

# THE INFLUENCE OF THE THEMATIC STUDY ON THE COMMUNICATION ABILITIES AND ON THE LEARNING RESULTS OF PUPILS THAT ARE PART OF THE STEP BY STEP EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVE

Evelina BALAȘ, Ph.D.  
"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad  
Andreea Maria CORNEAN,  
"Giminni" Kindergarten Timisoara  
evelinabalas@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** *This study presents a pedagogical quasi experiment starting from the idea that realizing a harmonious education through the interdisciplinary activities that took place by thematic study for the classes in the Step by Step educational alternative, is an essential element when it comes to the student's schooling success. Motivation is a sine-qua-non factor in the child's formation. Thus, studying the level of the development of the communication abilities was chosen as a theme of the research, within the thematic study, in the interdisciplinary activities. The method of research was the experiment and its conclusions strengthen the idea that by thematic study, the Step by Step educational alternative significantly makes a contribution to the development of the harmonious education of children.*

**Key words:** *Step by Step classes, thematic study, communicative abilities.*

## INTRODUCTION

The idea for the selection of this topic started from what has been suggested by Jean Piaget's words who said that "The education should be oriented to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of the respect for the fundamental rights and freedom of the human being". Nowadays the Romanian system of education tries to get integrated in the new European educational wave, according to which real equal chances are offered to everybody by the re-valorization of the subjective dimension of the educational act that says that the student "is not" but he "becomes". According to the specialists in the sciences of education, in the didactic space coexist at least two types of situations: ritualized and repetitive situations that the teacher approaches and solves quickly and efficiently, typical to the traditional system of education but also new and

unusual situations that configure a space of uncertainty and risk – and these last ones need new approaches, unspecified, nonconventional, creative, typical to educational alternatives.

The new approach proposed by these alternatives imposes the revalorization of the subjective dimension of the educational act. It is just this problem that is being tried to be solved by educational alternatives especially by the Step by Step educational alternative.

### **FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS**

The thematic study represents a way of putting into practice the school curriculum. The formation and the full development of the abilities and the skills that the student has to assimilate are thus naturally assured. The thematic teaching involves the harmonization of the different aspects of teaching by exploring an interesting idea that touches, through its content, different subjects. Through the harmonization of the themes of school subjects with the planning of contents, the alternative meets the students' needs but also the request of the national curriculum. It is the individualization of the program focused on the child that is being emphasized and not the teaching of school subjects. So, the didactic process has to include the elaboration of projects, learning in activity centers, discussions, visits, guests in the class, trips or hiking. Pupils like to learn for the basic subjects like reading, writing or math when those are mingled with notions connected with nature or social education.

The thematic teaching is an *active-participative* method which places the child in the role of the initiator of the learning act, of explorer of the universe, of learning and it determines him to become independent. Through the thematic study the theoretical knowledge is mingled with the practical exploration activity, by an active instruction that opposes the instruction of verbal, linear type.

In order to initiate and develop a thematic study it is necessary to follow certain stages:

#### Stage 1

- *Establishing the theme* of the study by the students, through the collective analysis, of their proposals - concerning what they are interested in. students will debate the themes that have been proposed by themselves, bringing pro and con arguments. Then, by democratic vote, the theme for the thematic study will be established.
- *The directions of development:* talks with the children, the map of the syllabus in network, discussions with the persons that can be involved in the study.

- *Establishing the period of time* when the thematic study takes place, according to the complexity or the diversity of the themes
- *Planning and projecting the activity*: the inventorying of the existing materials and the realizing, together with the students, of a list with the necessary materials-some of them can be brought or made by the students – realizing a list of activities appropriate to the theme, that can be developed in class, a list with human resources that can help the good development of the study (parents, members of the family, specialists)

#### Stage II

- *Establishing roles and responsibilities*
- *The development*: explorations, recording data and facts, realizing classifications, sorting out, descriptions of some objects, dramatization, creating riddles by the children as a game in which to guess the characteristics of the vegetables that have been picked up.

#### Stage III

- *Adding details*
- *Attributing a finality* to the finite product: storing the vegetables in the C.P.V. pantry, tasting the vegetables together with the old people
- *Assessing* the thematic study

### **METHODOLOGY**

Within the research we started from the premise that harmonious education realized within the thematic study sustains the child's development intellectually, socially, emotionally, esthetically, leading to the improvement of pupils' results and to the development of their communication abilities. Thus, the following was chosen as a research theme: the development of communication abilities, within the thematic study, for interdisciplinary activities, for the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders.

