

**THE ROLE OF THE STEP-BY-STEP EDUCATIONAL MODEL
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION AND
LEARNING BEHAVIORS THROUGH POSITIVE
INTERACTION AT AN EARLY AGE**

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Abstract: *The “Step-by-Step” program promotes the desire for permanent knowledge and learning as essential for today’s child. This program gives children the opportunity to be open in the future to the new things they will come into contact with, to other creative and modern activities. The study presents the experimental research that we carried out starting from the idea that if the educational alternative “Step by Step” is used, then the children get more involved in learning than in the individual or frontal approaches specific to traditional education. The children involved will show their desire and interest to share with others what they experience, and this leads to a permanent motivation for knowledge and learning. This implies a development of the language, and an increased efficiency of the act of learning, and this type of learning will open to other creative and modern activities.*

Keywords: *educational alternative Step-by-Step; language development in preschool children; literacy centre; preschool education; innovative approaches; experimental research.*

Introduction

Modern education through the use of alternative educational methods is based on the psychological acquisition of the child's development and aims to cultivate all his potential qualities. Contemporary research on child development supports the fact that different people develop at different rates and that there are individualized critical periods of development.

Within the “Step-by-Step” educational alternative, the child learns through discovery in his interaction with the environment, the educational process is centred on the child, the education is individualized, the teaching is oriented according to the child’s needs, the children have the opportunity to choose the task and the centred they want to carry out their activity, children learn in activity centres, there is a close relationship of communication and collaboration in the

team of educators (educators, assistant educators) and parents, parents are part of the children's education process and effectively participate in the classroom. "This pedagogical approach enables the student to express his critical and creative thinking with enthusiasm and sincerity. In this context, students will demonstrate behaviours based on control and self-control, on self-control and autonomy, so that the rules of the class will not have to be imposed from the outside, but will be established and negotiated within the group." (Catalano, 2018)

Through the content of this paper, a critical attitude is developed regarding the "Step-by-Step" educational alternative, trying to show that the "Step-by-Step" alternative is not a better or less good way than other learning methods, be they traditional or alternative. The alternative method "Step by Step" concentrates on a context of educational experiences that allow the development of the child as a unique personality and that cultivates respect for the values of humanity, fundamental human rights, and the diversity of cultural traditions.

In the spirit of social openness and modern reform, we believe that "Step-by-Step" is an alternative in education that enjoys success and deserves to be approached and applied with great confidence. The "Step-by-Step" alternative is a modern, complex, complete, accessible and viable method regarding the free, harmonious development of the preschool child's personality.

1. Theoretical Approaches of the Step-by-Step Alternative

Throughout their lives, regardless of where they live, today's children will face socio-political, ecological, scientific, technological, industrial, etc. changes. Thus, taking into account the rapid changes in today's world that can only be faced through a full human commitment, cognitive, affective, and motor, educating the child's desire to learn permanently has become imperative.

The current education reform provides for individualized education, allowing each child to develop and develop according to his characteristics. Following this desire, the "Step-by-Step" program was introduced in our country, which provides a foundation for meeting everyday challenges. This program is intended for children in which they can be enrolled from birth to the age of 13. The families of these children are co-participants in the program.

Educational organizational climate is a broad concept that encompasses various aspects of the school environment, including social, psychological, affective, intellectual, cultural, and moral dimensions. Organizational climate can have a significant impact on teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, and ultimately affect the quality of education provided to students.

(Redeş et al, 2023).

In Romania, the program started in 1994 under the name Head Start, and in 1995 it took the name “Step-by-Step” taken from the USA and introduced into the Romanian language (“step by step”).

The initiative to introduce this educational alternative belongs to the Soros Foundation for an Open Society and has the approval of the Ministry of National Education. Starting from March 1998, the Mare program.

“Step-by-Step represents an alternative education for children, from birth to adolescence that promotes discovery, thus creating a friendly and accessible environment for students, encouraging curiosity, exploration and discovery.” (Lica et al, 2020, page 13).

