

THEMATIC DESIGN IN THE STEP BY STEP EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVE

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Abstract: *The study presents the specifics of didactic design in the Step by Step alternative, focusing on the idea that this procedure allows the students to develop from a relational point of view, leading to the development of their communication skills and ensuring an educational success. The study focuses on the design and realization of interdisciplinary activities in the Step by Step alternative, with emphasis on the development of communicational/relational/ collaboration skills in 4th graders.*

Keywords: *Step by Step educational alternative; autonomy; communication skills; interdisciplinary activities design;*

Introduction

The projection of activities in the Step by Step educational alternative is based on the development theories. The development of the design is based on the premise that the particular features of the children, the conflicts they have experienced, are starting points in constructing the instructive and educational approach. The projected activities should support the child's developmental needs so that the student in such a class can set up a behavior based on entrepreneurship, initiative and leadership, confidence in their capacities, autonomy. The student is able to collaborate with others, children or adults, and cooperates in accomplishing tasks, is willing to cultivate friends, respects colleagues and collaborators.

Designing activities in the classes that operates in the Step by Step educational alternative has the mission to develop in each participant in the educational act the ability to be inventive / creative, to use their own resources, to promote critical thinking. The student becomes able to choose, has initiative in what he does. The activities are designed in such a way as to stimulate the courage to discover and self-discover and to promote friendship, helpfulness. There is a lower focus on competition between educational partners. This is because, at this age, the child is not yet mature enough to understand the competition between him and the others.

The design of activities, viewed from the perspective of the school curricula for preparatory classes and grades I to IV, has the same competencies and objectives as in traditional education.

What is different is that the methods and tools used to explore and deepen the child's knowledge are individualized according to his specificity. The tools that this alternative uses in designing activities, in the spirit of individualizing the teaching/learning process, are diverse. We can mention: the individualized tasks, according to the specifics of each child; activities carried out on centers, when students can choose by themselves on which centers they want to participate; the materials used are always made available to students to be handled, consulted; the evaluation of each student, based on his own creations and the full display of all papers.

Methodology

In this study we started from the following objective: the recognition of the influence of the interdisciplinary activities design in the requirements of the Step by Step alternative on the pupils' results of the fourth grade, with emphasis on the development of communicational/ relational skills, as well as on the development of cognitive, affective and social skills of children.

The investigation was conducted on a number of 32 students. They attend IV grade classes and are aged between 9-10 years.

The hypothesis from which it started was: if the didactic activities are designed in the formula specific to the Step by Step alternative, then the necessary framework is created for the development of the communicational/relational/collaboration abilities in the students aged between 9 and 10 years and good results at learning are obtained.

To accomplish the thematic design for a course day, it is necessary to go through some stages:

STAGE I

a) *Establishing the theme* of the study, which can be done by the pupils, in the case of the thematic study, by analyzing collectively their proposals on what they are interested in. Students will discuss the themes they propose, bringing pros and cons. Then the vote will set the theme for the thematic study.

b) *Development directions*: consist of free discussions with children, making a chart of the program, networking, then conducting discussions with people who can be involved in successfully completing the activity.

c) *Setting the timeframe* during which the thematic study will be conducted. Under the alternative, this is determined by the complexity of the chosen themes or the content of the curriculum, or their diversity.

d) *Planning and designing* the actual activity consists in the activity of assessing the existing materials and the creation of a list with the necessary materials, with the students being involved. Some of these can be brought or can be made by students. It is necessary to note the human resources that can help us to conduct the study properly. Among the human

resources we can mention: parents, members of the students' families, specialists, etc.

STAGE II

a) Establishing roles and responsibilities

b) Conduct: explorations, data recordings, word lists and alphabetical ordering, classifications, sorting, chronological ordering, description of objects, dramatization, creation of clothes for them (Roman sandals), but also for mini dummies from the center, the realization of some models with architectural elements specific to the studied historical age.

STAGE III

a) Adding details

b) Assigning product finality: students presenting the created posters; building from Lego pieces ancient amphitheater cubes, temples, using the specific architectural elements; realizing, from plastilin, mini-sculptures; making Roman sandals, which they will take home; performing an exhibition of clothing made by them.

c) Evaluating the thematic study

In order to be able to specifically observe the role of the thematic design, using interdisciplinary pedagogical activities, the method of pedagogical experiment was used, applying the content approach from the perspective of designing a day in the Step by Step specific.

