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HOW TO SUPPORT CHILDREN FOR EASY SCHOOL LEVEL CROSSING
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Abstract
The differences between school levels within our traditional education system are steeper than switching between different education systems. For the child, the transition from kindergarten to primary school and then to secondary level is a real world change. We initiated this research project “The child’s accommodation with the school level crossings in compulsory education” in an attempt to highlight and improve on these difficulties. This article is a general presentation of the research project.

Keywords: education, accommodation, level of education, school entry, the entry into middle school.

Rezumat
Trecerile de nivel din cadrul sistemului nostru tradiţional de educaţie sunt mai abrupte decât trecerile dintre sisteme de învăţământ diferite. Pentru copil este o adevărată schimbare de lume trecerea de la grădiniţă şi de la nivelul primar la cel gimnazial. Pentru punerea în evidenţă a acestor dificultăţi i şi pentru încercarea de ameliorare a lor a luat naştere proiectul de cercetare: „Acomodarea copilului cu trecerile de nivel din învăţământ obligatoriu” în cadrul Institutului de Ştiinţe ale Educaţiei. A cărui prezentare generală este obiectul prezentului articol.

Cuvinte-cheie: educaţie, acomodare, nivel de învăţământ, intrarea în şcoală, intrarea în gimnaziu, școală.

Nowadays we witness a great diversity of educational models which highlight an ever greater need for easy access from one education system to another, from one educational approach to another. Such state of the arts helps us see what we commonly minimize out of habit: within the traditional education system, level crossings are extremely sharp and bring about a high degree of change which requires a strong effort of adaptation on behalf of children and youth.

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School itself changes its landmarks from one cycle to another, which means new adaptations are needed. With each new cycle, the child who knew s/he was big and knowledgeable enough a year before finds out s/he must start from anew: so the "freshman" has to discover new rules and norms of social behavior. Every change triggers an adaptation effort on behalf of the individual. Fundamental changes (birth, marriage, death) around which human existence revolves borrow some of their hardship to all changes that people face. Consequently every change incorporates an initiation load which requires careful support.

If we refer only to the changes on the road towards active social life we come across the school levels: kindergarten, primary school, middle school, high school, higher education. At each level, children and youth face new reference points that seem much different than the previous ones. Each school level crossing represents an inbalance since students should give up something familiar and step into a space that is saturated by unfamiliar things. At this point, the essentials refer to stability, continuity, what ever can be preserved from the previous surrounding and grant individuals that feeling of security they need in order to adapt to a new environment.

Starting from these observations, the research team in the Theory of Education Department including Speranţa Farca, Simona Velea, Gabriela Alecu, Dan Badea, Monica Cuciureanu, Oana Gheorghe and Adrian Mircea, have structured a research project the aim of which is to investigate the accommodation practices at school level crossings in compulsory education and to develop support materials for parents and teachers. Our project title is "The child’s accommodation with the school level crossings in compulsory education". In 2012, the project focus was a qualitative research of the state of the arts in kindergardens, primary and middle schools. In 2013 we focused on the development of good practice guides to support two target groups: on the one hand, parents whose children start primary school or cross the level towards middle school; on the other hand for teachers who either prepare children for school or support students with the accommodation within the next level. We only researched into the school level crossings in compulsory education: primary school and respectively middle school entry. The rest of the crossings are also interesting. We analysed the kindergarden entry in a previous study and the postcompulsory crossings could be investigated in the future.

The main highlights of the research project relate to: the stability elements that can make the children’s school level crossings simpler, the essential changes of the school level crossings, the possible solutions that parents,
teachers, decision makers could adopt in order to prepare children for a better adaptation.

If we study the adaptation difficulties children face when they start primary school or middle school we could discover the means to effectively support children in their adaptation effort, from a multiple perspective: of the parents, as well as of the teachers or decision makers.

The magnitude of the child’s adjustment to school relates to the distance between the school environment and the family’s, the community’s and the child’s life. Many educationalists have tried to balance this gap so that the passage become possible, and school be relevant for the society it belongs to. Such educationalists are part of a respected group of thinkers who are always considered when we revisit the fundamentals of education systems in the contemporary world, when we attempt to discover ways to facilitate the child’s adjustment in the school environment.

