

The Step by Step educational alternative

C. G. Hanc (Semerian)

Claudia Gabriela Hanc (Semerian)

Primary school teacher

13 Primary School „Aron Cotruş”, Arad, Romania

Abstract: In this article I want to underline the Step by Step educational alternative. This educational alternative is a strong belief in the principles of democracy. Both the pre-school program and the primary school one encourage children to become active citizens and to appreciate the values inherent to a democratic way of life. The Step by Step program creates the basis of attitudes, knowledge and skills which children will need during the swift changes of future periods. The program is conceived in the spirit of respect for every country's specific necessities and cultural traditions, in the spirit of respecting Human Rights

Keywords: relationship, upgrade education systems, education, pedagogy, proces of education, personality, formal education, implementation, respecting.

Every one of us assisted in the XXIst century, more than ever to a scrutinizing of the educational system, determined both by the new society's changes and by the impregnation of the values brought from the concerning the educational system. This tendency concretized in Romania through the introduction of educational alternatives, most of them based on private initiatives.

Looked upon with reticence, these private initiatives have become nowadays appreciated by most of the people implicated in the educational act. If until recently, the Romanian society fought shy of mentioning the educational alternatives which already existed in west; today we notice a fondness for these systems – fact not at all neglectful for those interested in introducing a reform in education.

The *Step by Step program* is one of these alternatives being destined to children from birth to the age of 13 years old, as well as to their families. In Romania, the program began in 1994 under the name of Head Start, which, in 1995 took the name of Step by Step, at the initiative of the Soros Foundation for an Open Society, through the signing of a Convention with the Ministry of National Education. Starting with March 1998 the program is being continued by „The Step by Step Centre for Education and Professional Development” which offers new methods as a continuation of the next generations’ education vision for an active participation among open societies.

At the base of the Step by Step programs for children there is a strong belief in the principles of democracy. Both the pre-school program and the primary school one encourages children to become active citizens and to appreciate the values inherent to a democratic way of life.

The Step by Step program creates the basis of attitudes, knowledge and skills of which children will need during the swift changes of future periods. The program is conceived in the spirit of respect to every country’s specific necessities and cultural traditions, in the spirit of respecting the Human Rights and the Convention of Children’s Rights.

The *Step by Step educational alternative* respect the national curriculum, the national standards, is adapted to the local culture and, at the same time, it integrates international standards and the best practices in the educational field. The school programme (school curriculum) for primary school (1-4 grade) is the same as the one used in the traditional education. This means that the habits and the knowledge programmed to be assimilated during these 4 years are the same as those for the traditional education (habits of language and idioms, writing, reading, measurement habits, the 4 arithmetical operations, artistic drawing habits, painting, modeling, music, nature knowledge, physical development, moral-civic education) Optional habits, such as foreign languages are taught according to the school’s and parents’ possibilities. The difference is in the method of their formation which derives from the Step by Step principles.

The program promotes the education centered on the child, teaching oriented to the needs and interests of the child, teaching oriented in activity centers, the implication of the family and community in childrens’ education, the respect and appreciation of

human diversity, the support of the inclusion of disadvantaged groups. The Step by Step educational alternative has the mission to develop in every child the capacity of being creative, of forming a critical thinking, of making options and taking initiative, of defining and solving a problem, of easily communicating with people, understand them and negotiate.

A day in this alternative starts with the morning message which begins with the presentation of the day's agenda. It represents the planning of today's activities. Questions are being asked, precision are being made until it is certain that the activities plan was accepted and acquired. Another moment is today's calendar. Definition of the day, the date, of the social and personal events connected with the day, including the weather, the comments and questions. Next is the day's message – a message made by the teacher in order to introduce the new knowledge or habits to be learnt and worked upon on Activity Centers. The message gives an opportunity to introduce – desirable interactive- of the new notions and reminding the previous ones needed to the introduction of the new ones, through the steering of the children's questions and abilities. Another important moment is the one of the novelties. The children sign up to communicate to the others the novelties or special personal experiences. (From what happened to the child yesterday, to what he dreamed about, or what he read, what emotional or knowledge experiences he had, anything is possible). The novelties are communicated to the others from „the author's chair”, where the child will valorize, but will also have the responsibility of communication, because the colleagues questions and comments will follow.