The following contents of the curriculum for the 4th grade were approached at the educational disciplines:

- *Romanian Language and Literature - "Extracting information from a scientific text"*
- *History - "People of yesterday and today - the Roman Empire"*
- *Visual arts and practical skills - "Techniques for using processed materials"*

The content sample was from the school curriculum in the History discipline. The premise theme, as a representative sample, was evaluated: "*People of yesterday and today: the Dacians.*"

The initial test we applied to the entire sample of students does not represent a strict assessment of pupils' knowledge but aims at a brief recapitulation of the knowledge of the fourth grade pupils in the respective samples. After the initial tests, the children in the class where the experimental activity took place were presented with the message of the day and the themes they will learn at the centers.

The actual activity was done according to the specificity of the alternative. After *the morning meeting*, the message was read and the centerwork topics were announced, followed by the mini-lesson. At the

mini-lesson the students were shown on the physical and historical map the geographical location of the Roman Empire, where the city-state of Rome appeared. They were told about the myths surrounding the founding of ancient Rome, connected with the great legends of the world, represented by the Iliad, the Odyssey and Eneida, and the link between Greek and Trojan civilization. Students were informed of social categories that were similar to those in the Greek world. The expansionist policy, the organization and functioning of the army enables Rome to conquer the Mediterranean basin, and Latin becomes a European language. The way of life, the occupations and the customs of this fabulous people stirred the imagination of the students.

Next there was a rotation at the centers of interest: (*Reading, Writing, Social Studies, Arts and Construction*). The rotation of the centers gave students the opportunity to deepen the information received at the mini-lesson. Students worked on each center for about 15-20 minutes. The evaluation was usually conducted on the *Author's Chair* for each student, in the case of individual papers.

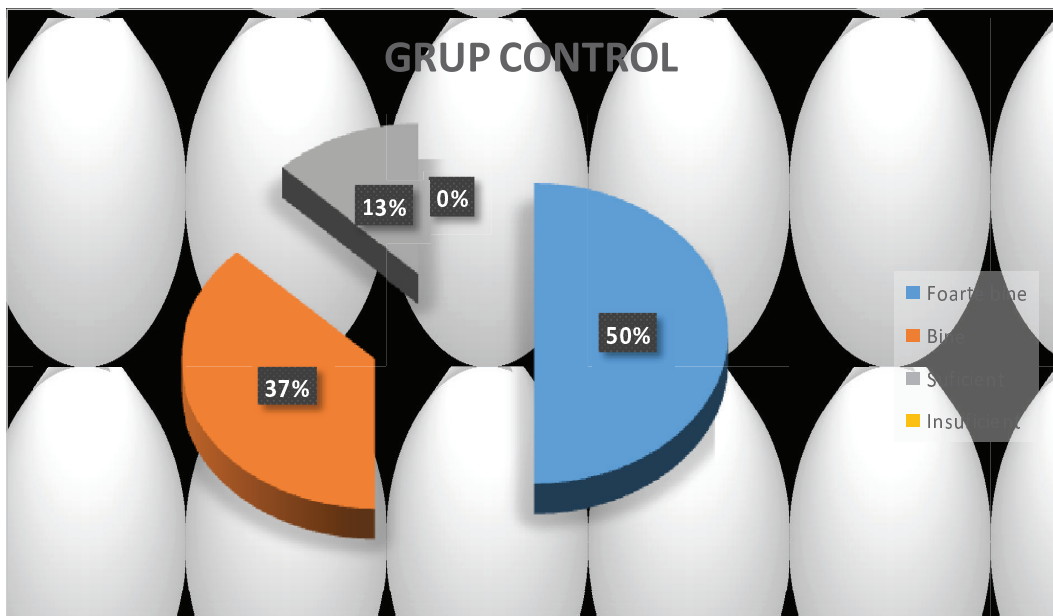
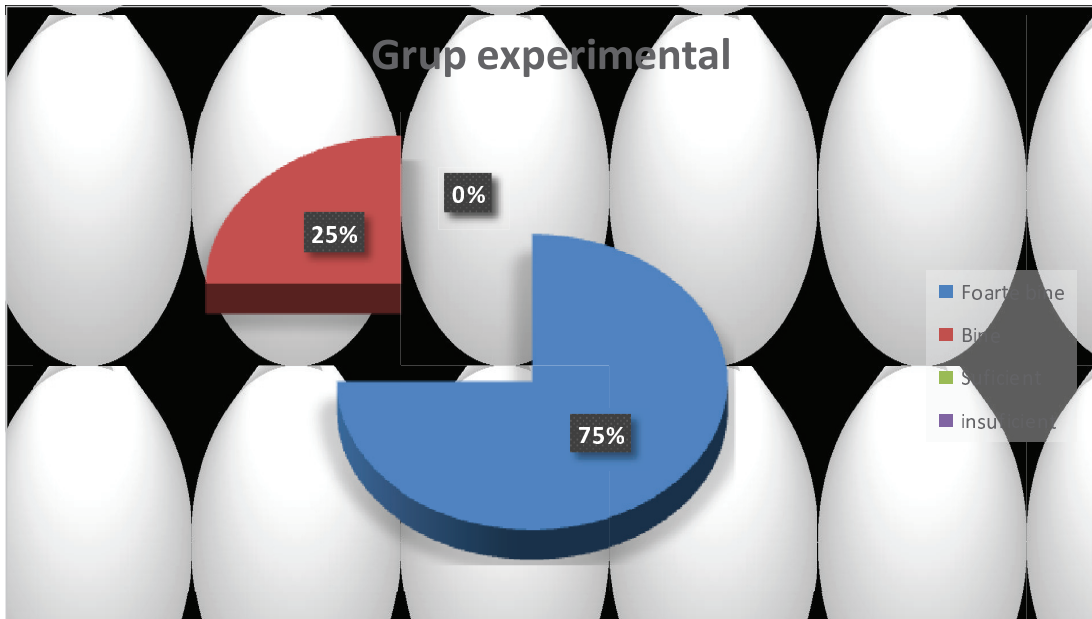
In the case of joint tasks where students had to make posters with conceptual maps, they presented the posters in front of the class and each student spoke about his contribution to solving the task he had received. These were displayed on the special panel in the classroom. Works from the Arts and Construction Centers were presented and then exhibited. The children proudly exhibited the way they fashioned their clothing, ornaments, how they shared their tasks, what indications they had in making the amphitheatres and temples.