J.J. Rousseau highlights the big distance between the social and natural environment. His solution is to keep the child away from the corrupting society. He supports an individualized education where children are in permanent contact with the natural environment. The latter is the space the child has to adapt to. It is only at his puberty that the student has sufficiently discovered himself so that he could sustain the social influences which otherwise can turn harmful. According to Rousseau, school should start after 12 years of age, which would correspond to our middle school.

E. Durkheim, by contrast, shows how school should be subordinated to the needs of the society the child lives in. Consequently schools should prepare the child to face these social needs and, in order to do so, schools should be developed in the likeness of the social community that sustain them. Schools should be institutions that are managed by the parents and that share their space with the whole community around.

Ellen Kay reminds us that the purpose of the school is to support the education of the child and that the whole process of education should be student-centered. The child-centeredness of education would make the entire process to address the students’ needs. Consequently the hardships of adaptation are no longer sustained by the students since schools should develop their personalized offers that are suitable to each and every child. In this case, adaptation belongs to the school according to the children’s development needs.
J. Dewey also considers an adaptation of the school to the child’s generic, social needs. In this respect, school should be like a family where children could spend their lives by enjoying the features of every age. The children’s school adaptation is reduced to social adaptation. The school community is similar to a family community where the child feels at home. School should change so that they become in the likeness of life, and children should learn by doing.

Ivan Illich notes too big a gap between the need of education and the school offer. Therefore he launches the striking idea of the society de-schooling, which becomes more and more fashionable nowadays. He suggests an adaptation of the whole society to the children’s education needs. As a result he imagines a totally individualized, mentor-based approach.

Contemporary educationalists seem to have internalized all these historical disputes and find themselves in a dilemma of harmonization:

- our ideal is what we call a “knowledge society”, but we realize the lameness of a purely intellectual education that does not treat the child as a whole;
- we almost magically invoke the “child-centered” education but we cannot abandon the centrality of disciplines in curriculum development or the centrality of the teacher in the school or classroom;
- we consider a connection of theoretical knowledge and practical applications, but we do not start from the live children’s experiences which could be an excellent reservoir of reflection;
- we understand education as a process of becoming free, but make use of methods of restraint, manipulation and labelling;
- We represent education as an individualized becoming, but we seem to fail abolishing comparison and competition among students, as well as single standards that are established by the framework of a discipline in connection to the average student – type of a child.
- When there is such a great contradiction among our ideals, our goals and means, between theory and practice, the accommodation strategy of the child is utterly affected.
- There are general conditions of the school as an institution which we cannot address ideally. Nevertheless our research aims to have some impact with respect to the following issues:
  - identify the difficulties the child faces when s/he starts primary and middle school respectively;
  - identify the continuity elements within these changes;
establish a strategy to better support children to adjust to the various changes that are involved in school life.

Our research can support the development of a strategy to accommodate the child to school changes that address several distinct factors of child support. It can be useful to parents who could understand the age specificity, the child’s developmental needs and the school requirements. Consequently they can help their child to better adapt to the school level crossing. Teachers can also capitalize this study by understanding what happens to children, what needs the latter have. As a result, teachers could be able to adapt their requirements in order to bridge a smooth transition. Policy makers could better open schools to the community real life, towards the reality of the child and that of the social practices.

Therefore, within this research, we aimed to know the real and current situation in our contemporary (rural and urban) schools in order to discover the resources they hold to determine improvement by suitable solutions which come from within and not from the outside, like artificial constructs easily ignored.

I. Research methodology

The project: “The child’s accommodation with the school level crossings in compulsory education” represents a qualitative research that was conducted in several schools in the country, both in urban and rural areas. Without claiming to cover the entire country, we tried to collect data by interview from several counties: Bucharest, Constanta, Ialomita, Prahova.

The goal of the research is to provide a basis for ensuring a favorable adjustment of the child within primary and middle school. Throughout the research we intended to discover the difficulties that children face at compulsory education level crossings in order to find suitable supporting measures that are within the reach of parents and teachers for the child’s smooth transition from one school cycle to another. Likewise we tried to provide guidelines and educational tools for initial and continuing teacher training in the domain of moral and emotional education.