When these things were valorized they pass on to working on activity centres. On every center's table are written the specific thematic activities. After choosing the activity centers, preferentially, but also by fulfilling a few rules easy to understand and respect, the children read the activities to follow. Every center has prepared on the table the tasks, specific for writing, reading, sciences, arts, constructions or mathematics. Conceived by the teacher to practice the abilities to be gained or their combining with others already assimilated, the tasks are progressive, so they allow anyone to resolve his tasks in his rhythm and level. When the teachers are convinced that the tasks were understood by all the children, they become collaborators to the learning process of every one. After a period of time, needed to the majority of them to

fulfill part of the tasks (to practice the specific abilities) an assessment is made. Each group – and each child- presents in front of the others the solving of the tasks at the respective center. This is the moment of the assessment - to which take part in the colleagues, with questions, suggestions, etc. but the teacher as well. The works made are displayed in the classroom; for a few days they represent an opportunity to compare and mirror the mental steps, the habits and dexterity gained at that moment, and afterward they go into every child's work folder, which is kept in the classroom and is at hand both for the child and parents.

At a certain moment, after a few rotations and evaluations, the children have their lunch, after which the work in activity centers in continued. Thematic activities are connected with the environment and as much as possible, integrated.

The *Step by Step classroom* has two teachers who lead the children in making the choices, taking personal responsibility of those choices. The children in these democratic classes are encouraged in forming and expressing their own opinions. Questions are asked. Discussions are sustained. The Step by Step program for primary school puts into value mutual respect and responsibility towards those surrounding us, honesty, civism and seriousness. Adults form consciously these character features through their day by day relations with the children. These features are the base of character development in the Step by Step program for primary school.

In a Step by Step classroom you will not find rigid benches, but mobile tables with chairs around them. The classrooms have carpets so that some of the activities can be made with the children sitting on the floor (which they really enjoy). The tables are separated by shelves with didactic materials specific to an activity (mathematics, sciences, reading, constructions, writing) thus making the activity centers.

The group learning activity is defined as a method in which the tasks are executed by small groups of pupils, groups which are self-constituted and self-controlled. It is successfully used in the Step program, without neglecting individual work, but seeing it as a component of team work. If in the traditional method, the pupils are selected according to their intellectual capacities, here there are groups where all the children can work together, so that each group member not only improves his situation but also contributes to the increase of his group's performance. The activity centers are adequately used to sustain

the interest for solving specific activities (writing, reading, scientific understanding, expressing through artistic means, etc) and for attaining or consolidation of specific abilities.

It is proven more than once that the Step alternative facilitates learning, and the activity is child centered. Whatever center he is at, he is given the opportunity to correct his own mistakes after being made attentive. None of the teachers hurries to make the pupil's work sheets all in red, instead they are guiding them towards redress. Thus he has the chance to add at his folder correct or almost correct papers which bring him satisfactions and success, because through the endeavor of correcting himself, he learns, all in his favour. Thus it is realized a satisfaction on three plans: the pupil, the teacher and last but not least, the parent, are enjoying the same result.

Without considering the level of performance every pupil should reach, after one or several years of study in the Step alternative, it can be affirmed, without exaggeration, that the child knows to ask pertinent questions, to form precise and correct answers, that he can easily dialogize which proves that the school gave him and asked from him more than just information. He graduates primary school having an aperture formes towards a good communication which leads him rapidly to prgress, and this is what this system is all about.

In a Step by Step classroom one can see on the walls different materials which personalize the children (pictures or signs specific to every one, birth dates, etc) and which plan – according to the child's choice, the children's activities on the current day or week, as well as their responsibilities. You can see posted the classroom rules, which are set and discussed so they are understood by everyone. You can also see the personalized calendar of the passed and future days, with events of interest (such as the weather, anniversaries, celebrations, rejoicings, terms) recorded next to each day. You can also see thematic visual materials, but also the children's works from the last days – the solving of their thematic tasks. In the middle of the classroom, a space as wide as possible id dominated by a chair with the inscription « The author's chair » ; this is the place from where each child shows his solvings, experiences, own ideas, in front of his colleagues, and gives to each one, at this moment, the due attention and respect. Because of the centers based activity, the collaboration and the need of communication, in the Step by Step classroom there is not and it is not required a perfect silence. There always is a slight humming, a continuous activity sound.

