

## **EMOTIONAL CURRICULUM IN PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS – AN ANCHOR IN THE HARMONIOUS DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN**

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*Abstract: Emotional literacy, a wide-ranging theme in today's pedagogical literature, must begin as soon as possible during the early education and continue throughout schooling and life in general. Social and emotional skills and abilities are first learned through imitation and modelling, within the relationships that the child establishes with the most important people who are permanently present in his or her universe. Then, as part of a common effort to understand, exemplify, improve and train, with the support of teachers, parents and specialists, and the community, children learn during personal development, counselling and guidance activities. The present study aims at presenting the way in which, through curriculum documents, education authorities understand the need to develop this theme on a formal, concrete, official level, starting from early education and continuing in primary education as well as through specially designed and implemented activities. However, the presence of these themes in school curricula is far from sufficient. Important are also the interest, the effort, the involvement of primary and pre-school teachers to create relevant and exemplary educational experiences, to find the most appropriate attitudes and behaviours, on the one hand, and content and means, on the other hand, to be able to teach children to cope with the emotional challenges of everyday life as an important support for a balanced, harmonious, and healthy development*

*Keywords: emotional curriculum, education, socio-emotional skills, school curricula, early education, primary education, emotion training*

### **1. The harmonious social and emotional development of pre-schoolers and young primary school children, from the perspective of curricular documents proposals. Analyses, observations.**

Education for a balanced social and emotional life, generating harmony, positivity, openness and flexibility, empathy and the capacity for authentic communication is a permanent and real concern for everyone. It is a preoccupation starting from the young childhood and enjoying a formal interest by inscribing it in the compulsory curriculum of the education systems of countries around the world and in our country (see M. Suditu, 2017).

Literature regarding the psychology of emotions (see D. Goleman 2001, H. Gardner 2006, Reuver Bar-On 2011 etc.) shows us that young childhood represents the start of the social and emotional evolution of future adults.

A brief review of the explanations regarding the Curriculum for preschool education – the curriculum document adopted in 2008 and still in force – makes us understand the concern for student-oriented curriculum rather than discipline-oriented curriculum, for a curriculum oriented towards goals expressed as competences, or as pupils' way to act or know in general, and not oriented towards teaching and learning" (see D'Hainaut, Pre-school curriculum, p.9). By directing our analysis towards the explanations given by the curriculum regarding the Socio-emotional Development Area, we see the focus shifts on children's ability to interact, since the debut of their social life. This will help children build self-confidence, and positive self-image on the one hand, and help children in establishing relationships with those around them, be they children and/ or

adults, on the other. Specifically, the quoted curriculum document specifies/ explains operationally the meaning of emotional development and social development for pre-school age. Thus, according to the current syllabus, emotional development aims at:

- “children’s ability to perceive and express their own emotions;
- To understand and respond to the emotions of others;
- Developing children’s self-concept and self-image, with important influences on the learning process” (pp.19-20).

Social development aims at:

- “developing abilities for interaction with adults;
- Developing abilities for interaction with age-related children;
- Accepting and respecting diversity;
- Developing pro-social behaviours” (pp.19-29).

We note the interest in activities that lead to a heightened emotional expression, to the discovery, perception and appreciation of beauty, communication of emotions, exploration of affections in an integrative manner, involving visual, auditive and active stimulation, etc.

Exercising personal development is predominantly achieved during early education as part of routine and transition activities, and focuses on the following areas (acc. to the Preschool Curriculum, 2008):

- “self-knowledge (self-esteem, self-image);
- Development of communication skills – assertive communication;
- Management of learning by playing;
- Development of empathy;
- Making decisions based on certain criteria and encouraging choices and finding as many solutions to a situation;
- Conflict mediation” (pp. 19-29).

For primary education, preparatory, first and second grade, the issue of emotional literacy is achieved by following the syllabus Personal Development, for which the curriculum design model is competence-centred. What matters, therefore is the ability to solve problems and specific situations in different contexts.