#### **The general objectives of the investigations have been:**

- recognizing the influence of the thematic study on the positive results obtained by the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders;
- developing the communication abilities for the pupils involved in the Step by Step educational alternative and also the interactive didactic strategies;
- developing the communication abilities also involves developing the pupils' cognitive, affective and social abilities;

**The operational objectives have been:**

- determining the influence of the thematic study on pupils' results;
- emphasizing the fact that the methods used within the thematic study facilitate the development of pupils' communication abilities;
- identifying the factors that influence the cohesion of the group of students;

The method of research has been the pedagogical experiment and the following have been used as instruments of collecting data: questionnaires for the teachers, questionnaires for the students, the direct observation, observation files/records.

The experiment started from the following general hypothesis: the thematic study, through its interdisciplinary activities, positively influences pupils' results by putting into practice the requirements of realizing the syllabus of the thematic study the pupils develop involvement, responsibility and social integration. The operational hypothesis were as follows:

- If the thematic study is applied, by the harmonious teaching of specific subjects then we will be able to reach a high level of preparation and involvement in the learning activity of the participants (pupils, teachers, parents).
- If all the activities that took place during the thematic study determine a dynamic and interactive approach of the theme then the willingness of the children towards communication and relationship will increase.
- If teaching contents by realizing a network curriculum is made by using the appropriate methods, then the children's activity is stimulated, positively influencing their school success.

The sample of subjects has been formed by pupils with ages between 8, 9 and 10 years old, because at this level of development, the psychopedagogical characteristics are about the same. Considering that at this level of development the children's communication and relationship abilities have already been outlined, the thematic teaching can be successfully realized, helping the identification of the pupils' mutual interests and the acknowledgement of their belonging to a certain community.

Likewise, we have chosen teachers that are about the same age, the same experience in the field, all of them having the 1<sup>st</sup> didactic degree and especially all of them teaching and having been formed in the Step by Step educational alternative, with a teaching experience of at least four years in the field. Another motivation of the choice of subjects (the teachers) is the fact that the pedagogical communication style of these ones is the democratic one. (It is about the fact that they had been working in the alternative?) I am

mentioning the fact that the two classes are functioning in this school year as a traditional system, but one of them had agreed to develop the activities in the spirit of the alternative.

Two teachers that lead groups of pupils with ages between 8, 9 and 10 years old (3<sup>rd</sup> graders) were part of this research. The number of the participating pupils is 30 as it can be observed in the tables that follow:

Table no 1. Pupils involved in the research

3 <sup>rd</sup> graders	No .of children	Girls	Boys
Work sample	30	17	13

The pupils are very well built, both physically and mentally, coming from ordinary families.

Table no .2. Pupils involved in the research – according to their environment and material state

The study group	No. of children	The family environment			The material state		
		Organized	Disorganized	One of the parents is abroad	Very good	Good	Satisfactory
The preparatory group	30	19	3	8	5	18	7

#### **THE PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIMENT:**

In order to be able to observe in a more nuanced manner the role of the thematic study by interdisciplinary activities, we have appreciated as being more appropriate the use of the method of the pedagogical experiment. When it came to the development of the activities proposed by the syllabus of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, traditional methods of teaching the contents have been applied to one class and for the other we have tried the approach of contents from the perspective of the thematic study, the theme *The Living World*.

Using the method of the thematic study in teaching the contents set by the syllabus improves the students' results, through a better student-student, student-teacher or student-experts communication. We have reached this conclusion after having applied a pedagogical experiment that has had as a starting point the objectives and the hypothesis mentioned above.

Because there is only one class per level in our school we appealed to a parallel class from another institution with the same number of students, using the technique of parallel groups:

The control group (the control sample) – formed by 15 pupils

The experimental group (the experimental sample) – formed by 15 pupils

During the day the contents from the school curriculum for the following subjects have been taught:

- Romanian – “Describing an object/a person. Describing an activity”
- Science – “Live bodies. The plants”
- Civic education – “Persons with special needs”
- The content sample has been represented by the contents of the school curriculum for Science. The preliminary theme: “Live bodies. Lifeless bodies” has been evaluated as a sample.