Individual appreciation of the development and progresses made by each child is an important element for the elaboration and implementation of some programs according to the degree of the children's development. If they really want to know what their pupils are capable of, the teachers have to observe how they fulfill their tasks in common situations, where they have many opportunities to prove their knowledge and skills, instead of counting only on written tests. The perspectives upon the evaluation need to be correlated with the child's development degree, in order to give a large image of his capacities and accomplishments ; tests results are not eloquent in this sense.

The evaluation is a way of gathering information, afterward used to appreciate the pupil's progress and to elaborate the learning curriculum..

According to the Step by Step Program for primary school model, the evaluation needs to be based on the following premises:

- The evaluation has to stimulate the accumulation of knowledge, the understanding and the child's confidence;
- It has to focus on important objectives and to implicate multiple sources of information;
- The evaluation must support and inform about the teaching practices in accordance with the child's development degree;
- The parents and the pupils are base partners in the evaluation process.

The main purpose of the evaluation is to keep track of the child's progress and to identify exactly at what level of development each child is, so that the curriculum could meet the children's needs, individually seen and to assure everybody's experiences success. The identification of the children with special needs and who might need extra support or interventions represents another of the evaluation's objective.

The correct evaluation must assure an active interdependence between what is taught and what is learned during the training process.

The evaluation in Step by Step is permanent and it takes place in different ways:

1. The Activity Center

It is known that the pupils work in activity centers where they have to solve tasks specific to the respective center. The teacher, together with the group, discusses the way they solved the task, the different ways they worked and the correctness of the solutions.

2. The Author's Chair

In the Step by Step classrooms an evaluation instrument is „The Author's Chair”

From the author's chair the child presents to his colleagues his homework or the task of his activity center group.

The presentation is followed by analysis and the teacher's and colleague's comments. This exercise forms the children in the direction of understanding his colleagues' judgements and to assess the result of his colleagues' work which he will compare with his own work.

3. Papers display

The pupils papers are displayed in the classroom, all the children can examine how they worked and to comment on the papers, to evaluate together their work and to present it to the persons who enter the classroom, too.

4. The portfolio/ folder

Each pupil has a portfolio in which the papers are gathered. Every paper has inscribed the date.

Everything in the portfolio represents the pupil's work in his development and represents a document. Thus these can be shown to the parents, who have the possibility to follow the evolution of their children, as well as to other authorized persons.

5. The written correspondence for parents

A way of informing is the above mentioned.

The teacher transmits to the parents' synthesis which comprise what she decided to teach, what the child learned, what are the directions in which the child has success and easiness in solving and in which aspects he still needs help where the parents should contribute. These notes may be transmitted weekly or monthly

It is advised that the rhythm of transmitting these evaluation notes should be settled by the teacher and the parents at the beginning of the school year.

6. The evaluation notebook.

It is the evaluation instrument that replaces the traditional classbook.

The final notebooks, the evaluation notebooks in which is made a summary of the competences which are grouped on curricular areas and disciplines replace the classbook, and the parent will understand well which his child's real situation is. Without making rankings and categorizings, the Step alternative does not kill the pupil's will to know as much as possible; these realize on their own through team work, especially, that each of them is responsible to solve a task and if he does not finishes his work thoroughly, will not be punished for his insuccess, but will be helped to understand better in order to progress in the shortest period possible. Through the activities accomplished in the classroom and through their analysis, they will develop capacities of good critics, without being bias. Through the way in which it is acted, they will know they are appreciated for what they succeeded to do to a certain point. There isn't a pupil who, through his work, will not give a quality product.

In conclusion, the *Step by Step* model for primary school promotes a vision above evaluation which incorporates various techniques and allows the teachers to present the children's progress, in a significant manner, both to the parents and to other interested persons.

Bibliography

- Ezechil, Liliana; Radu, Ion T. - Pedagogy. Theoretical Bases. - IInd Edition, Editura V&I Integral, București, 2002;
- Herlo, Dorin, „Metodologia educațională”, Editura Universității „Aurel Vlaicu”, Arad, 2000;
- Ilica, Anton, „O istorie a gândirii pedagogice”, Editura Universității „Aurel Vlaicu”, Arad, 2009;
- Ilica, Anton, „O pedagogie modernă”, Editura Universității „Aurel Vlaicu”, Arad, 2008;
- Kate Burke Walsh – Teaching Oriented After The Child's Needs, Iași, Cermi, 1999.