“The basis of Step-by-Step programs for children is a firm belief in the principles of democracy. Both the preschool and primary programs encourage children to become active citizens and to appreciate the values inherent in a democratic way of life.” (Burke-Walsh, 1999, p. 13).

The educational alternative “Step-by-Step” offers strategies that satisfy the interests and different cognitive styles of children, proposes active methods that facilitate the formation of the child’s personality, promotes a quality educational experience for both children and their families and creates a child-centred program. Within this didactic program, it can facilitate learning based on children’s interests, and the program can include all children.

The instructive-educational activity within the “Step-by-Step” program has as its configuration the group activity and the optional activities in activity centres carried out throughout the day. The success of individualization has its starting point in the sectorized activity by centres. There are ten activity centres: art, building materials, cooking, role play, literacy, math/manipulative games, music, outdoor games, sand and water, and science. Activity centres educate the child's self-confidence, discipline, courage, moral qualities, positive traits, imagination and creativity, encourage verbal and non-verbal communication, and develop personality.

In order to optimize the didactic activity, the teacher from the educational alternative Step-by-Step will take into account the granting of a greater degree of autonomy to the students, the organization of information according to the student's requirements, the stimulation of learning motivation, the creation of a favourable climate for the manifestation of positive attitudes by the students (Albulescu et al, 2016).

This educational alternative can be considered viable for the future of education because it educates the child on the complexity of his personality. The educational alternative also offers an enviable

environmental setting, preferable to rooms with modest furniture and materials that involve the involvement of a large number of people permanently around the child and acting in his favour. The “Step-by-Step” educational program is a useful, accessible form in preschool education, which provides quality education and for quality, encouraging the development of the child’s personality, giving him a sense of security, self-esteem, confidence in his abilities, motivation and curiosity.

The 21st century is characterized by deep and rapid changes in society. The various social, political, environmental, scientific, technological and industrial changes have a special impact on man. Education must come to the aid of man by orienting the school towards a new way of learning that ensures the individual the possibility to respond to unforeseen events. This means innovative learning with the attributes: of participation and anticipation. Participation means awareness of the rights and responsibilities of each individual, as well as cultivating the capacity for communication, cooperation and empathy. Anticipation refers to the individual’s ability to respond adequately to events that society will generate. Also, “in the Step-by-Step alternative, special importance is attached to a stimulating learning environment, based on mutual respect, democratic principles and the active participation of students and families in the life of the classroom”. (Muste & Albulescu, 2020, page 35).

One of the main orientations manifested, today, in modern didactics, focuses on distancing itself from school methods based on memorization and repetition and promoting methods that centre on the active participation and direct or indirect interest of the student in his own training. The characteristics of these methods, which ensure a high level of student co-participation, represent key elements that must be taken into account in the construction of any training and education situation. (Roman, 2014)

This perspective orientation is a natural consequence of the accelerated pace of evolution and transformation of history. This implies the revision of some objectives and the establishment of new hierarchies within them, the education of the ability to continuously adapt to change comes to the fore. For this new type of education, the methods and techniques must be applied in the future. The change in educational technology implies a shift in emphasis to heuristic teaching-learning methods and the technical means necessary for a more accentuated individualization of education. It is then aimed at changing the content of education by selecting and processing knowledge according to the principle of interdisciplinarity. The main objective of this new type of education is, according to A. Toffler, “increasing the adaptability of the individual” so that he can adapt

quickly and easily to a permanent novelty.

2. The role of the Step-by-Step educational model in the development of communication behaviours and learning through positive interaction

The objectives of the experiment:

- language development at the preschool education level within the literacy centre from the educational alternative “Step-by-Step” by applying the means specific to language education activities;
- the application of the two educational alternatives in parallel, namely the “Step-by-Step” educational alternative and the traditional education;

Research hypothesis

The participation of preschool children, level 4-5 years, in the Step-by-Step program within the Literacy Centre, improves age-specific communication behaviours.

