



## **READINESS GRADE. A WAY OF ORGANIZING AND ACHIEVING THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS AS VIEWED BY TEACHERS OF MULTI-AGE GRADES**

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### *Abstract*

*The aim of this study is to underline the attitude of primary school teachers that teach multi-age grades (N=144) towards the achievement of the educational process at readiness grade. The subjects were divided into two categories: teachers of multi-age grades, including readiness grade (N=80) and teachers of multi-age grades, without readiness grade (N=64). All research data are questionnaire-based; the items referring to the assessment of the educational process are centred on: the way of organizing the activities for readiness grade in school and on the principles guiding these activities. The findings were analysed with the chi-squared test and they reveal the significant differences at the level of difficulty assessed by the two groups of subjects in achieving the Alternative Teaching Strategies Principle and the Principle of Individualized Instruction Strategy. These are considered as easier to follow by a higher number of teachers that work with multi-age grades, including readiness grade, as compared to the teachers belonging to the other group of subjects. Both categories of subjects view the existence of readiness grade in school effective for the educational process, but also challenging.*

Keywords: multi-age grades; readiness grade; primary school teachers

### **Introduction**

During the school year of 2012-2013 readiness grade was implemented within the pre-university educational system. It triggered different reactions,

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some of rejection and others of acceptance, becoming a strongly debated subject. There have been three years since the introduction of readiness grade in schools. Our own teacher training observation classes of our college students, as well as the discussions with teachers that teach or are going to teach readiness grades offered a less positive image of the way the interdisciplinary teaching principles have been implemented.

The present study intends to investigate the attitude of some of the teachers that teach multi-age grades in Bihor County towards readiness grade. We are interested in finding out how much of the not so positive observations about the implementation of readiness grade are also seen by the teachers in the rural area schools.

Teaching multi-age grades is not easy due to the complexity of the process of planning-performing-assessing the teaching activities of these grades. Because education is sub financed, the output standard of teaching hours has changed, and more and more frequently the teachers have to coordinate a simultaneous activity at the level of three or four grades. The implementation of readiness grades has broadened the age register of children that have to be taught at the same time; if before readiness grade, designing an activity planning for four simultaneous grades was a challenge, now, designing an activity planning for five simultaneous grades has turned into a desperate situation. Unfortunately, the field bibliography is scarce in offering models of good practices for the integration of readiness grade within the multi-age grade teaching activities. This study intends to draw the attention of field researchers and of high officials in educational politics on aspects about the attitude of multi-age grade teachers, a group of teachers that has few representatives at the level of pedagogical research in our country. Under the conditions stipulated by the National Education Law, we wonder if “the principle of equal opportunity” is valid for the students in rural area schools in the same degree as for the ones in urban area schools. Although the hereby study is a descriptive one, we consider it to be a call for the field specialists to turn their attention to the specific problems of multi-age grade teaching process, too.

The legislative framework for the implementation of readiness grade in schools was provided by:

- National Education Law (L.E.N.), Law no. 1/2011 with the subsequent amendments (Article no. 23 states that primary education covers readiness grade and grades 1-4);

- Ministerial Order no. 3064/19.01.2012 that approved the Admission Guide 2012-2013, for readiness grade and 1<sup>st</sup> grade, as well as the Enrolment and Registration Calendar 2012-2013 for enrolling in readiness grade and 1<sup>st</sup> grade;
- Ministerial Order no. 3654/29.03.2012 that approved Framework Curriculum for Primary Education, the level of fundamental acquisitions – readiness grade, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades, as well as its Methodology;
- Ministerial Order no. 3656/29.03.2012 - the Order of Ministry that approved school syllabus for readiness class in primary education.