In support of this goal, our main objectives were the following:
• identify current problems and difficulties faced by children when they start primary and middle school;
• identify issues of concern in managing these difficulties by parents,
teachers, school administrators and policy makers;
• investigate how teachers understand their role to support children in order
to adjust to level crossing in compulsory education;
• develop recommendations for improving accommodation and designing
solutions to ensure a good adaptation at level crossing – we aim at
solutions that are possible with the existing resources and without
excessive changes in the representations of the school community.

The methods we used are appropriate for qualitative research. We
conducted an analysis of documents in which we studied the literature on
child development, the classical directions in pedagogy for understanding
the mission of the school, the contemporary ways of opening the school to
the needs of the child as well as to the needs of the community the child
belongs to. We went through normative documents concerning the access
of children in primary and middle school (laws, enforcement methodologies,
curriculum).

The research itself is an exploratory one where we initiated contacts with
kindergarten, primary and middle school teachers, as well as with parents
and children to see as directly as possible the problems children face when
they start primary or middle school. We also intended to have first hand
accounts from teachers in order to understand how they prepare and support
the children’s transitions and their accommodation when they cross school
levels. We researched as well into how parents approach the children’s
preparation and support when the latter start a new cycle of education.

For these reasons we conducted interviews with kindergarten, primary and
middle school teachers, parents and children. These took place as follows:
in kindergardens as focus groups with teachers and parents; in schools in
the preparatory grade with teachers and parents; in grade one with teachers
and parents; in grade 4 as focus groups with teachers and parents, and
optionally, as written answers from the students and in grade 5 as focus
groups with teachers, parents and students.

The field research included: middle school teachers who teach in grade 5;
primary teachers who teach in the preparatory grade, grade 1 and 4 during
the conduct of the research; kindergarten teachers who teach in the reception
group or the pre-school group; parents of the children in the reception
group or the pre-school group of the kindergarten, parents of students in the
preparatory grade, grade 1, 4 and 5, children in grade 4 (optional), and
children in grade 5. The teachers, the parents and the children were selected among the volunteers by the school head where the research was conducted or by our field operator. The interviews we analysed during our research come both from the rural and the urban areas, from schools that only work in the morning as well as from schools that work in shifts.

The investigation results and the proposed activities to support the adaptation of children with the school level crossings are of interest to policy makers, teachers, parents and all those who can support the child. Children, families and society as a whole could be recipients of the research in the perspective of initiating support measures and actions to accommodate children in school level crossing.

II. Research results

The research has highlighted some problems of the education system as well as ways to deal with these issues.

1. Better understanding child development

We cannot take care of the children’s education without thorough knowledge. Our research showed that many of the primary teachers’ complaints were related to natural children’s behaviors under the pressure of change at this age. Likewise, many of the middle school teachers’ expectations are unmet due to the same lack of the adults’ understanding of natural teenage specificity. Meanwhile when students start middle school they depart from the security that used to be provided by the primary teacher. Consequently children feel more free in a context where they lack the experience of taking self in a responsible way.

In all action that is deemed educational, teachers should be thoroughly trained in order to understand children. The school environment, the curriculum and the teachers’ actions should all revolve around this understanding. Such knowledge should show us that a child who finds himself in a situation of change is too caught up in the accommodation process to make notable progress in intellectual education. Consequently the curricula for the school years that mark big changes or transitions should be significantly lighter than the rest.

Children should not be submitted to the process of education. On the contrary, education should sustain their natural development towards freedom and responsibility taking. In order for their choices, assumptions, decision to be
taken, children need to face the consequences of their deeds and not the subjective attitudes of the adult educators, to discover the pride and joy of personal involvement in a range of activities that target themselves, the others or the environment.

2. The need for coherence and consistency in the education system
Education requires a stable, balanced, consistent system that come with a valuable offer and that stir the beneficiaries' trust. If changes are too numerous (as it has been the case in Romania for the last 22 years), participants are deeply concerned to adapt whereas the educational progress is left aside. At the same time, the education system cannot be viewed as a closed cluster in and for itself. Children come from the social segment that bears the configuration of the respective time and age and should prepare for the social integration that advances according to the educational foundations. The communication between the school and the family and its adaptation to the general requirements of the society are inevitable for a valuable education offer. Also the true social adjustment does not mean to proliferate bad habits in schools but to discover that education good sense which is able to create a healthy framework for the children’s development.

