

**STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING TRANSITION
FROM ONE SCHOOL CYCLE TO THE NEXT**

Camelia Nicoleta MEDELEANU

camelia.medeleanu@uaic.ro

"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi

Nicoleta MORON

nicoleta.moron@uaic.ro

"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi

Abstract

In these trying times for the Romanian education system, due to the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, we intend to return to a topic of permanent relevance, namely the school transition of students from one school cycle to another. Through our research we aim to identify the views of teachers on how to successfully facilitate transition from one school year to another. Our research is qualitative, with the use of in-depth interviews. This study is based on the analysis of over 60 interviews conducted with teachers from educational institutions in the North-East Region of Romania. Findings: The solutions proposed by the respondents revolve around the idea of development in connection with professional skills, intercultural education, programs on parenting education, tutoring activities, development of common work strategies, development of school-parent-child partnership etc. The conclusions of this research underline first of all that an optimal solution of this moment is the development of the teachers' professional skills, the personal development of students, communication, information, constant interaction of parents, children and teachers. Education is not an isolated experience, but a lifelong interactive effort, involving resources and actors of change.

Keywords: school transition; professional skills; intercultural education; family-school partnership.

1. Introduction

A child's transition from one school cycle to another “is not a smooth, uniform process for all children” (Golu, 2015, p.153). The literature mentions that for some children the adaptation to school life is *immediate*, while for others it is *gradual* (Papalia, Wendkos, Feldman, 2010; Şoitu, 2014). Children may display aggressiveness, shyness, behavioural instability, self-isolation, a certain emotional and motivational immaturity (Eming, 2002), if they are not supported by teachers and families (Horga et al., 2017). The transition period is not the same for all children (van Rens et al., 2018), it takes place in individual terms, specific to each child (Vogler, Crivello, Woodhead, 2008) and along with the stages of academic transition.

Our paper contributes to the existing literature on the transition of students from one school year to another. First, it provides empirical evidence on the strategies applied by teachers to facilitate the successful school transition of students in the North-East Region of Romania.

2. Methodology

The results presented in this paper are based on data collected within the project "Creative Schools", MySMIS code 106637, between May 2020 and June 2021.

The sample for our research consisted of 60 teachers from kindergartens, elementary schools and high schools in the North-East Region of Romania. The selection of the target group for interviews was done by directly approaching the people in order to schedule an interview; emails sent to school managers requesting their participation in interviews and direct telephone calls to persons whose contact details have been provided by other interviewees. The interviews were recorded and transcribed throughout their duration. All respondents agreed to be recorded. The interviews were scheduled according to the decision of each teacher, their duration being between 60 and 125 minutes.

The interview focused on the following aspects: methods of identifying students that are experiencing difficulties in moving from one school year to another, theoretical and practical bases for teacher training, teaching-learning methods and techniques that contribute to a better adaptation of 1st / 5th / 9th grade students and strategies and examples of good practice from the teachers' experience.

3. Thematic analysis of data

3.1. Identifying the students that are experiencing difficulties when transitioning from one academic cycle to the next.

Our research has identified a variety of student behaviours, some predictable and desirable in terms of educational goals, others, on the contrary, running counter to the values promoted by education. In the schools studied, regardless of the level – primary / secondary / high school, the problems vary in severity, and in order to deal with them, they must first be identified and then the most appropriate approaches must be found.

The first to notice the students' possible problems and who are directly interested in identifying and correcting them are the teachers. On the one hand, the respondents identified various types of problems – for example, *the student receives a low grade and does not understand why this happened* (L2) or *discipline issues, student / teacher conflicts* or *diagnosing a child with behavioural or learning problems* (I5) and so on.

Normally, there are at least two ways schools can keep parents informed: *the grade report* and *parent-teacher meetings*. In the view of all participants in the research, parent-teacher meetings seem to be opportunities for teachers and parents *to discuss the students, their behaviour and the difficulties noticed by the parents*. In practice, *for some parents, these may be the rare occasions when they visit the school* (L1).

The most effective methods for detecting students who encounter difficulties when moving from one school year to another, according to the respondents, are:

- *knowing the personal and social needs of the students, necessary in order to reduce their level of stress and anxiety caused by the change of school / class / switching from nursery school teacher to primary school teacher, or from primary school teacher to form master*, (I3);
- *being familiar with the student's health status, through medical tests*. The student's adaptation to a new academic cycle requires an increased effort, which can influence the child's health. That is why it is necessary to be aware of the student's exact state of health or of the presence of a disease.

