

OPTIMIZING THE ABILITY OF PREADOLESCENTS TO ADAPT TO THE SCHOOL GROUP

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Abstract. *The optimal integration in the group generates psychological comfort, high self-esteem, and rise in the level of aspirations, cooperation and collaboration relations with the other students. On the other hand, the isolation from the group and the absence of a harmonious relationship with the classmates contribute to low self-esteem, psychological discomfort, manifestation of hostility towards school and the other students, anxiety. In order to develop the ability to accommodate to the school group, to communicate and relate to the classmates and the teachers, we have designed and implemented a syllabus within the curricular area of 'School Counselling and Guidance', including specific, appropriate activities, which would meet the actual requirements of the preadolescents of the 5th grade, requirements established during our investigations.*

Keywords: *preadolescence, relationships within the group of students, normative adaptation, relational adaptation*

1. Paper Rationale

One of the periods with frequent difficulties in school adaptation is the beginning of preadolescence, a period which coincides in students with the transition from the elementary to the lower secondary school cycle. In this period, based upon a background of a frail emotional and psychological balance and of a developing personality, numerous adaptive behaviors are acquired and durable behavioral patterns are created, patterns which will be transferred to numerous later activities.

Preadolescence, as a stage in the ontogenetic development, ranging between the ages of 10-11 to 14-15, also known as the middle school period, marks the ending of childhood and the beginning of the maturity stages, the beginning of integration in the adult society, its main characteristic being the intense development of personality.

The first ingression into a collective group, situation frequently encountered in the preadolescent students of the 5th grade, may raise numerous issues, including ignorance of the reactions the pupils can expect

from their peers. For the optimal acceptance and integration of the preadolescent in the school group, he must know the rules, norms and standards of behavior specific to that group. When entering a new collective, the student wishes to integrate himself, to be accepted and appreciated by the group, matters which are only possible through the assimilation of the group's norms. The optimal interrelation with the other students, as well as learning and respecting the norms which govern the behaviors and activities within the group are factors which condition both the integration of the students in the group, as well as their academic performance.

2. Theoretical foundation and related literature

During this period, changes at the level of preadolescents' social relationships also occur, namely in the sense of the expansion and diversification of the roles and statuses acquired based on the regulations and system of requirements expressed by the adults. An increase in the attraction towards the group can be noticed, as well as the diversification of interrelationships and the development of the group's cohesion, these factors contributing to the growth of social expansion, favoring the social integration of the student in the next stages as well. At the basis of the preadolescent's attraction towards spending time with his group of friends are the feelings of independence, freedom and emotional security he experiences, all the while manifesting initiative, the group being an opportune environment for affirmation, free manifestation, sharing experiences, and identification with people of the same age (T. Crețu, 2001). If the group is oriented towards promoting nonconformist or even socially undesirable behaviors, the family and school should discretely supervise or even intervene in the situation.

Regarding the relationships within the group of students, a consolidation of these can be noticed, a solidarity in their reactions towards the teachers' requests being established. Emotional experiences are beginning to get complicated and nuanced during the school activities as well, through the emergence of intellectual emotions owed to the satisfaction of the epistemic curiosity, as well as through promoting competition within the school group, which can generate feelings of frustration, anxiety, envy, or conversely, self-satisfaction, gratification, admiration. The students with a low tolerance to frustration have a hard time accepting criticism or suggestions, are dominated by their egocentric tendencies, and will often resort to satisfying their needs by other means than those provided for by the norms and regulations of the school environment. The interactions within the classroom collective generate feelings of friendship, fellowship, solidarity, and even pride in belonging to that group (A. Neculau, 2007).

In its broad acceptance, a collective represents a group of people who take part in a common activity. In a more restricted sense, a collective

signifies a group of people who perform the same activity in the purpose of reaching well-determined goals and who bear responsibility for this activity, submitting to a discipline freely consented to and to a single leadership (E. Truță, S. Mardar, 2005, p. 15).

At the beginning of the 5th grade, we have a collective group in its broad meaning, which will become a collective of students in the more restricted sense, as the students interact to achieve common goals and the group acquires educational functions, becoming an educational-formative factor. Within the classroom, the educational influences of the teachers are being exerted on the emerging personality of the students. By becoming an educational-formative factor, the collective group will act upon the personality of the students, being at the same time a subject of education, as well as an object of education, the instructive influences of the teachers being reflected upon the collective's members. The formation of the collective of students at the beginning of the 5th grade is thus subordinated to its acquirement of certain educational-formative functions.