Documents of educational politics underline the role of readiness grade: “to prepare a quality school start by an institutionalized early education and by creating the educational premises for a school adaptation with low marking points for an early school dropout and high chances of future integration on labour market for the present day generations of kindergarten children” (Manolescu, 2013, p. 6). Readiness grade is seen as a buffer between kindergarten and school. It should consolidate the knowledge of kindergarten children, but also prepare them for an easy adaptation to school demands. During this period, children should have the chance to have a mild transition from childhood games to school life by enjoyable activities performed in a natural and creative environment (Laurian, 2014). Thus, teaching readiness grade should be different from teaching 1<sup>st</sup> grade, it should be a teaching process that gets the child accustomed to school demands, to a new daily program, a new group of children, a new educational environment where there already are elements familiar to the children from kindergarten, but also new elements that belong to school life and which children of this age should gradually assimilate.

The eight key competences set at the level of European Union as “a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes seen as necessary for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment” (Eurydice Report, 2012, pp. 7-8) become guidelines in the curriculum organization for primary school, and thus for readiness grade, too. School syllabus for this grade is divided in general competences and specific competences, the latter being grouped around the eight core competences: communication in Romanian (mother tongue) or in a foreign language,

mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression. All these eight fields of competences are comprised in the approved readiness grade framework. “The making of Framework Curriculum for Primary Education focuses on the needs of the development profile of the child that graduates primary school, a profile determined by the key competences stated in article no.68 of National Education Law (L.E.N.) no.1/2011” (*Organizarea interdisciplinară a ofertelor ...*, 2013a, p. 31). The education path of a child from readiness grade up to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade is centred on “achieving a level of performance essential in the development (in building the) of key competences” (*Organizarea interdisciplinară a ofertelor ...*, 2013a, p. 31).

Interdisciplinary teaching is another specific element in the readiness grade curriculum. It is a common approach for the pre-school level, but with the readiness grade it becomes an entire new element for the primary school teachers. Although there is a justified and accepted need for an interdisciplinary framework for primary school, the teachers have real problems in finding models for performing interdisciplinary activities with the class. A reason why interdisciplinary teaching is not an easy approach for teachers is because “(...) it asks for changes not only at the content planning level, but also at the level of teaching and learning «environment». The child and his/her experience become the starting point in designing and implementing the curriculum” (*Organizarea interdisciplinară a ofertelor ...*, 2013a, p. 6). It is not easy to turn from a content centred teaching approach to student centred one. Student centred instruction is based on the idea that students are actively engaged in constructing their own understanding of the curriculum (Laurian-Fitzgerald, 2015). Readiness grade curriculum has to be adapted as to follow certain curricular principles (Manolescu, 2013) like: whole-child approach, principles of child rights, peer-mediated instruction, individualized instruction strategy, game-based learning, interdisciplinary teaching, diversified learning, alternative teaching strategies, family-school partnerships.

Individualized instruction strategy performed at the level of readiness grade helps: “to early identify SEN children and children with a high risk of school failure; to perform programs of curricular differentiation and individualization which would allow to avoid social problems issues or side effects of lacks in development; to assure an early educational intervention to

get over impairments in a tolerant and flexible environment; to ensure equal opportunities for a normal development and to prepare the child for social and school inclusion” (Manolescu, 2013).

Game should be one of the main approaches of teaching in readiness grade, thus the game-based learning principle. At this level children should be put in various learning contexts, but also under various working strategies and child interaction patterns, from frontal, to cooperative, individual or competition. The focus is also on consolidating family-school relationship, a sincere and trustful partnership. “Teachers should try to learn about the children in their class from the parents, but also give parents all necessary information and resources for achieving an effective educational process” (Manolescu, 2013, p. 156).

One of the most complex studies on 2012-2013 implementation effectiveness of readiness grade was done by a mixed team of researchers and experts of the Institute for Educational Sciences and of the Bucharest Municipal Center for Resources and Educational Assistance, a study published by the Institute for Educational Sciences in Bucharest, in 2013.