This school discipline belongs to the curricular area Counselling and Orientation. There are 2 hours per week in preparatory grade and one hour per week in first and second grade. The learning activities aim to “develop pupils’ ability to know themselves and positively express their interests, skills, personal feelings, networking and communication skills, reflections regarding the learning process” (acc. to School curriculum for Personal Development, preparatory, first and second grade, pg.2).

General skills are formulated in the curricular document as follows: (idem):

1. “Manifesting interest for self-knowledge and a positive attitude towards self and others

Specific skills: “identification of elementary personal features, presenting elementary personal features to others in various contexts, stating similarities and differences between self and others, according to simple criteria” (idem. pp. 4-5).

2. Appropriate expression of emotions in interaction with children and known adults

Specific skills: “acknowledging basic emotions in various circumstances, identifying communication rules in school activities, associating basic emotions with simple non-verbal and para-verbal language elements, expressing basic emotions in various simple, familiar situations” (idem. pp. 5-6).

3. Using skills and attitudes specific of school learning” (idem. p.3).

Specific skills: “identifying simple work tasks in various contexts, achieving a daily schedule of activities with the help of adults, applying simple techniques that support leaning and school success, highlighting the importance of learning for their own person, presenting the conditions that render learning easy or difficult, identifying hobbies, exploring known or preferred professions” (idem. pp.7-9).

Third and fourth grade bring to the fore, in terms of curricular design, the syllabus of a discipline called Civic Education. Areas of interest, at this level, aim at involving the young pupil into social life – integration and belonging to family; allegiance to friends, groups; establishing specific relations with the community, etc. General skills, according to the school curriculum in force for Civic Education, third and fourth grade:

1. Applying norms of behaviour in daily life,

Specific skills: “exploring every individual’s quality as person, acknowledging ways of belonging (local, national, European) in which a person gets integrated; identifying defining moral features of a person; identifying relevant elements for belonging to various communities (local, national, European); exploring small groups and group rules, exploring moral norms that regulate relationships with other people” (see School Syllabus for Civic education, p.5)

2. Manifesting moral-civic behaviours in life contexts within the known environment

Specific skills: „acknowledging and manifesting attitudes in relation to things, plants and animals; exploring existing relationships between people in a group; exploring moral values at the basis of relationships with other people; acknowledging moral-civic behaviours in daily life; differentiating pro-social behaviours from anti-social behaviours; identifying the universal rights of children” (idem., pp 5-8).

3. Cooperating with others for solving simple work tasks, manifesting availability

Specific skills: “positive relating, in small groups/ with others to solve simple work tasks; participating in activities along small groups, by assuming rights and responsibilities; participating in simple projects with moral-civic content within class, school or local community; participating in activities that promote the universal rights of children; participating in projects with moral-civic content, within class, school or local community” (idem. pp. 8-9).

A close analysis of curricular documents at teacher’s disposal helps us not that the content of these school curricula mainly overlaps with the elements of social and emotional intelligence. Activities that can be accomplished to train general and specific skills, taken from the school curricula as mentioned above, focus on topics such as:

Identification/ recognizing feelings, building a vocabulary for them, expressing them appropriately; establishing connections between thoughts, feelings and reactions; acknowledging the importance of emotions in decision making, the capacity and the courage of making decisions; self-knowledge, positivity, building an accurate self-image, availability for the group, openness towards community, etc. Special attention is paid to coping with emotions – an issue as real as it is frequent nowadays – explaining what stood behind a feeling, taking responsibility for own actions. Also, an important preoccupation is the development of the capacity to understand others’ feelings, their perspectives, respecting differences in thinking and feeling things through. We are speaking, therefore, of empathy.

An emotional curriculum, (see M. Suditu, 2015) as a range of activities specially designed for the registry of children’s social and emotional development, for understanding emotions and feelings, for expressing and directing them, was not included within the compulsory curriculum and least likely to have been included among the focus areas for teachers in preschool or primary education, or for teachers in general. Several notions touching the sphere of social skills were

present in the syllabus for Civic Education, in the second part of the primary education (third and fourth grades). It is about learning units about our identity, desirable moral features, establishing friendships with colleagues, with other groups, children's relationship with the immediate environment, accepting persons with difficulties in the group of friends, etc. The stress falls strictly on behaviour, on desirable behaviour rules, on knowing and respecting them, on civilized presence to the social life rather than shifting towards the sources/ factors generating a certain behaviour, understanding them, explaining the need to adapt behavioural responses to a given situation etc .(p.173).

