

## WAYS OF IMPROVING SCHOOL ADAPTATION IN PRE-ADOLESCENTS

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### Abstract

*The paradigm of school adjustment to the demands and teaching possibilities of the student, prompts for a diversification of learning situations and experiences, and setting them up according to the possibilities and needs of all student categories in order to meet the following principles: “inclusive school”, “school for all”, “integrated teaching”. One of the periods in which frequent difficulties of school adaptation are registered is pre-adolescence, especially the beginning of pre-adolescence, which coincides in students with the passage from elementary to secondary school and which on the foundation of a fragile emotional and psychic balance as well as personality in formation, numerous adaptation behaviours are assimilated and long lasting behavioural patterns are formed, which will be transferred in future activities. The steps to be taken in our investigations of identifying the pre-adolescents’ adaptation difficulties to the specific requirements of secondary education, as well as of developing and implementing strategies to prevent / improve these difficulties, are convergent with the action directions of the educational policy documents that refer to basic education.*

**Keywords:** *school adjustment, student-centered paradigm, difficulties of school adaptation, pre-adolescents, educational policies*

### 1. School’s adaptation to student’s requirements – size of the current educational paradigms and policies

One way of defining school adjustment is by referring to it as a transforming process, a process of student behaviour adjustment in line with the demands and exigencies of the educational-instructive process, so as to meet these adequately. On the other hand, school adjustment also presupposes altering, regulating, and adapting the educational-instructive process according to the potential, and psychological and individual student capabilities. The final goal of all these changes and adjustments applied to both parts (at student level, as well as at the educational-instructive process level) is to reach a balance between the demands of the school and the response behaviour of the students towards these, but also between the needs, the student’s capabilities, and the way the educational-instructive process is suitable to all these (A. Coașan, A. Vasilescu, 1988).

A second definition of school adjustment, which refers to the adjustment of the school, of the educational strategies and the entire educational-instructive process to the individual needs of the students, to their learning capabilities and particularities is one dimension of the post modern paradigm within the education system, characterized by:

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promotion of new education systems, curriculum reform, a personalized approach of strategies, using alternative sources of information, interdisciplinary, ceasing to use traditional practices of transmitting knowledge, using a personal content instead of a pre-established content that reflects a subjective knowledge, using multiple means of instruction and teaching, placing the student, with its needs and capabilities at the centre of the teaching process. Post modern tendencies mostly correspond to the constructivist approach in education, especially through the role given to the student concerning knowledge acquisition, and altering the role of the teacher and learning strategies with a strong formative aspect.

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 paradigm of school adjustment to the demands and teaching possibilities of the student*, a characteristic of education in the future, but also of education systems organized according to the network model (V. Chiş, 2005), prompts for a diversification of learning situations and experiences, and setting them up according to the possibilities and needs of all student categories in order to meet the following principles: “inclusive school”, “school for all”, “integrated teaching”.

A series of documents of international educational policies promote and support dimensions of the student-centered paradigm and of a real school adjustment to the possibilities and needs of the student: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Dakar Framework for Action at the World Education Forum, the Millennium Development Goals, UNESCO’s Medium-Term Strategy, 2008-2013. Among the demands for democratizing the contemporary education systems, there is also the issue of transforming the students into subjects of education (though involvement, used methodology, enhanced responsibility) and the adoption of adequate support measures for the socially, intellectually, and physically challenged (alternative schools: Freinet, Montessori, Waldorf, Decroly that allow an individualized training, suited for the capabilities and the rhythm of each student), action directions aimed at adapting the school to the various capabilities and interests of students.

The need of school adjustment to the various educational needs, to the learning and development characteristics of each child is also reflected by the concept “education for all” launched by Jomtiem at the World Conference on Education for All (1990). Providing a quality basic education, acknowledging the diversity of the educational individual needs, engaging in a pedagogy that is student-centered, the right of every child to a complete cycle of elementary school, are a few of Jomtiem’s recommendations in order for everyone to get a basic education. (T. Vărăşmaş, 2001, p. 22).

Flexing and individualizing curricula by adapting 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. The principle of decentralizing and flexing the curriculum, which offers the possibility of designing differentiated, personalized curricula, through the segment of *curriculum at the school’s decision*, one of the principles of educational policy that lied at the basis of the new Romanian pre-university curricula.

Generating a new type of curriculum is characterized by: transitioning from a teacher-centered school to a student-centered school by promoting interactive learning methods, flexing the curriculum, adopting an inter- and transdisciplinary approach to the curriculum, is in accordance with the paradigm of adapting the school to the demands and possibilities of the students, giving all of them an opportunity to identify their interests and to fully use their aptitudes and capabilities.

