maladaptation

	Frequency	Percentage
Negligible risk of maladaptation	35	35%
Slightly jeopardized educational adaptive behaviour	27	27%
Major risk of maladaptation	38	38%
Total	100	100,00%

It can thus be established that the number of students that exhibit a major risk of maladaptation is predominant (38%), followed by the number of students that do not exhibit a risk of maladaptation (35%), and by the students whose educational adaptive behaviour is slightly jeopardized (27%).

The results from evaluating the risk of school maladaptation for preadolescent students require the adoption of new preventive measures for the difficulties in school adaptation at this age. The adaptation of the school, of the educative strategies, in fact the adaptation of the entire instructive and educative process to the individual needs, capacity and learning particularities of the students may represent a preventive solution for the abovementioned difficulties.

From the perspective of 'education for all', a series of psychopedagogical principles were formulated. They may be considered premises for the adaptation of the educational environment to the capacities and the needs of the students and converge on the idea that an adapted and flexible curriculum, together with the change of the educational practices, are the base of qualitative education, in agreement with the contemporary educational paradigms (E. Vărășmaș, 2004, p. 29-71):

- The development of the child is dependent on the environment in which it takes place, even from the moment of conception;
- The development of the child is influenced by the relationships with the surrounding objects, people and himself;

- The virtual potential for learning and development that all children are born with will only be transformed into abilities and competencies solely through positive stimulation and orientation;

- All the children can learn; what each of them learn and how they accomplish this varies;

- Even if the learning stages are correlated with the development stages, there is a variety of individual development models, determined by the individual particularities, rhythm and style of learning, but also by the intensity and the adequacy of the environmental influences.

- Promoting various learning types will benefit the individual development.

Adapting the school, the educational strategies and the entire instructive-educational process to the individual needs of the students, to their learning abilities and particularities is one of the dimensions of the postmodern paradigm in education. E. Păun (2002) highlights the following characteristics of postmodernism in education, in a study dedicated to the analysis of theoretical developments in terms of the postmodern pedagogical paradigm:

- Learner-centred education, the student being seen as a person with individual, different characteristics that should be valued and used to the maximum (an idea situated at the centre of the existential-humanistic paradigm, subsumed under the postmodern perspective);

- The revalorization of the subjective-emotional dimension in relation to education, of the actions and behaviours of subjects that have a unique, situational, contextualized character;

- Considering the educational relationship as an interaction where the teacher and student are engaged in a process of cognitive and emotional investment, and in which the teacher works alongside the students with the purpose of their development and the building of their status as students;

- Creating a balance between promoting competition and cooperation in school;

- Promoting new types of education, inter-disciplinary ones;

- Relinquishing instruction based on transmission and on pre-established content, in the favour of a particular, subjective construction of knowledge.

The postmodern approach corresponds on the whole to the constructivist approach to education, especially through the role given to the student in the construction of the knowledge, through the modification of the teachers' role, and through the educational strategies with a pronounced formative character.

Synthesizing the references upon the constructivist learning, E. Joița (2006, p. 62, 65) describes the following dimensions of the idea of centring the learning on the student as main actor:

- The students search for information by themselves, processes it and then collaborate;
- The students realize a subjective cognition, addressing questions, establishing correlations, formulating hypotheses, solutions, and arguments;
- Moving the focus on understanding, critical analysis, personal interpretation and argumentation;
- Encouraging the cognitive and acting autonomy, initiatives and curiosity;
- The students move away from a passive attitude of receiving information, towards an actional and mental involvement;
- The student solves the problems through: learning through discovery, researching, constructing and decision making;
- The new knowledge is the result of the reconstruction of old information and of integrating the new data;
- The students organize and realize their own studying, forming abilities of ‘learning to learn, to know’;
- The teacher has the role of organizing information, tasks, assignments, material, of facilitating, guiding, coordinating, offering support, formulating and helping to formulate questions, supporting individual answers, debates, negotiations, and also realizing the final synthesis.

5. Conclusions

The paradigm of adapting school to the learning necessities and possibilities of the student, characteristic for future systems of education and for contemporary network type educational systems (V. Chiș, 2005), requires a diversity of learning situations and experiences, built in accordance with the possibilities and the needs of all student categories, in order to respond to the principles of: ‘inclusive education’, ‘education for all’ and ‘integrated education’.

All the changes particular to preadolescence (biophysical, intellectual, emotional, moral, social) must be well-known by teachers and parents alike, in order to be able to meet them, to understand preadolescence and be able to adopt the most adequate preventive measures when it comes to school adaption, especially with the advent of middle school. Knowing the age particularities, the specifics of this stage in the development of the students in terms of resources, motivations, adaptation mechanisms, psycho-physical transformations and their consequences, will let us avoid the overstressing of the already limited possibilities of this stage and will offer

us an improved understanding of the behavioural manifestations and reactions of preadolescents.

Knowing the age and individual particularities of the preadolescent students is an essential condition of ensuring the centrality of the student in the instructive process – one of the dimensions of the constructivist paradigm that thus rehabilitates the role of the student in education, considering knowledge as being specific to age, but also based on a personal manner in which the student integrates, explains and interprets reality, according to his own cognitive knowledge.

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