The classroom system evolves from a system in development towards a developed system, more precisely, from a purely administrative collective towards a cohesive collective. Within the dynamics of the classroom system, a series of occurrences specific to a system in development are manifested, occurrences that evolve, transforming into ones specific to an established system. E.Truță and S.Mardar (2005, p. 12) summarize the following phenomena specific to the two stages of group dynamics:

- Group phenomena specific to a system in formation:
 - o Outlining the statuses and roles of the classroom members;
 - o The gradual shift from organization to self-organization;
 - o The development of collaboration and cooperation between the pupils;
- Group phenomena specific to an established system:
 - o The stabilization of statuses and roles;
 - o The relatively autonomous functioning of the class as a social group;
 - o The collaboration and cooperation between pupils;
 - o The increase of productivity of the classroom collective;

In the initial phase (the first days or weeks) of the formation of a classroom of students, a phenomenon also present in the case of preadolescents of the 5th grade, we cannot speak of the existence of a collective of students. Generally, within the 5th grade, even if the collective of the 4th grade is kept as a foundation, new students from other classes are included, which favors the formation of subgroups. Thus, at the beginning of the lower secondary education cycle, in the 5th grade the existence of the following can be observed:

- *a dominant subgroup*, representing the majority, constituted of students coming from the same school and class;
- *a secondary subgroup*, including a smaller number of students coming from a different school and that have the tendency to oppose the dominant group;
- *other unstable subgroups*, smaller than the first two, containing students from different schools, who know less of one another and desire to establish relationships with the members of the other subgroups (D. Sălăvăstru, 2004)).

Under these circumstances, occurrences such as the reorganization of interpersonal relations, confrontations between leaders, and attempts to impose certain behavioral patterns will appear. As a harmony in goals is achieved, and behavioral patterns are established and assumed by the pupils, the group will become a collective. The collective group of students does not just represent a sum of the interpersonal relations established in the initial phase, it is the result of a long formative process in which informal aspects present within the group must also be known and managed. The role of the form teacher is to organize activities which foster the mutual acquaintance among all the students in the class, activities which will require them to work together in order to achieve common goals (C. Langa, F. Dumitru, 2016).

Studies on groups have emphasized a mechanism which proves that the group exerts pressure on the individual, thus favoring his integration. There are studies in this direction which indicate the existence of several stages of group integration, in our case, the integration of the preadolescent pupil within the school collective: investigation, socialization, maintenance, resocialization, remembrance (G. Fischer, 1997).

Investigation is the first stage, which implies activities through which each potential member examines the group of students and evaluates the situation with the intention of becoming a part of the group.

Socialization is the stage during which an internalization of the norms and values of the group is accomplished, which permits the individual to accommodate to the new group. Obeying the group's norms represents a conscious act of adhesion.

Maintenance is the stage in which the student becomes a full member of the group, by being accepted by the others. It is the stabilization stage, in which the individual and the group negotiate their positions and the roles to be assumed, with the purpose of achieving the objectives of the group. Sometimes there are differences in opinion between the individual and the group concerning the fulfillment of roles, and the way to the next stage, resocialization, is opened.

Resocialization appears as a consequence of the student manifesting disagreement towards the norms of the group, the student's objectives not

being accomplished at a satisfactory level by the group, or because of differences of opinion in the fulfillment of tasks. The group will try to redirect the student's behavior towards respecting the norms and the assumed roles, trying to obtain a new form of adaptation from the student. In this situation, the student becomes a marginal member. If the resocialization process is not successful, then the individual must leave the group.

Remembrance is the stage which appears as a result of the gradual departure of the student from the group, prior to the transition to a new stage of development. In this situation, he will remember the experiences from the group.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the research

In a recent study, which aimed at identifying the adaptation difficulties of preadolescent pupils of the 5th grade and the implementation of socio-educational intervention programs and educational activities which would contribute to the prevention and amelioration of the identified difficulties, one of the objectives was: the development of the preadolescents' ability to accommodate to the school group, their ability to communicate and to relate to colleagues and teachers.

Starting from the definition of the concept of school adaptation, and attempting a first step in operationalizing it, we established that, at the minimum, the following two dimensions can be defined: the pedagogical (instructional) adaptation and the normative and relational adaptation, with its subdimensions of normative adaptation and relational adaptation, aspects which are in accordance with the delimitations made by other specialists in the field (A. Cosmovici, L. Iacob, 1998). Relational adaptation indicates the student's ability to accommodate to the school group, namely to communicate and relate to his classmates and teachers.

The objectives of the research:

- Optimizing cooperation and collaboration behaviors through the assumption of roles and responsibilities within the group effort;
- Applying the principles of an efficient interpersonal communication;
- Demonstrating the appropriate expression of preadolescents in their relationships with their colleagues and teachers.