I could give you the example of a case of type 1 diabetes detected in a fourth grade student that had serious consequences both in terms of health and school results (I2).

- *meetings with parents and application of questionnaires in order to get to know the students and parents;*
- *the observation by the form masters / teachers of the behaviour, discipline, academic results of each student (E4).* The analysis of school documents and of the products of the student's activity allows the collection of information about the academic path, the performance and the level of learning, the concerns and aspirations of each student.
- *the implementation of guidance and counselling programs for students that would provide students the necessary support in learning (I8).*
- *communication with the teaching staff (PG11) and with the school psychologist (PG7), communication with primary school teachers (I14);*
- *open discussions about the future, role play about plans and dreams (I11).* The main advantage of conversations is the opportunity to obtain a large volume of information in a short time, which is why those who use this method gather information much more easily about students, the students' family environment, about teachers and colleagues.
- *interactive-participatory methods, role-playing games, simple dramatizations, heuristic conversation (I2);*
- *sociograms, psychological tests (L1), school counselling (I1).* We underline here that psychological testing is a method accessible only to specialists, due to the complexity of using the tool related to it – the psychological test.

It is important for parents and teachers to work together to prevent difficulties in adjusting to a new school stage *instead of addressing them after the fact.*

The respondents highlighted situations encountered in their schools, as well as and ways of identifying the difficulties the students face.

In the case of students' learning difficulties, teachers highlight those regarding focus, reading and writing difficulties, and behavioural problems (aggressiveness, sadness, depression, etc.). All the areas in which the learning disorders are manifested have attracted the attention of the teachers regarding the many aspects that must be taken into account in the teaching activity. To an equal extent, the respondents believe that it is necessary to be aware that the students facing these

difficulties, mentioned above, show varied and complex problems, which must be approached in a multidimensional manner and in specific interdependencies, which may manifest differently from one student to another.

The diagnosis of learning difficulties involves a coordinated effort carried out by teachers together with specialists and school counsellors, and in full collaboration with the family. It is useful, from the beginning, in the respondents' opinion, for teachers *to apply a questionnaire to parents as well as students (I8), to systematically observe the student's behaviour in the school environment (PG14), and to write down the information in observation charts (E3; I5) and progress charts (E3)*. Among students with such issues, the respondents usually identify a gap between the demands of the student's school environment and the child's needs and opportunities to meet them.

In this case, the teachers' intervention strategies must be associated with *the different learning styles*, but also with *active-participatory methods (I7)*, with *emphasis placed in the didactic activity on group work (I10)*.

3.2. Training teaching staff in order to develop their skills

The need to train teaching staff

The professional development of teachers takes into account those programs and activities subsequent to the initial training that contribute to individual learning, in order to continuously improve teaching. Therefore, teacher development involves providing opportunities for growth, learning and training in order to improve quality of work and performance. In the management of schools, teachers must be considered assets of the school. Hence the importance of investing resources in these assets, in development and learning programs, in order to obtain competitive advantages. This aspect is highlighted:

- by respondent I3: *the involvement of teachers in professional development activities can contribute to the optimization of the transition from kindergarten to school, by preventing and overcoming the difficulties generated by the lack of a curricular unity between the two levels of education.*

- and also by PG3: *in a constantly changing society, lifelong learning is no longer a luxury, but a necessary condition for adapting to professional requirements.*

Some respondents consider it necessary to train teachers to facilitate the successful academic transition of students, *as it is important for teachers to be familiar with the methods by which they could address any unexpected situations* (PG8) that may arise over the years.

The time of change of the current system of training and professional development of teachers in the pre-university system is pressing with increasing intensity in all component sectors of the education system, whether it is digitalization, curricular content, assessment system, student learning performance. Unfortunately, the Romanian system of training and professional development of education staff still faces significant shortcomings in the construction, implementation and development of a strategy and policy in this regard, and teacher training *has become a race for points, credits, certificates and documents without essence.* The coherence of the courses in which the teachers participate, their pedagogical efficiency are still deficient, as evidenced by the following testimony:

Given the manner in which certain courses are conducted (you pay the money and receive the diploma after a few months, maybe you meet once to sign the attendance register) I do not know to what extent they are effective. They are effective when taken seriously and when they teach something that can then be applied in class (L1).