The aim of the study was to “visualize the way the Romanian schools ensured a proper environment for performing readiness grade school activities”. It investigated the implementation pattern of readiness grade in its first year, since then, the specialists’ attention has turned away from this problem. The following lines present the results of the above mentioned research; it underlines readiness-grade-situation in a distinct chapter: “Readiness grade as part of a multi-age grade” (Chap. 1.4).

According to its data, in 2012-2013 school year, in Bihor County, more than half of the total number of county readiness grades were within multi-age grades (60% multi-age grades, 40% normal grades). At the national level, “11% of readiness grade children are schooled within multi-age grades” (*Implementarea clasei pregătitoare...*, 2013b, p. 12)

The study presents the average number of readiness grade children within multi-age grades (“the average number is 5.2”). It is shown that Bihor County has “the highest number of multi-age grades that also have readiness grade children: 178” (*Implementarea clasei pregătitoare...*, 2013b, p. 12).

As for the percentage of readiness grade children within multi-age grades, the research points out that in Bihor County approximately 25% of all readiness grade school population is within multi-age grades.

The research also underlines the difficulties encountered by some principals of schools having readiness grade within multi-age grade; they are the following:

- readiness grade game-based activities are sometimes interruptive for performing the activities with the other children in good conditions; time management for these activities is difficult to achieve. Thus, game resources in the play area are used only during breaks, not to interrupt the other students in class;
- some parents and multi-age grade teachers would rather have the readiness grade activities performed in kindergarten than in multi-age grades;
- the differentiated timetable was a challenge (because of the bus transportation of the students in multi-age grades);
- there are three-level multi-age grades; the teaching process was a less efficient one, in spite of all the teacher's constant efforts;
- lack of space – the desks too crowded;
- unequal competition (for school population) with schools that do not have multi-age grades.

Approximately 25% of school principals think that for the six-year children, kindergarten is a safer and more adequate environment than school. Based on individual interviews, there is the common belief that readiness grade should remain in kindergarten if the other option is to be included in a multi-age grade.

Here are the results of our study, intended to investigate the multi-age grade teachers' attitude towards the way of performing readiness grade activities.

## **Objectives**

The research objective is to understand the way the teachers of multi-age grades assesses the educational process at the level of readiness grade.

The hypothesis is to check whether there are significant differences regarding the way in which teachers of multi-age grades assess the aspects of the teaching-learning process of readiness grade.

## Method

### *Participants*

The subjects were a number of 144 primary teachers of multi-age grades. The group was divided into two categories: teachers of multi-age grades, including readiness grade (N=80) and teachers of multi-age grades, without readiness grade (N=64).

### *Research tool and methods*

For our research, we have designed and used a questionnaire having its items centred on two categories: the first one – regarding the way of organizing school activities for readiness grade (4 items), and the second one – focussed on assessing the difficulty level in achieving the principles followed in completing these activities (6 items, one for each principle). The first category has dichotomous items (yes/no), except the last one, this being an open answer item, while for the second category, there are 5-variant answer items, on a Likert scale from 1-very difficult to 5-very easy.

The subject teachers filled the questionnaires individually, being assured of the confidentiality of their answers.

## Results

Data interpretation was conducted by using chi-squared test for comparing the answers (frequency) of the two groups of subjects.

The answers for the first item (*Do you think the enrolment of students in a readiness grade is effective?*) reveal that a high number of subjects think the existence of readiness grade in school is an effective one. Both groups of questioned teachers (teachers of multi-age grades, including readiness grade (86.1%), and teachers of multi-age grades, without readiness grade (83.9%) believe it brings an additional amount of quality to the educational process at the primary level school teaching. There were no statistically significant differences at the chi-squared test  $\chi^2=.133$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.71$ .

Answering the second item (*Teaching readiness grade is/would be a greater challenge than teaching other grades?*), teachers of both groups (76.4% and 80%) view teaching readiness grade as a part of a multi-age grade as a professional challenge. There were no statistically significant differences

between the results of the two groups of subjects at the chi-squared test, the values being:  $\chi^2=.249$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.518$ .

