Prerequisites of School Adaptation at the Beginning of the Schooling Period

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Abstract

“What is the optimal beginning age of schooling?” is a question that has been often heard from the specialists or from other persons interested in the field. The beginning of the schooling period at 6 years is supported frequently by political or comparative arguments (with those of other educational systems). A frequent criterion used for the beginning of schooling period is represented by the chronological age (6 years) and is based on the hypothesis according to which the development of the 6 year child’s psycho-socio-emotional level allows him to adapt to the educational environment with all its implications and to the activity of school learning. School readiness is the term used on a large scale to define school competence but there is no consensus on the level of defining the child preparedness for school and the best way to acquire this competence. Most approaches refer to the child’s ability to learn and adapt to the school requirements efficiently. The present study synthetizes the main prerequisites of a successful adaptation to schooling: school maturity and play as a fundamental activity during early years.

Keywords: School readiness, preschool period, school adaptation, school maturity, play.

1. Conceptual framework

Changes in the educational policies underwent in Romania during the last years had been determined by the importation and development of new concepts of educational strategies such as early development. The main objective of such programs is the stimulation of psychical, social and emotional development of children at early ages so that, they should

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prepared to face the school requirements and activities in the short run and to obtain success in the personal, social and professional life in the long run which lead to a social development implicitly. School readiness is the term used on a large scale to define school competence but there is no consensus on the level of defining the child preparedness for school and the best way to acquire this competence. Most approaches refer to the child’s ability to learn and adapt to the school requirements efficiently. The approaches related to the criterion of child maturity consider school readiness „maximum correlation among the developmental fields: cognitive, emotional, psychomotor, social”. (NEGP, 1997) Attaining a certain level of school maturity (physical, cognitive, emotional and social), and also the influence of the family, of school environment and of pedagogical factors upon the child lead to school adaptation (through the assimilation of educational influences and accommodation to the educational environment) – which determines adequate conditions for academic success and superior academic performances implicitly.

The scope of the present study ranges between the interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary domains, at the confluence of developmental psychology, education and learning psychology with education sciences, being an area of interest for specialists in the child psychology and education sciences, but also for parents and for all those with preoccupations in the educational field. Implicitly, most specialists and many parents consider that success in the academic activity and performance in school acquisitions of Grade 1 is due to cognitive competence unidirectionally (notably to school intelligence). Cognitive competence is defined as a set of skills and mental aptitudes and is considered the most powerful predictor which underlie the learning acquisitions of Grade 1, in communication and mathematics domains (written expression and the reception of the written message). The main objective of Cycle 1 is represented by literacy – acquisition of fundamental school competencies (writing, reading, mathematical skills) which contribute to an efficient adaptation in the modern society of knowledge. Writing, reading, arithmetic acquisitions are tools of assimilating knowledge and communication ideas, etc. Recent studies mention that early interventions upon their development in the first school year has positive effects on subsequent school acquisitions. Alongside cognitive competence in the variance of school success, an equally important role, although not very obvious, is ascribed to noncognitive factors, especially social competences (responsibility, cooperation, autonomy, prosocial behavior) as well as the emotional ones (emotional regulation, emotional problems settlement); the child mobilizing capacity for the learning activity also presumes an energetic-motivational side, a volitive one, a minimum of self-
regulation and self-control, conditioned by the development of internal inhibition, etc.

It has been demonstrated that the intervention upon the intellectual abilities which have within their structure a powerful genetic component is difficult to achieve and interpersonal factors can have a mediating effect in the relation between cognitive factors and the child success in school activities. Thus, the development and training of such factors within certain programs would contribute to a rise in the capacity of adaptation to subsequent academic and professional requirements, to the achievement of strategies which would enable the adaptation to stress situations, to an efficient maintaining and management of professional and interpersonal relations, to risk reduction in developing personality disorders.