Over the years, courses on this topic have been implemented for teachers, especially for form masters. Unfortunately, the trainings were given by rigid or insufficiently trained trainers who focused largely on the theoretical basis (PG4).

The problem with teacher training is, according to respondents, that it focuses too much on knowledge and too little on practical exercises. The job of a teacher should have a practical side, and this is desirable because they admit that their students learn more from books and from the lesson taught in class.

It is more important to change how teachers work than what they know. Nobody says we have to

reject knowledge, but we have to add practice (PG6).

Despite the existence and recognition of authentic pedagogical talents, present in each of the schools participating in our research, there are also teachers who appreciate mediocrity and believe they do not need any additional training:

I do not think that teacher training is necessary, because every teacher who is a parent as well knows how to be a friend to the children and listen to their problems (PG12).

There is no need for such courses. A smile is something anyone can provide (I5).

It was suggested that peer coaching opportunities should be developed in schools, encouraging teachers to learn from each other and assuring older colleagues that their expertise matters – as a support mechanism for professional training.

Topics approached during the training period

The respondents consider useful and mandatory in their professional development, in the courses, the **topics** related to:

- managing digital skills (*in order to improve the way we work with the student - for example, online teaching, which we need to use now. We need to learn to adapt to the new requirements, but the mental effort is great, especially for those above a certain age. E3*), for at least two main reasons: digital skills mean adaptability and flexibility, and technical progress is expanding rapidly in all areas.
- *Facilitating learning in non-formal and informal educational contexts, integrated approach to the students' school adaptation problems, in the sense of making connections with real life (PG6)*; It should be noted that learning in non-formal contexts is considered to be integrated learning within planned activities, with learning objectives, which do not explicitly follow a curriculum and may differ in duration. This type of learning depends on the intention of the learner and does not automatically lead to the certification of the acquired knowledge and skills (Source: National Education Law no. 1/2011). Also, informal learning may include learning activities that take place in the family, at work, in the local community, and in everyday

life, on a direct social or family or personal basis (Source: ISCED-2011, International Standard Classification of Education);

- Student class management, methods of getting to know the student (I12);
- Interactive-creative learning teaching strategies and examples of interactive, intra- and inter-group methods and techniques, essential components of interactive strategies (I1);
- Modern teaching-learning methods (I16), built on scientific bases;
- Improving *communication* between teachers, between primary school and secondary school teachers (E4), between teachers and students (I16);
- *Child and developmental psychology*, influences on development (heredity, environment, contexts, normative and non-normative influences, critical periods in a child's life, etc.);

This additional training would be welcome, and one of the topics I believe is important to address is the development of socio-emotional skills in students (PG14).

Further teacher training needs to focus more on the child psychology at various stages of life (PG15).

We need training programs in the field of psycho-pedagogy (PG1), especially in the field of preventing deviant behaviour in students.]

- Management of stress, of emotions (I9; G12);
- Training of teachers for guidance and school counselling (PG3) and presentation of good practice models on the topics developed in the course PG16);

For the society we live in, where parents are especially busy, it would be appropriate to train teachers so that they can provide more counselling to students (PG2).

I would like to help my students to be confident in their own strength ... to make responsible decisions about their future (L1).

- School dropout (PG13); An important cause of the risk of dropping out of school, some respondents mention, is poverty, associated with living in rural areas, the absence of both parents or of the mother, agricultural specialization, as well as parents with a low level of education;
- Forms of discrimination in the school environment, school violence and ways to combat them (I11).

Without offending anyone, labelling, comparison and compensation are still practiced in education. I hate this the most. Maybe one day I don't feel like answering in geography, even though I know the answer to the teacher's question. Or maybe I even blank out. Why should I be labelled a poor student, who'll never get anywhere in life and be told to take the example of my classmate X? I was told that I would not pass the baccalaureate exam and that I would end up herding cows. In addition, I was always compared to some of my classmates. My confidence dropped a lot, but I didn't give up. I knew I could do it. I passed the "bac" from the first attempt, without private tutoring because my financial situation did not allow it, still working in the fields on my days off – while those who had won school contests failed the exam. I went through both undergraduate and graduate school. I apologize for talking about myself, but I was haunted by bad memories of teachers who shattered my self-confidence (I11).

Some respondents underlined the need to develop parent education training programs. In this sense, the testimony of one respondent is suggestive: *not only teachers should be trained, parents should be trained too, because lately, in their opinion, teachers have always been the cause of all their children's problems (I6)*. Such training should be carried out by *school counselling specialists*, as they have *field experience and would certainly focus their intervention on the practical side, on applicability in the school environment (PG4)*.