Research Methodology

The methods used in the research:

- the psycho-pedagogical experiment;
The psycho-pedagogical experiment is the main method aimed at testing the formulated research hypothesis, to study the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variables.
- observation method;
The observation method aims at the intentional and systematic tracking of an individual or phenomenon, in its natural state, in familiar conditions of existence and manifestation (Bocoş, 2003). An observation sheet will be used.
- the method of analysing the products of the activity;
The method of analysing portfolios/activity products is a method that presents the actions and results of the subjects, in correlation with the actions carried out by them. The research method of school and curriculum documents.

The analysis of the children’s products – was carried out in parallel with the two groups, namely the “Step-by-Step” group (Medium B) and the traditional education group (Medium A), the control group.

Research sampling:

- We started the experiment with the sampling operation establishing two samples: the experimental sample (experimental group) and the control sample (control or control

group). The first group is from Kindergarten with Extended Program No. 14 from Arad where I carry out my activity, namely the middle group “B”, the teaching group in the educational alternative “Step-by-Step” and the parallel group also from the same kindergarten, middle group “A”, control group, group with teaching in education traditional.

- The experimental group, the middle group “B” of teaching “Step-by-Step” has a population of 25 subjects aged between 4 and 5 years. We applied the “Step-by-Step” educational alternative to this group and deliberately intervened in the educational action. The activity was carried out respecting the characteristics of the step alternative.
- The control group, the middle group “A” of traditional teaching has a total of 25 subjects aged between 4 and 5 years. In this group, the language and communication activity was carried out based on the document Curriculum for Early Education (2019).
- We staggered the experiment over a period of 9 months (36 weeks). We planned two joint language and communication activities per week on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and on the other days, we opened the Literacy Centre daily where the children carried out intellectual activities specific to language development.

Stages of the experiment:

The psycho-pedagogical experiment was based on the application of the means of carrying out the language education activity both to the Step group and to the traditional group and was carried out in 3 stages:

- The pre-test stage is necessary to establish the initial level of language development
- The formative stage is characterized by carrying out the teaching/learning process using specific means of carrying out language education activities, to develop children’s language. This will be done differently, taking into account the specific characteristics of each educational alternative; educational alternative.
- The post-test stage is necessary to establish the degree of development registered following the factors of educational progress.

The didactic experiment:

Within the experiment, two groups were selected: the experimental group (Medium B) with teaching in the educational alternative “Step-by-Step” and the control group (Medium A) with

teaching in traditional education.

The initial test covered several aspects:

- the ability to transfer knowledge and skills
- skills within the curricular field
- the ability to apply knowledge and skills
- level of vocabulary development
- correctness of expression from a grammatical and logical point of view
- increasing the level of language development

Some evidence has been established that underlies this experiment. Based on these samples, the specific means of carrying out the language education activity were applied in both classes, through methods specific to each type of education to achieve an increase in the level of language development.

The evaluation samples that were the basis of this experiment were:

1. Retelling/reciting an incident/poem
2. The formulation of grammatically and logically correct sentences
3. Creating a story/scene from an imaginary story
4. Developing phonemic hearing, finding rhyming words
5. Retelling a scene from a well-known story, the ability to differentiate similarities and differences between characters
6. Integration of notions in a text

The testing was carried out based on a series of evaluation tests that were completed:

1. Telling/retelling a story/fragment: “The Purse with Two Coins”, “The Goat and Her Three Kids”, and “The Bear Tricked by the Fox” by Ion Creangă. (The children told/retold stories/fragments from their favourite works and stood out by using special expressions).
2. Recitation of well-known poems: “Rag” by Tudor Arghezi, “Gândăcelul” – “Dooblebug” by Otilia Cazimir, “The Lamé Little Dog” by Elena Farago. (The children recited the well-known poems and recognized the event illustrated in the image by associating it with a poem/story; the poems were recited with expressiveness and coherence).
3. Determining the volume of the vocabulary (The children named the notions represented in the images and integrated them into a context; they also made sentences with at least three notions and found an adjective for each noun).
4. Checking the ability to generalize and the degree of acquisition of notions from various fields (The children