The reflection stage took place the next day. During this stage, discussions took place, impressions were shared, opinions were expressed, and children concluded that they enjoyed this form of activity more because they did not get bored. A poster was created with the impressions and conclusions of the children about the form of the course day. The moments that were representative of them, those that attracted and impressed them were noted.

Interpretation of results

By comparing the results obtained by the two groups of students, we can conclude that the experimental group obtained better results at the final test, which confirms the hypothesis that by involving the students through the thematic study method the pupils' results considerably improve. After the applied questionnaires, we found that all the students in the experimental group participated with interest in the activities carried out, and at the end of the course they all felt happy. Not the same thing happened in the control group, where some of the students felt indifferent and two felt unhappy. This

proves that it is necessary for the pupil, with his aspirations, to remain at the center of the teaching.



It has been found that, as a result of the activities carried out, the pupils gained self-confidence, they were accustomed to debating what was unclear, had the opportunity to communicate and understood that there was a dialogue between them and the teachers/experts. It has also been noted that after the activity, the relationships between the children has improved, and they continue to discuss what has happened and what they have done, even during the pause. Even less communicative, less sociable students have participated in these discussions. Through debates initiated by the teacher they develop respect for each other's opinions, a sense of responsibility, involvement, and it is noticed that social integration issues are improving.

By debating the theme, through the discussions that students carry between themselves and the teacher in networking, placing children in unprecedented situations or in a position to decide for themselves what they want to learn, they are all encouraged to engage in dialogues, to express their opinion, but also to support it, to formulate arguments. They are also in a position to interact with adults, use formulas, address questions directly, spontaneously, from their desire to know more. Their curiosity, properly exploited by the teacher, becomes an absolute motivator. I think this is the most relevant way to develop the real communication skills, stemming from a directed spontaneity, not those imposed by the rigidity of the traditional system.

The thematic study gives students another perspective on teaching-learning, more attractive and, at the same time, more motivating. The implementation of the thematic study method improves the nature of the student-to-student relationship and the result is classroom cohesion.

Conclusions

From a cognitive perspective, the unitary vision in which the contents of the program are taught and learned, can be observed. Students are in a position to search for information from multiple sources to follow the subject. They operate involuntarily and in the form of play of responsibility, thinking operations as analysis and synthesis, heuristic thinking, etc., these being determined by the composition of the thematic map and the ways of realizing it.

From the emotional / affective perspective, we can assert that students have confidence in their strengths, their abilities, self-esteem, sense of dignity and self-appreciation. Through their relationship to the other students, they develop the sense of belonging to the group, and through their activities they are enjoying themselves with their colleagues.

From a social point of view, the children are in a position to collaborate and communicate with each other, but also with adults, parents or experts, some of whom are unknown to them. Children are "forced" to ask

questions, to participate in discussions, to engage in constructive dialogues, and to answer questions when needed. Only in this way they socialize, develop the spirit of cooperation and belonging to the group. By working with adults, pupils develop their sense of belonging to the group.

Through the thematic study, the Step by Step educational alternative contributes significantly to the development of children's harmonious education.

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