## **2. Pre-adolescents' adaptation difficulties to the specific requirements of secondary education**

One of the periods in which frequent difficulties of school adaptation are registered is pre-adolescence, especially the beginning of pre-adolescence, which coincides in students with the passage from elementary to secondary school and which on the foundation of a fragile emotional and psychic balance as well as personality in formation, numerous adaptation behaviors are assimilated and long lasting behavioral patterns are formed, which will be transferred in future activities.

Secondary education is an integral part of basic education, whose importance is emphasized in international and national educational policy documents. It is an essential step in preparing for life, the child learns "how to learn" and is able to decide on the path that he/she will follow in the future, in which he/she forms and develops skills in the areas of oral and written language, mathematics, problem solving, science, communication, optimal integration in the sphere of work and in society as a whole.

One of the fundamental principles formulated by UNESCO and reaffirmed by the International Commission for Education in the 21st century targets the vital need for basic education, which is a major problem in all countries, and must include the millions of illiterate adults, and children out of school, children leaving school after the first year of study. In this regard, the Commission recommends (J. Delors, 2000):

- Designing the curriculum for basic education so as to stimulate the love for knowledge and education, to include skills, abilities and knowledge essential to human development;
- Improve basic education through enhancing the traditional elements of the primary programs: reading, writing, arithmetic skills, capability of expression, conversation and understanding skills;
- Reconsideration of the teacher-student relationships, whose importance should not be minimized in relation to modern technological means of transmitting information.

*The Framework of Action* adopted at the World Conference on Education for All Jomtiem (1990) and adopted as the conclusion of the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, provide directions and strategies aimed at making available good quality basic education to all individuals of a (especially for those disadvantaged workgroups) improving the quality of primary education and teacher training, school achieve measurable results, especially in reading and writing, computer skills and essential life skills, recognition of diverse individual educational needs.

Therefore, the steps to be taken in our investigations of identifying the pre-adolescents' adaptation difficulties to the specific requirements of secondary education, as well as of developing and implementing strategies to prevent / improve these difficulties,

are convergent with the action directions of the educational policy documents that refer to basic education and which aim at:

- improving the quality of basic education by redistributing a higher share of human, material, didactic and financial resources towards this level of education system and by a widespread use of student-centred teaching strategies;
- developing special education programs for the disadvantaged social groups (children with special needs) regarding their access to basic education.

Within a broader experimental investigation, conducted on a sample of fifth-grade students, we proposed contributing to enriching teachers', fifth-grade students' and their parents' practical way of action, in order to improve the instructional-educational activity's results, to prevent / improve the school adaptation difficulties. Thus, in order to identify the changes of the fifth grade educational activity that raised the greatest difficulties to students, we used a questionnaire survey, and we obtained the data summarized in Table no.1.

**Table no. 1: When you were in the fifth grade, did you experience any changes in your school activities? Which of these changes did you find the most difficult?**

	Frequent	%
Each subject is taught by another teacher	22	44,9
The subject matters are more numerous and more difficult as compared with the 4th grade	11	22,4
Free time is significantly reduced	10	20,4
The relation with the teachers is different as compared with the relation with the primary school teacher	5	10,2
Assessment is carried out through grades	1	2,0
Total	49	100,0

The data presented show that the main difficulty faced by students in secondary education is that every subject is taught by another teacher, each with a different teaching style, formulating different requirements, using different teaching methods and evaluation and the student is forced to adapt to all these requirements. Also, increasing the number of school subjects studied and the degree of difficulty of their content, and reduce leisure time, are perceived as difficult. The preadolescents in the fifth grade are forced to adapt to all these requirements.

Correlating this with the results of the students at the end of the first semester of fifth grade, we found that students with the lowest average considered the main difficulty the different teaching style of each teacher (Table no. 2). The collected data point out the need to conduct activities that contribute to an appropriate learning style and new school requirements assimilation techniques and strategies for increasing learning efficiency.

**Table no. 2: overall average grade - the 1<sup>st</sup> semester \* When you went in the 5th grade you faced some changes in school activities. Which of the following seemed the most difficult?**

When you went in the 5th grade you faced some changes in school activities. Which of the following seemed the most difficult?	average	number
Each subject is taught by another teacher	8,8555	22
The subject matters are more numerous and more difficult as compared with the 4th grade	9,3245	11
Free time is significantly reduced	9,3640	10
The relation with the teachers is different as compared with the relation with the primary school teacher	9,0640	5
Assessment is carried out through grades	9,2000	1
Total	9,0929	49

### 3. Strategies for optimizing the pre-students' school adaptation

Pursuant to the investigative steps taken, we have proposed to implement some *intervention programs* for helping the students' school adaptation optimization.