The hypothesis of the research: the designed educational activities, including specific, appropriate activities within the curricular area of 'Counselling and Guidance', which will satisfy the real requirements of the preadolescents of the 5th grade, will contribute to the improvement of the ability to communicate and relate between pupils-pupils and pupils-teachers and to the adoption of individual behaviors that are in accordance with the groups' expectations.

Description of the instruments

In order to quantify these objectives, to be able to quantify the degree to which students possess the ability to relate and communicate with teachers and classmates, we have used the following research instruments: the observation sheet regarding the activity and conduct of the student within the collective and a questionnaire addressed to the students.

Target group: The aforementioned instruments have been administered to a sample of 100 pupils of the 5th grade.

4. Results and discussion

Following the administration of these instruments, during the observational stage, we have gathered the following results:

Table 1.*The activity and conduct of the student within the collective (Observation sheet)*

	Frequency	%
Communicative, sociable, shows initiative	51	51
Passive, indifferent, does not show initiative	40	40
Isolated, uncooperative	9	9
Total	100	100,0

Table 2.*Generally, when you wish to discuss something with a classmate, how easy is it for you to communicate with him? (Questionnaire addressed to the students)*

	Frequency	%
Very easy	37	37
Easy	58	58
Fairly difficult	3	3
Very difficult	2	2
Total	100	100,0

Table 3.*Generally, when you want to ask your teachers something, to communicate something to them, how easy is it for you to start a conversation with them? (Questionnaire addressed to the students)*

	Frequency	%
Very easy	28	28
Easy	37	37
Fairly difficult	32	32
Very Difficult	3	3
Total	100	100,0

As a result of the analysis of the students' ability to communicate with classmates and teachers, we conclude that even if almost half of the students do not encounter difficulties in communicating with their classmates, a higher level of difficulty being reported at the level of their communication with their teachers, the design and conduct of educational activities that would contribute to the formation and development of the ability to relate between students-students and students-teachers are necessary, as well as the adoption of certain individual behaviors that would be in agreement with the collective's expectations.

In order to develop the ability to accommodate to the school group, to communicate and relate to the classmates and the teachers, we have designed and implemented a syllabus within the curricular area of 'School Counselling and Guidance', including specific, appropriate activities, which would meet the actual requirements of the preadolescents of the 5th grade, requirements established during our investigations.

Among the units suggested, we mention: *Classroom Management, Self-knowledge and Personal Development, and Communication*. For each of these we have detailed: the educational activities conducted, their respective stages, the resources required (methods, teaching aids, and forms of organization), and manners of evaluating the activity. From the activities conducted, we mention (L. Tăușan, 2012):

- For the *Classroom Management* module: *The Rules of Group Interrelation, Let's Meet Our Classmates. Identifying Their Behaviors and Attitudes, The Group and I, Class Rules, The Ideal 5th Grade, Difficulties and Expectations, Effective Conflict Solving*;

- For the *Self-knowledge and Personal Development* module: *Who am I?, Me – in the Eyes of Those Around Me, My Achievements, My Qualities*;

- For the *Communication* module: *Effective Listening, How Do I communicate?, Assertive, Passive or Aggressive?, Barriers in Communication*.

For the manner of conduct of the activities, we chose one based on the interaction with the students, the students having the opportunity to express what they know, and to learn through discovering what interests them. Furthermore, we started from the premises that the success of the 'Counselling and Guidance' classes is guaranteed by the active and responsible involvement of both the form teacher (counsellor) and of the students, by the accomplishment of a student-student and teacher-student interaction based on mutual respect and trust. For this purpose, we have used active methods, especially group methods, of which we mention: brainstorming, Phillips 6/6, debate, problem solving, group work, role-play, exercise, 'Gallery Walk', 'One Stay, the Others Stray', SWOT analysis,

clustering, pair work, ‘I Know – I Want to Know – I Have Learned’, the SINELG method (the interactive system of note-taking for the streamlining of reading and thinking), etc.