The ascertaining stage has been marked by an individual worksheet in which have been checked: the subjects’ initial knowledge as far as the contents of the school curriculum are concerned and then the obtained results have been registered according to the table below:

Table no 3. The results registered by students in the ascertaining stage

Group	Sample No.	Marks			
		Very good	Good	Sufficient	Insufficient
Classes of pupils	30	19	8	3	-

The test applied to the whole sample of students regards the revision of the knowledge detained by the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders up to that moment. It is a time of bringing the knowledge up to date once again.

After having been given the tests, the children from the class in which this activity had taken place were told the themes they would have to learn about: live bodies and lifeless bodies and persons with special needs and afterwards they were asked for opinions. Some of them have parents that work for the Shelter for Old People from Sacu have identified in the people committed there persons who have special needs. They have been suggested to pay a visit to that institution the next day and the students agreed.

The experimental stage is that in which the control group had classical lessons where they had been taught in the traditional way having used the manual and the classical methods. The experimental group had the chance to take part in an unusual lesson. After *The Morning Meeting*, having read the message and having announced the themes, there came the mini-lessons. During the mini-lessons the students have been explained essential things about live bodies and lifeless bodies, about developing cycles which make a difference between the two categories and also about people who have the same developing cycle. The pupils have noticed that old people and children are categories that need special attention. By extension, discussions have been carried out and children have also identified other categories of people who need special care and the way they can make a contribution to helping these persons.

A short stop at the centers (*Science and Social studies*) had given to the pupils the possibility to receive some information about the themes of the day. (10 min/center)

Afterwards they paid a visit to the old people asylum where the pupils had a meeting with the seniors, some in a wheelchair, with the manager, the psychologist and some members of the staff. They asked them a lot of questions about the way they live, how they are taken care of, but the funniest were about what school was like when they were children. They were very vexed when they found out how school was like back then. Next came the activity during which they picked up, together with other two old men, vegetables from the garden looked after by the last ones: peppers, egg plants, tomatoes, potatoes. They have been pleased to see the red, pink and yellow, orange, big average and small tomatoes but also the white egg plants and the peppers of different kinds and colors. Each of them described to the others the vegetable he/she liked best (both the plant and the part of it that can be used). They have noticed the environmental conditions that are necessary for the plant's harmonious development. They have sorted them and stored them in cases in the pantry. As a reward they each got a vegetable of their choice. The biggest rewards were the thanks they got.

The meditation stage took place the second day and it was marked by discussions about the visit, their impressions, opinions, debates about certain events, the realization of a collage made from photos taken by the students and their teacher during the visit by choosing the most representative moments that had impressed them.

### **INTERPRETING RESULTS**

The following results have been registered after the ascertaining stage:

Table no .4. The control group results:

The group	Sample No.	Marks			
		Very good	Good	Sufficient	Insufficient
The Control group	15	8	5	2	0

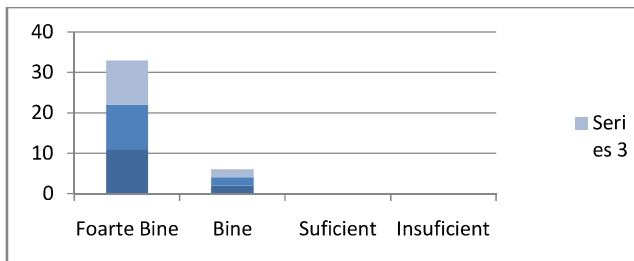
Table no .5. Experimental group results:

Group	Sample No.	Marks			
		Very good	Good	Sufficient	Insufficient
Experimental group	15	11	4	0	0

Table no .6. Results between the two groups

	Very good	Good	Sufficient	Insufficient
EXPERIMENTAL GROUP	11	4	0	0
CONTROL GROUP	8	5	2	0

From the above graphics different results between the two groups can be observed.



By comparing the results obtained by the two groups of students we can conclude that the experimental group got better results in the final test,



fact that acknowledges the hypothesis that by involving pupils through the method of the thematic study their results improve considerably.

### CONCLUSIONS

By centralizing the answers got in the working sheets, by analyzing the results at the tests but also the behavior of the subjects of the research a lot of conclusions have been identified as far as the influence of the thematic study on the communication abilities and the results of learning are concerned.