- named the notions represented on the chips and identified the rhyming words, then the words were separated into syllables).
5. Determination of creative imagination (Children created a story/scene from a story with a given beginning, gave the story/scene a title, then drew a scene from the story).
 6. Combining the educational alternative with other interactive learning methods (The “Double Bubble” interactive method was applied; the bubbles were filled with tokens representing the similarities-differences-common aspects of the story “The Old Woman’s Daughter and the Old Man’s Daughter”)
 7. Vocabulary enrichment as a result of the activities carried out (Children have made progress in terms of language development in the “Literacy” centre from the educational alternative “Step-by-Step”).
 8. Making up some grammatical structures according to modern principles (Stack’s method). (The children made sentences according to Stack’s principle; the speed and correctness of the sentences made were noted).

Table 1. Analysis and qualitative and quantitative interpretation of the results:

ITEMS	NO. TOTAL OF CHILDREN		SUFFICIENT		GOOD		VERY GOOD	
	GR. A	GR. B	INITIAL GR. A	FINAL GR. B	INITIAL GR. A	FINAL GR. B	INITIAL GR. A	FINAL GR. B
1	25	25	28%	16%	44%	36%	28%	48%
2	25	25	20%	16%	48%	28%	32%	56%
3	25	25	24%	12%	40%	28%	36%	60%
4	25	25	36%	8%	48%	48%	16%	44%
5	25	25	32%	12%	32%	36%	36%	52%
6	25	25	40%	8%	28%	40%	32%	52%

This last activity also constituted the end of the didactic experiment, following that its results will be quantified, the opportune assessments coming from the establishment of some comparative relationships. The final activity was structured in several stages, each of which has the purpose of ascertaining and recording the progress made in this

interval. As can be seen in the tables, the efficiency of using both alternatives is reflected in the children’s results. Thus, the frequency of the qualification *very good* increased, while the frequency of the qualification *sufficient* decreased significantly regardless of the alternative used. Both groups made progress in developing communication behaviours

Table 2. Graphical analysis of the control group.

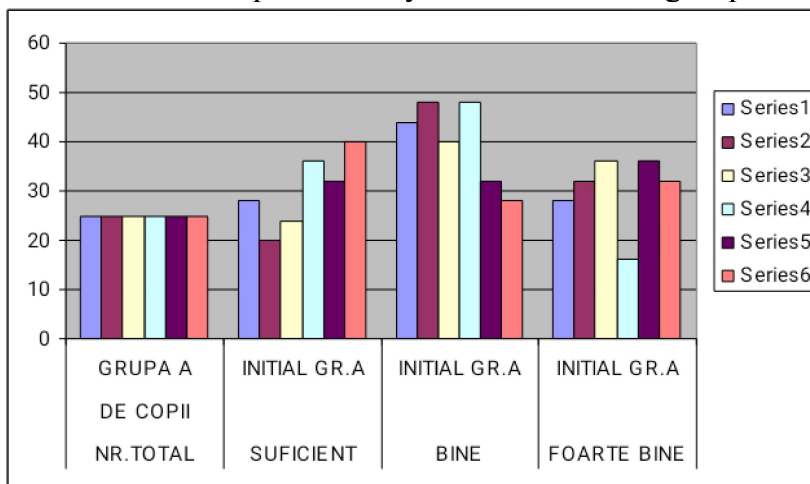
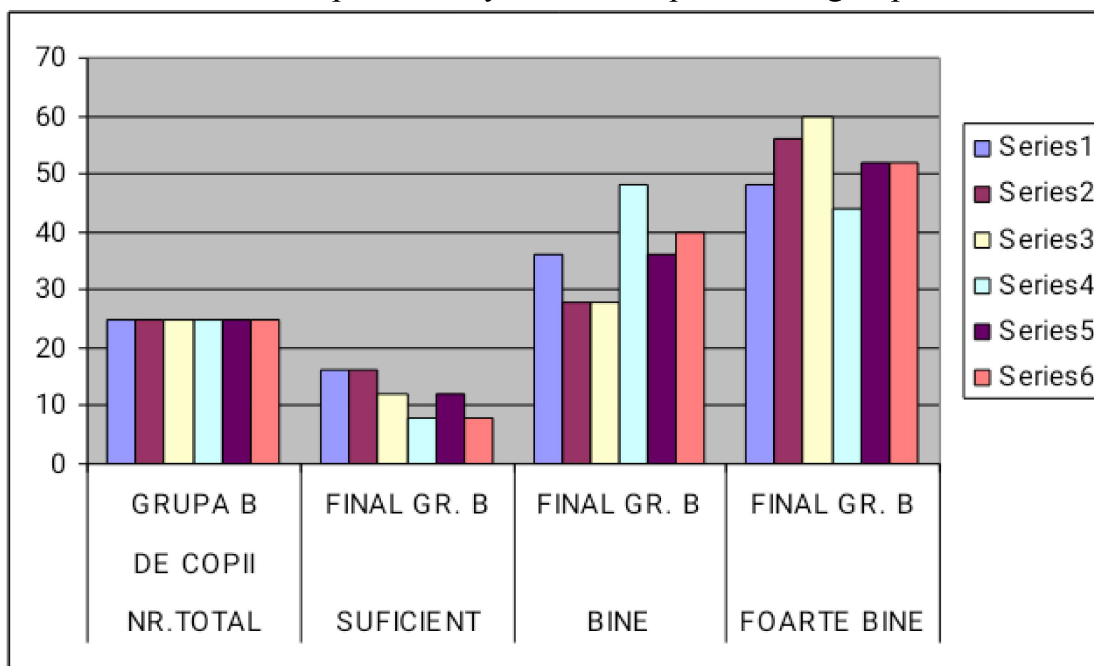