The local community that is involved in the school administration should support the institution not to exploit it. For instance the gym in many schools are rented to various organizations by the hall. Consequently in the evening, these spaces are used by adults and as funding for cleaning is absent, they are no longer functional for the children. Of course examples of unilateral “help” offered by the school to the poor hall ar far more numerous.

3. The need to eradicate frustration factors among teachers
Many teachers are frustrated: they feel underpaid, wrongly evaluated and disregarded. This creates a situation where children cannot benefit from their teachers’ work at a high level. Our recommendation would be to seriously investigate the causes of frustration among teachers and to correct mistakes. Otherwise we cannot expect quality education delivered by people who feel frustrated and marginalized.

Most often, the determined causes are too general and costly, as if to legitimate the taking of no-action. Nevertheless when we discussed with teachers we found out lots of unjust situations when it comes to appraisal or corruption in school or the stressful influence of some parents, or the overloading with extra projects and activities, or the continuous instability in
education that leads to relentless changes and adaptations. These only represent the natural need to benefit from a healthy balanced normal environment where teachers could practice their job. Of course no extra funding is necessary in order to reestablish healthy balance in schools. On the contrary, some funds could bring about more corruption and unjust treatment. This leads us to the conclusion that the top priority in schools should be a healthy environment.

Another source for the teachers’ frustration come from the wrong ratio between over-abundant requirements and the career development offer. Teachers are asked to change their approach, methods, techniques while they were not trained for this shift, they lack time (due to collateral demands) and they have overpopulated classes (with great numbers of children in a group).

4. The need to make a good selection of the teaching staff
The research showed some serious behavioral problems of the teachers. The effect of the latter over children is a highly traumatic one. The cases are not numerous yet they are enough to tarnish the school image. Also, since every child matters it is important to take firm measures so that every school become a safe environment to nurture students.

In order to ensure such an environment, a better selection needs to be done throughout initial teacher training, at graduation and also a genuine check must be performed throughout the teachers’ career. The yearly check on behalf of the psychiatrist is formal. Our proposal is that psychiatrists are better equipped and they become more responsible for the stamp they attach to the teachers’ health certificates. The school counsellor should also observe teachers’behaviors and interfere in due time.

5. The communication and collaboration between schools and parents
There is a lot of debate on this matter yet the situation is quite problematic. Schools adopt a majesty attitude towards parents who most often than once are not even admitted in the school environment unless they are requested to. Nevertheless, parents as taxpayers and beneficiaries of the education system should be treated accordingly and respectfully. Schools should really have opened doors for parents while the latter should respect the rules that govern the children’s education (these rules can be explicit in the school chart). We could notice the existence of parents associations that become overindividual and distance themselves rapidly from their members’ interest.
Consequently, as it is the case with children, the school needs to communicate with parents in an individualized way as well.

The purpose of child educational support is common matter among parents and teachers, so the premise of communication exists, but this communication for collaboration can be neither vertical nor addressed to the masses. Therefore we encounter another instance of searching for normality and the natural relationship among people who share a common goal and desire to support one another.

6. Considering schools as a life environment

Our research has highlighted once again the distance between schools and every real, natural, normal environment in the society. Artificiality is not good for the school. The latter can become a more vivid and friendly place where children, teachers and parents do feel good.

The schools communist architecture might be reconsidered at least from a functional perspective. The front entrance door could be opened for children and their parents, classrooms could be restructured in other configurations than the classic rows, the school yard could become a playground for rides and games opened for the whole community. The building could include some spaces where parents can gather as well others devoted for the children’s play. If after-school activities take place there should be beds and lockers and a relaxed organization so that children can rest and be able to have time “at will”. All these changes do not trigger excessive funds. An overall sum-up shows that parents spend huge amounts on special books, contests, nonformal courses, video and multimedia equipments that more often than once burden children instead of offering them a healthy training.

Above all, adaptation to an education system is useless if the latter is not adequate to the true requirements of the society it is part of. An education system clustered within itself and per se only becomes an “ivory tower” for “princes and princesses” who cannot face the real world. Adults who find themselves in the position of educators, whether they are parents, teaching staff, researchers, decision makers or members of the community, can transform the education system into a real support for the children’s development needs. Every effort of the child to adapt becomes easier if it is done to satisfy its natural growth needs. At the same time, education is not only about the children’s adaptation to a system but also about a system that adapts to the child’s needs.
REFERENCES

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