Teachers consider absolutely necessary the involvement of parents in their children's education, but also their preparation for planning their children's activities, assuming that it is important to closely monitor students during the beginning of school, especially in secondary school, but also in the years after that.

In fact, parents' education is a concern today for education policies everywhere. The need to involve parents in formal and professional decisions and actions regarding their children is strongly emphasized.

4. Methods and techniques in teaching/learning that contribute to a better adaptation of 1st / 5th / 9th grade students

"Teaching and learning are not some form of mind-melding. Teachers do not transfer the contents of their minds to those of students as a download" (Robinson, 2011, p. 56). Teaching and learning is a relationship in which there are four main elements: the context, the teacher, the student, the content of the subject.

Context	⇒	Teaching staff	⇒	Student	⇒	Contents of the subject
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Teachers have their own teaching styles, *which are partly related to the way they see their roles, and partly to their personalities*. An important role in creating a favourable climate for creative and interactive learning is played, according to one respondent, by the teacher's attitude towards the student's ability to cope with situations viewed as problematic.

According to one respondent, a good teacher allows the students *freedom of expression in front of the education professional*, allows them to take intellectual risks, to speculate and also *to make mistakes without fear of being punished*, offering support in situations of insecurity (I11).

I was a good student, but there were some classes I would skip for two reasons: the subject and the teacher. At that time I didn't like chemistry, and the chemistry teacher always yelled at us, she looked down on us, she almost hit us, she gave us surprise quizzes on purpose so that we'll have low grades. I was running away from school for fear of this teacher. If she had known how to speak nicely to us, to teach us the subject through attractive methods, through games and all kinds of chemical experiments, to have us disguise ourselves as scientists, to play roles, we would certainly have learned the subject out of love for it. And it's not the only example. I had

this teacher in secondary school, but the ordeal continued during high school, with several teachers. We were never allowed to make mistakes, and most of the time we did not answer in class for fear of the teacher's reaction if the answer was wrong. And most of the time I avoided giving the answer, even though I knew it (I11).

Unfortunately, the research has highlighted the fact that, most of the time, children self-censor themselves for fear of failure or because they are afraid they will be judged by other classmates, and this phenomenon leads to *decreased creativity* (I11).

5. Strategies and examples of good practice in the teachers' experience

a) *Visiting the pupils in class during the preparatory year/ in 5th grade, and having a class with the future primary school teacher*

Participation in a preparatory year class, at the beginning of the year and at the end of the school year when the children can get to know their future primary school teacher. It is useful to support activities with the group of children together with their future teacher (E3).

Respondent E4 states that, as a rule, teachers inquire in early, even informally, about the students they will take over next year: *I knew in advance which students I would be assigned and I familiarised myself with the issues that may arise, with the students' academic level, their discipline level the and the characteristics of each family.*

b) *Organising school trips*

Starting with the first semester of the 5th grade, form masters can organize a school trip for the students so that they get to know each other and socialize in a different context not just the school one (PG16). In this manner, they get to know each other better and we show that we can have fun together.

c) *Increasing the involvement of parents from the first day of school*

The organization of activities on the first day of school starts a few days beforehand by inviting the parents to participate in the opening of the school year (PG1). At the same time, they are informed about the schedule of activities. Many children, as well as their parents, are excited and a little worried about the start of the school year.

d) *Intervention strategies for improving family-school interaction*

As solutions for developing a good relationship with the students' families, the teachers highlighted the following aspects: first, they suggest establishing relationships with all the families in the group / class; then, ensuring that the first contact with the family is positive and takes place early; one must communicate with the student's family by any means (face to face, by phone, email, etc.); then respondents suggest that the preschooler's / student's successes, no matter how small, and interactions should be shared.

By focusing on communicating the children's successes, no matter how small, the parents will have the confirmation of what they already know about their child and the idea that education focuses on individual development will be strengthened (I6).

Another step suggested by the respondents is to identify the individual needs of parents and discuss how these needs can be met. Parents need to be listened to and valued. The teacher should respond to the parents' concerns and worries, trying to reformulate them whenever they are not realistic.

e) In search of balance between concrete data and personal histories

Respondent PG14 reports that at one point he realized that his students were not interested in the subject he taught, mathematics. Each time the students told him that they did not see the connection with the real world: *What is the use of mathematics, apart from addition, subtraction, multiplication and division?* The teacher realized that most students probably understand mathematical concepts in their own way. These personal representations are difficult to understand other than turning them into graphs or stories.