**The use of the thematic study develops pupils' communication abilities.** By debating the theme, by the talks the students had with one another and with their teacher in establishing the network, by putting children in extraordinary situations and in the situation of deciding by themselves upon what they what to learn about, they are all encouraged to have dialogues, to state and also to sustain their own ideas, to formulate arguments. Likewise, they find themselves in the situation to have dialogues with grown up persons, to use addressing formulas, to formulate questions that spontaneously and directly arise from their need to know more. Their curiosity, accordingly exploited by the teacher, becomes an absolute motivating factor. We consider this to be the most significant way of developing true communication abilities, arising from a controlled spontaneity.

**The thematic study offers to the students a different perspective on the teaching-learning activity, more attractive and at the same time, more motivating.** As a result of the questionnaires that have been applied, it was obvious that all the students from the experimental group have shown a great interest when participating to the given activities and that, at the end of the day, everybody felt happy. Not the same thing happened within the control group where some of the students were indifferent and two of them were unhappy. This proves that the students and his aspirations need to remain in the center of the didactic act. As a result of the activities developed within the study the students gained confidence in themselves, got used to debate, about what is not very clear to them, had the opportunity to communicate and understood that there's a dialogue between themselves and the teacher/experts.

Implementing the method of the thematic study improves the nature of the relationships between the students having as an effect the cohesion of the group. It can be noticed that, after the activity ended the relationships are visibly improved and they keep on discussing about what had happened and what they have realized, even during break time. Even the least communicative and the least sociable of the students took part in these

discussions. Through the debates initiated by the teacher they have developed respect for one another's opinions, sense of responsibility and involvement and it was obvious that the problems that deal with social integration improved. All the students have observed an improvement in the state of mind created in the class (100%) compared with the students from the control group that noticed no change. We have also seen that, dynamic, interesting activities that effectively involve the student, really determine him to willingly come to school with great pleasure.

As a last conclusion, it is impossible not to be noticed the effect that the thematic study has on both the students and their parents. It is obvious in three different fields of the child's development: the cognitive field, the emotional/affective and the social one.

From a first perspective, a cognitive one we can notice the unitary vision in which the contents from the curriculum are taught and learned (e.g. *"The live world"*). Students find themselves in the situation of searching for information from lots of sources in order to stick to the research theme. They operate without thinking, as a game of responsibility, the thinking operations as analysis and synthesis, heuristic thinking, and so on, these ones being determined by the making of the thematic map and by the ways of realizing it.

If we regard it from the perspective of the emotional/affective field, we can notice that children develop self-confidence, they trust their own abilities more, self-esteem, the sense of dignity and self-appreciation. By relating themselves to the other students they start feeling useful within the group and through their activities they rejoice together with their colleagues, they are solidary and they have a feeling of satisfaction when finalizing a thing well done.

From a social point of view, the children find themselves in the situation to work together and to communicate with one another but also with grownups, parents or experts, some of these being unknown. Children, according to the law of the permanently unsatisfied curiosity at this age, *"need to"* beat the shyness that adults arouse and to ask questions, to take part in discussions, to initiate constructive dialogues but also to answer the questions when they have to. Only like this do they get to socialize, they develop their cooperation spirit, the feeling of belonging to a group. By working together with the adults, children develop their feeling of belonging to a group and the adults also (either if they are from the family or experts from a public institution) develop a sense of responsibility towards the problems of the new generations that are left nowadays more and more in the school's responsibility.

**References :**

- Albulescu, I., *Pedagogii alternative*, Editura ALL, București, 2014.
- Dumitru, I., Ungureanu, D., *Pedagogie și elemente de psihologia educației*, Editura Cartea Universitară, București, 2005
- Ministerul Educației, Cercetării și Tineretului, Centrul Național de Formare a Personalului din Învățământul Preuniversitar, *Ghidul Programului de Informare/Formare a institutorilor/ învățătorilor*, București, 2003
- Vintilescu, D., *Motivația învățării școlare*, Editura Facla, Timișoara, 1997
- Walsh, Kate Burke, *Predarea orientată după necesitățile copilului*, C.E.D.P., Step by Step, București, 2004
- Walsh, Kate Burke, *Crearea claselor orientate după necesitățile copiilor de 8, 9, 10 ani*, C.E.D.P., Step by Step, București, 2005