The School Curriculum for Personal Development, as part of the curricular area Counselling and Orientation, starting with preparatory, first and second grades, is realised in . March 2013, by the Ministry's Order no. 3418/19.03 For third and fourth grades, the Civic education remains in place, according to the Curriculum Framework for Primary education (see Curriculum Framework, sanctioned by Order no. 5003, 2014). The Curriculum design – as stated in the school document – is focuses on developing the training profile of pupils for primary education With this occasion, from the early education, and then, in a more organized form from the beginning of school and throughout primary education, children practice the elements of social and emotional skills formation. For example:

- "Elements of self-knowledge – from topics eliciting simple answers to the question "Who am I?", identifying the elements that give identity to a person and self-analysis, to the analysis of oneself in relation to others.
- About social and emotional stimulation –simple and complex behaviours; developing communication skills and then listening and understanding others; training interaction skills, making friends, working together, tolerance, etc.
- About learning, skills, attitudes – topics that focus on training and organizing learning activities, designing and observing a work schedule, discussions regarding time and the time management of learning in relation to other activities, removing stress factors in learning, knowing the wide spectrum of professions" etc. (see MO no. 3418/19.03.2013, Annex no. 2, see also M. Suditu, 2015 , p.174 ).

We notice from reading the compulsory curriculum documents that the stress shifts towards revealing the explanatory mechanisms of behaviours, towards appropriately expressing emotional states, acknowledging them, towards developing children's reflexive attitudes about learning, about their origin group. "The methodological suggestions accompanying the curriculum underline the marked applicative character of contents – resorting to games, therapeutic stories, debates, expressing opinions, role-play, capitalization of personal experiences and sharing in others' experiences, stimulation of pupils' self-trust, etc. personal reflection upon one's progress" (idem., p.174).

## **2. Empirical observation**

As we noted above, the methodological suggestions accompanying the activities proposed in curricula shifts the focus from the theoretical approach of the issue of a balanced social and emotional development towards the practical approach. Important are skill training, providing varied contexts that facilitate children's understanding and the possibility for them to simulate experiences, reactions, interventions, etc. Our unmediated presence in school and kindergarten, the classes we assisted in, the observations and analyses, the face to face discussions with primary and pre-school teachers, lead us to the following:

- Oftentimes, and in the name of obsolete teaching practices, some teachers only sign these activities to look good on paper.
- We can see, sometimes, their little availability in thinking through adequate learning contexts, clarifying examples, relevant and useful applications, etc.
- Lack of inspiration, sometimes, in using some relevant texts for the analysis, the analogies, for reflexion exercises, empathising, role-play, etc.
- Lack of flair in making the most out of the resources provided by a theme that can relate to self-knowledge, coping with emotions, interacting with others and concern for others, management of difficult situations and emotions such as joy, sadness, shame, disappointment, etc.
- Lack of constant readings in topical pedagogic and psychologic literature and, as mentioned in previous occasions, the necessity to participate in continuous education training that covers this area of didactic interest.

### **Conclusions**

We do not, of course, make any generalizations. We would not dare to and it would not be right doing so. But we do draw attention to the fact that the generosity of these themes, plus the philosophy of presenting contents, as outlined in our extensive analysis of the curricula for school and pre-school education, urge towards activities whereby children understand – through exercise and constant practice – the behaviours, the emotional reactions and their consequences, they become aware of the importance of their presence in a group, they think and express themselves according to context, they understand the importance of expressing their own opinion, of self-knowledge, they exercise their decision making skills. All these, in a didactic manner appropriate to the psychological possibilities of their age, with dedication, tact and pedagogical inspiration from the part of teachers.

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