Table 3. Graphical analysis of the experimental group.



As a result of the tests carried out, a difference is observed in the percentages obtained in the two groups, however, the educator must support the child by orienting him towards innovative learning. Thus, we found that regardless of the educational alternative chosen, the

children developed their language, and made progress in learning and qualitative leaps from an educational point of view.

3. Conclusions

Within the “Step-by-Step” program, children develop in their own way and at their own pace, having their own temperament, learning style and family origins, the educational environment focused on the child’s needs favours individualization and the expression of options; children accumulate knowledge through experiences and their own connections with the world around them, children benefit from a team of educators (two educators, assistant educators, parents) who will collaborate to facilitate the development, growth and progress of children, taking into account the interests, needs, their qualities and talents. Children harmoniously form their personalities and acquire the feeling of trust and respect.

Identifying the level of development of children’s language at preschool age, the relationship between the child and the surrounding reality is broadened and complicated, and the forms and content of communication become wider and more varied. The need for communication is a natural need both in children’s relationships in play and learning activities. Language acquisition is done globally, as a whole and not on component elements. The acts of communication: listening, speaking, reading, and writing are not acquired by children in limited and successive steps. The development and activation of the oral language involves the organization and planning of everyone’s language experiences according to their own pace of development. The achievement of the reference objectives derived from the framework objectives is done throughout the entire period of the teaching process with the children, both in the chosen activities, carried out with small groups and individually, as well as in the common activities carried out with the whole group of children.

The “Step-by-Step” program offers an alternative in the education of pre-schoolers in a “step-by-step” manner, creating the foundation of the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that children need in the present and future times. The child is the most important in the act of education so all other educational acts start from the child. The three major features of the program (“Constructivism”, “Developmentally Appropriate Practices”, and “Progressive Education”) consider the child as a whole, considering him a unique person worthy of respect and valuing aspects of his personality in order to integrate him with success in an open, modern and European society.

We can also conclude that the Step-by-step alternative allows careful observation of students’ work and their results, leading teachers to pedagogical practices that improve performance, avoid overload, give

students safety and facilitate knowledge acquisition. (Catalano, 2017). Through all the essential characteristics stated above, we argue the value and importance of the educational program for formal education in Romania at the level of preschool education.

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