The results for the third item (*Can all activities of a school day be taught interdisciplinary?*) underline that a interdisciplinary teaching could be possible during all the activities of a school day (69.4% and 57.7% of the teachers). But when the fourth item asked them for examples of good practices in interdisciplinary teaching, as topics and lesson already performed in class, only 24.3% offered an answer.

The items of the second part of the questionnaire dealt with the aspects of following the principles of performing teaching activities at readiness grade, as viewed by both categories of subjects. After analysing the result of chi-squared test, we believe:

There were statistically significant results for frequency-based comparisons for:

- *Principle of Alternative Teaching Strategies*:  $\chi^2=21,654$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.001$ ; there was a statistically significant difference between the expected frequencies and the analysed one. The degree of the effect was determined by Cramer's V and it shows an average of .398. Table 1 presents a more detailed data analysis.

Our findings underline that a high number of teacher of multi-age grades, without the readiness grade (47.5%) believe the means of applying this principle have a medium level of difficulty as compared to 14.5% of the teachers of multi-age grades, including the readiness grade, that think the achievement of this principle as of medium level of difficulty. A large number of teachers (68.5%) belonging to the latest group view the principle as easy to follow. But only a small number of the teachers of both categories regard this principle as very easy to achieve.

- *Principle of Individualized Instruction Strategy*:  $\chi^2=17,22$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.002$ ; there was a statistically significant difference between the expected frequencies and the analysed ones. The degree of the effect, determined by Cramer's V, shows an average of .356. A more detailed analysis of the research data is rendered in table 2. We noticed that a high number (46.7%) of teachers of multi-age grades, including readiness grade believe the principle has a medium level of difficulty, while only 24.6% of the teachers of multi-age grades, without readiness grade, share the same view. More teachers of the latest group of subjects (16.4%) consider it as difficult to achieve than the teachers of multi-age grades, without readiness grade (2.7%).



There were no statistically significant results for the comparing of frequencies for:

- *Principle of Interdisciplinary Teaching*:  $\chi^2=7,52$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.111$ . It is considered to be easy to follow by 47.9% of the teachers of multi-age grades, including readiness grade, while 39.3% of the teachers from the other group of subjects view it as having a medium level of difficulty.

- *Principle of Diversified Learning*:  $\chi^2=4,992$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.172$ . After all data analysis, the percentages show that 50% of the teachers of multi-age grades, without readiness grade consider it as having a medium level of difficulty, and 47.7%, as easy to follow.

- *Principle of Game-based Learning*:  $\chi^2=4,60$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.460$ . The teachers of both groups of subjects believe the principle is easy to follow (38.5% and 37.1%).

- *Principle of Family-School Partnerships*:  $\chi^2=2,996$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.559$ . The teachers of both groups of subjects believe the principle is easy to achieve (50% and 43.5%).

### Conclusions

One of the conclusions drawn from this study is that the majority of multi-age grade teachers believe the implementation of readiness grade in primary school is a good decision, a decision that facilitates better child integration in school life. Even if performing readiness grade class activities are a challenge for the questioned teachers, they all stated that this implementation answers the needs of the children of this age group and contributes to enlarge the degree of enrolment in school of the children in rural areas.

The research also underlines the need for guides and other teaching instruments for the teachers. They only believe interdisciplinary teaching is good for children at this very young age, but they do not have enough knowledge to put this belief into real practice.

Data analysis points out that the teachers that have already worked with readiness grades are much more optimistic about following the specific principles of readiness grade teaching activities than those that, although working in rural areas, have not taught this grade yet.

Readiness grade brings a new challenge to teachers, a challenge that is received with optimism, open-mind and flexibility, showing that a teacher is

under a permanent process of development to become able to adapt to the continuous reform of the Romanian education system.

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