After proceeding with these activities (for the duration of one semester), we readministered the same instruments used during the observational stage and came to the following results:

Table 4. *The activity and conduct of the student within the collective (Observation sheet)*

	Frequency	%
Communicative, sociable, shows initiative	65	65
Passive, indifferent, does not show initiative	35	35
Isolated, uncooperative	0	0
Total	100	100,0

Table 5. *Generally, when you wish to discuss something with a classmate, how easy is it for you to communicate with him? (Questionnaire addressed to the students)*

	Frequency	%
Very easy	64	64
Easy	35	35
Fairly difficult	1	1
Very difficult	0	0
Total	100	100,0

Table 6. *Generally, when you want to ask your teachers something, to communicate something to them, how easy is it for you to start a conversation with them? (Questionnaire addressed to the students)*

	Frequency	%
Very easy	35	35
Easy	50	50
Fairly difficult	13	13
Very difficult	2	2,0
Total	100	100,0

The percentages registered in the final stage indicate a development in the ability to accommodate to the school group, to communicate and relate to classmates and teachers when compared to the initial stage, which validates the importance of the activities conducted by us during the ‘Counselling and

Guidance' classes, especially those in the 'Communication', 'Self-knowledge and Personal Development' and 'Classroom Management' units.

On the degree of cohesion of the preadolescent students' group relies its ability to regulate interindividual relationships, through positive and negative sanctions of the members' behavior. In school groups characterized by high level of cohesion, deviating from the norms is immediately sanctioned through a series of measures which can go as far as excluding the student from the group if he does not return to following the rules. The desire of the student to belong to the group, to be accepted by the others is reflected in the compliance with the common norms and the avoidance of manifestations of deviant behavior. If the group is characterized by a weaker cohesion, with several subgroups, the group may ignore a lack of conformation to the norms in certain students or may have weaker reactions, due to the lack of a consensus regarding the interpretation of behaviors (C. Neamțu, 2003).

Within the classroom, seen as a socio-educational group, the form teacher is the one who fulfills an important role in the planning, organization, directing and control of educational activities, ensuring the compliance with the rules of conduct stipulated in the school regulations. Through these activities, the manager of educational activities within the classroom contributes to the development of the preadolescents' personalities, helping them achieve the required accomplishments in order to integrate themselves into the school collective and, subsequently, into the socio-economic life.

As a manager of educational activities, the form teacher fulfills several roles (M. Stoica, 2005, pp.240-241), among which we mention: organizing the classroom as a socio-educational group, ensuring its cohesion and dynamic; mediating and solving conflicts with pedagogical tact; preventing and combating behavioral deviations and school adaptation difficulties; using intervention strategies adapted to the particularities of the situations that arise.

In the purpose of fulfilling these roles, the form teacher can use the following educational strategies: differentiated instruction strategies, intervention strategies for the prevention or resolution of individual or group conflicts, intervention strategies for addressing dysfunctions (M. Stoica, 2005, pp.241-242).

The strategy for the differentiated instruction of the students – involves the use of instructive-educational methods that are appropriate to the abilities and interests of each student. The intervention strategy for the prevention or resolution of individual or group conflicts involves: the active listening to the parties involved in the conflict; identifying the causes of the conflict; the analysis of the conflict; the confrontation and mediation of the parties; suggesting neutral, correct solutions for the resolution of the conflict;

evaluating the solutions and reaching the final decision; implementing the solution and evaluating its effectiveness.

The intervention strategy for the elimination of certain dysfunctions within the group involves: the intervention to obtain information on the socio-educational group; the intervention to sensitize the members of the group to certain actions or problems they are not aware of; the intervention for the removal from leadership of a leader who is not efficient in the organization of the group, generating conflicts; the intervention for the removal of certain inadequate attitudes, beliefs, or opinions.

With the help of systematic observation and the sociometric techniques developed by J. Moreno, the teacher can be aware of the network of affective relationships within the class (attraction, repulsion, indifference), with the intention of adopting certain measures and strategies that would aim at the optimal integration within the group of the isolated pupils.

5. Conclusions

The formation and development of the collective group of students in the 5th grade implies a series of changes within it, a group dynamic which influences the development of each student's personality. The dynamic character of the collective of preadolescent students is reflected in the structural changes which take place within it and which are aimed at the interpersonal relations between the students. As all students are integrated within the system of interpersonal relationships, the transition from a predominantly formal structure to a predominantly informal structure of the group of students is achieved. The integration of the preadolescent students in the system of interindividual relations is accomplished through the gradual compliance with the requirements of the classroom group, through the transformation of the members' behavior in agreement to the groups' expectations. To ameliorate the difficulties that can accompany the group integration process of the 5th grade pupils, the teaching staff, particularly the form teacher, must act in accordance to the group's syntality, to the age-level characteristics of the preadolescents and their individual particularities by: engaging the students in the analysis and development of school rules; establishing, from their very first meetings, certain rules that would be aimed at all aspects of their coexistence; encouraging students to express their opinions in what concerns the normative character of the group. The similarity between their personal opinions and that of the group will increase the attraction of the pupil towards the group, contributing to the cohesion of the collective.

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