I have invested a lot of time in understanding the students' own representations of the world of mathematics and then corrected them where appropriate or translated them into personal examples (PG14).

This type of correlation of the data obtained from the students and the personal histories must take into account the following aspect: first of all, action must be taken while on has fresh

information from the student (if I find that the student is confused, I may wonder whether this affects the learning process).

f) *Find out what the students are thinking*

One respondent, I9, involved the students in the assessment process, giving them the opportunity to reflect on the learning process. Because students excel in school in different ways, there should be no one-size-fits-all assessment method. The students' voices regarding their own ideas and their own development can provide just those small clues that reveal the existence of important trends that lead to the improvement of learning at home, but also at school.

g) *Including learning during time off*

One respondent noted that he often helps children learn how to regain their physical and mental energy in order to be more alert during class and to achieve better academic results (I11). Breaks are part of learning and are definitely not a waste of time.

In primary school, students can be taught games that include all the children, so that no one stays on the sidelines, everyone is active and feels included in the group. The respondent reports the importance of accepting that some students sometimes prefer loneliness and observing from the sides.

h) *Organising activities - One day without simultaneous teaching and school, but different*

Respondent I2 mentions that every year he takes his students on visits to other schools and integrates the children in the groups they visit, for one day. On that day, the students participate in all the activities of the respective class, *they have demonstration lessons* and joint activities with their colleagues from that particular school.

The "School, but different" program contributes to the development of learning competence and of socio-emotional skills among preschool children / students. At the same time, it contributes to *the operationalization of concepts in practice* (I10). The activities carried out by the respondents were: visits and activities in museums, the art of fun experiments, fun science, the house of experiments – the principle is to "learn by doing" in a fun way; colourful emotions, sensory workshops and the development of emotional intelligence: feeling and knowledge, the colours of autumn, etc. This type of learning “does not take into account the boundaries of any one school subject, but would have an effect on performance in any subject” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 9).

i) *Active engagement of the teaching staff outside school activities*

According to some respondents, the teacher must be, in a way, *the student's friend* (I2). Knowing the personal and social needs of the students, knowing the specific learning mechanisms of the students (PG13) can contribute to academic progress. The proof is in the description of the following situation: *a teacher, noticing that one of his students was having difficulties in the process of transition from preschool to school, contacted the student's parents and found the best ways to introduce the student to the new school cycle, spent extra time with the student in order to facilitate this transition period, and this was correlated with the involvement of parents in solving homework / schoolwork* (I16).

Conclusions

Realistically speaking, during school and especially in the moments of transition from one school cycle to another, small problems may appear, but also some complex ones. This research discusses the need to change the current system of training and professional development of teachers in the pre-university system, which is currently more focused on theory than on practice. In developing this approach, training should be based on “learning from others, systematic individual and group research and technological innovation (Vlăsceanu, 2019, p. 123), but also on the awareness of “the role of the teacher at the level of the school organization which implies the assumption of an optimal decision-making model with the educational requirements” (Esi, 2020, p.109). It must be mentioned that this triangle of professional development should be monitored in every school.

In all the schools analyzed in our research, the respondents mentioned several elements that positively influence the transition of students from one school cycle to another: a school environment that provides safety and well-being; collaboration with the family, close collaboration between parents and teachers for the good of the student, positive relationship between teachers - students - parents; the consistence of requirements and expectations of school curricula and the structuring of learning by creating active learning techniques and methods, implementing actively participatory methods and involving students in the educational process.

Teachers must keep their students engaged, interested in the subjects taught, and must constantly encourage them to reach their full potential. Primary and lower secondary teachers need to know

and understand the specific learning mechanisms of students, but also develop a common strategy for an effective teaching practice. The correspondence between the teaching methods used in the fourth grade and those approached in the upper grades can significantly reduce the students' risk of dropping out or of declining academically. All these teaching-learning methods and techniques intervene in this process at one point or another, and their diversification and alternation, depending on the age, typology and potential of the students, on the type of lesson, on the proposed objectives, facilitate a better adaptation on the part of the students.

Education is not an isolated experience, but an interactive effort throughout life. Learning means creating communities of people who think freely and for the benefit of others (Mihalache, 2011). When stakeholders – family, school, community – work together, they can provide the best possible resources and expertise in order to improve education.

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