The practical ways of action were:

- Implementing *appropriate activities within the "Counselling and Guidance" curricular area*, which to meet the fifth-grade preteen's real needs, discovered during our investigations;

- Conducting the *"Preventing the pre-adolescents' school adaptation difficulties" socio-educational intervention program on parents*, in order to develop the educational practices and the parenting skills, to improve communication and cooperation between parents and teachers, for the child's benefit;

- Designing and conducting some *activities within the Form Masters Committee*, based on specific suitable topics, which to contribute to improving the course of education, by communication effectiveness, by the proper application of active and interactive teaching and learning methods, of some alternative assessment methods, by knowing the methods of investigating the students' and the school groups' personality, by the formation of some counselling and guidance skills depending on age and students' individual peculiarities, and by adopting managerial effective attitudes in specific teaching activity situations.

The theme of the activities conducted with students aim at optimizing their school adaptation, at achieving the goals set in the research referring to the teaching adaptation and also to the students' normative and relational adaptation: concern's, interest's and positive motivation's development towards school activity; using techniques and strategies adequate to their own learning style, in order to increase learning efficiency; developing inter-relation, inter-knowledge, cooperation behaviours, collaboration, assuming roles and responsibilities in group; effectively resolving conflicts; developing an effective interpersonal communication; the compliance of the conduct norms and rules which operate within the academic and extracurricular environment; developing the self-knowledge capacity.

As a means of conducting the activities we have chosen one based on the interaction with students, for they had the opportunity to express their knowledge and to learn through discovery what they were interested in. We also assumed that the

“Counselling and guidance” classes’ success is provided by both the form teacher’s (counsellor), and the students’ active and responsible implication, and by achieving a student-student and teacher-student interaction based on respect and mutual trust. For this purpose, we have used *interactive methods*, especially methods based on debate and group work, such as: brainstorming, “Phillips 6/6”, debate, questioning, group work, role play, exercise, “Gallery Tour”, “One stays, the others are moving”, SWOT analysis, cluster method, dyad work, “I know - I want to know - I learned”, SINELG method, etc.

In designing the socio-educational intervention program on parents, we thought that, in addition to school, family also plays an important role in preventing the preteen student’s school adaptation problems, but this can be achieved only by knowing them and by meeting them, based on a continuous cooperation with the school. *Family’s alliance with the school* is a factor affecting students’ school performances and progresses, as a relaxed atmosphere between the two educational agents, the existence of common rules, together seen and set, increase the efficiency of school learning. Educational partnership, in this instance school-family, is one of the principles proper to contemporary education and pedagogy, subsumed to the education requirements in the future. It is the form of communication, cooperation and collaboration made for the child’s support, involving a unit of requirements, options, decisions and educational actions between school and family (E. Vărășmaș, 2002).

Among *the topics* discussed, we cite: Bio-psychological peculiarities of the preadolescent period and parental desirable behaviours; How can we know our child?; Child’s adaptation to secondary school demands, to the main changes taking place in school when entering the fifth grade; How to help the child in homework preparation; Special pre-adolescents (naughty child, only child, angry child, shy child) (G.Kelemen, 2012).

Our concerns for designing and carrying out an activities program with teachers, fall on line of steps of improving the quality of their professional performance, by initiating and improving on theoretical and practical issues aimed at modernizing the instructional-educational process, proper to contemporary pedagogy’s characteristics and trends and to education in the future: focus on learning, on learning competences and skills; learning by problem solving; critical thinking; promoting interdisciplinary perspective in teaching and learning (developing synthetic lessons in interdisciplinary teams, conducting interdisciplinary connections, promoting interdisciplinarity within non-formal activities); students-centred education; school’s adjustment to student’s characteristics, to the different learning rhythms and styles; personalized, individualized instructional-educational activities; formal, non formal and informal education contents’ harmonization and articulation; promoting and applying the principle of continuous learning in organizing the instructional-educational activity; effectively integrating the interactive methods and the computer technologies in the educational process.

#### **4. Conclusions**

School adaptation difficulties that may occur at the beginning of the fifth grade may be caused by multiple and sometimes sudden changes that occur within two plans: *the bio-psycho-social development plan* and *the instructional-educational activity plan*. Pre-adolescent student’s school adaptation abilities depend on the way in which the interaction between the pre-adolescent’s physical, intellectual, emotional and personality

particularities is achieved, on the one hand, and on the exigencies and requirements imposed by the instructional-educational activity, and also on the quality of family influences on school activity, on the other hand. Preteen's adaptation to the new requirements implied both by the changes suffered by him in the bio-psycho-social plan, and also some changes in the instructional-educational activity plan, is a condition for achieving and maintaining the student's morpho-functional, psychological, moral and social equilibrium.

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