1.1. School-readiness - an adaptation and regulation process

Bulleted lists may be included and should look like this: The concept of the 6-year child preparedness for school and implicitly for the school activities can be assimilated largely as school adaptation, defined as a complex process „of permanent, dynamic and dialectic interactions” between the pupil and the members of the school community which recognizes his identity, capacities, place and status, which imposes participation norms, rules and obligations to the life of the community based on specific values. (Negovan, 2006, p. 173) Adaptation denotes the favorable result of an action or activity, on condition that they imply a certain difficulty, to require an effort in overcoming difficulties and to fully attain their goal (Coașan, 2000). We can affirm about a person that he was successful in an activity when the action had been carried out, at a certain level of demands, being appreciated socially. School adaptation can be approached as a form of social adaptation. The specific of school adaptation can be derived from this perspective (Negovan, 2006, p. 173) which arises from the interlacing of relational adaptation mechanisms with instructional adaptation mechanisms, the latter being defined as „the pupil’s adequate answer to the instructional exigencies, respectively his readiness to assimilate knowledge and to operationalize them efficiently and creatively” (T. Rudica, 1998, in Negovan, 2006, p. 173). It is also underlined that pedagogical adaptation does not replace relational adaptation in the complex process of school adaptation, on the contrary, it is integrated through organization and self-organization principles (systemic and synergetic) adaptation types. When he starts school, the child adapts to the new social environment „activating mechanisms which will ensure his survival” (Negovan, 2006, p. 175), this adaptation being more than a simple adjustment to new situations. A day of
school life is different from the one in the kindergarten, the activity proper lasts longer, the inactivity and listening periods become longer, routines increase and playing opportunities are sporadic. The relation with the primary teacher is different from the relation with the preschool teacher, the interpersonal relations with the peers follow a routine program. The child must adapt to these social characteristics, different from those of the kindergarten environment, which represent a turning point in his development.

According to Piagetian concepts, school adaptation consists in assimilating the informational content and the norms of the pupil’s status and role on one side and on the other side in adjusting the cognitive and affective-motivational processes to the demands of the school environment. A. Coaşan (2000, p. 10) states that it is rather important to adapt the particularities of school environment (with specific demands and tasks) to a certain developmental stage of the child, in which assimilation and adjustment mechanisms are fit for him. School adaptation does not apply only to the moment of starting school but it represents a process which has to be appreciated through relating the characteristics of the school environment to a certain developmental stage of the child. The child stage and readiness level represent one of the criteria of initial schooling, the implicit premise of learning in the primary cycle but also the essential condition of an optimal school adaptation.

1.2. Transition from play to the learning activity

School adaptation is evaluated according to level the child performs his basic activity (school learning activity), (Coaşan, 2000, p. 12). From this perspective, the child readiness implies the preparedness for a new type of activity- the learning activity. Man possesses the most considerable learning potential manifested from birth to his disappearance as a psycho-physical, emotional-cognitive and spiritual reality (Neaşu, 1999).

From a Piagetian perspective, adaptation presumes an equilibrium between assimilation (incorporation of the schemata of surrounding objects to the schemata of individual behavior) and accommodation (the individual modifies his assimilation cycle in order to comply with the new situation). Piaget defends the existence of a balanced process which acts to consolidate accommodation through assimilation, the balance being maintained by them. This state of equilibrium can be considered as a stage in the pupil’s development. The passage to another stage is characterized by states of disequilibrium involving assimilation and accommodation which will reach to a new state of equilibrium. Coordination and balance relations are set between
assimilation and accommodation, which mediate the interactions with the environment. I. Neaşcu (1999, p. 32) considers that, through this theory based on the bipolar model of adaptation according to which assimilation to the preexisting changes is followed by accommodations implying restructuration and modifications of schemata, Piaget beats the functionalist theory promoted by Ed. Claparede. The role of the adult in setting the equilibrium is practically limited. Thus, school adaptation consists of the degree of adjusting the mental schemata to the requirements of the instructional situation.

Vigotsky considers that a preschooler is not capable to organize stimuli in order to control his behavior. The child acquires the thinking and learning mechanisms as a result of the interactions between him and the adult. The child’s knowledge and skills develop due to this cooperation process. The play activity according to Vîgotsky is considered to be the main factor of general development. The child who faces a problem elaborates unconsciously a real situation he can comply with. Such play involves the use of a set of rules and procedures which make the child consider that an object taken from a familiar context is something else and the rules of the play allow the child behave in a manner detached from reality. (Brich, 2000, p. 81). Play may contain a real professional training for a future activity, being oriented towards the social activity the child observes, imitates and transposes in to play, taking over the main social relations.

The Russian psychologist launches the concept of the zone of proximal development as a unifying concept in understanding the child progress from the dependence on others to the independence in the cognitive functioning. The zone of proximal development represents the interval between what can be achieved by the child without guidance and what he can achieve with the help of someone. This is the crucial area where instructional efforts should be placed. The adult must identify the performance and the potential of a child and to adapt carefully the his intellectual challenges only a step beyond what the child already understands.

1.3. School readiness- a complex maturity process

School-readiness refers to school maturity, to the development of skills and aptitudes which allow the child to achieve the learning activity successfully. This perspective refers to the balance achieved by the set of individual characteristics of the child which opens the way to advance and to new acquisitions. The only way to conceive correctly „school maturity” (the actual condition of the child complete personality before schooling) is the pluridimensional one (Kulcsar, 1978), who takes into consideration: physical maturity, cognitive maturity, social maturity and emotional maturity. We can
affirm that the acquisition of the knowledge and skills calculated for Grade 1 implies a certain level of physical and intellectual development, able to ensure the minimum conditions for a successful learning. It is about the corpus of mental tools and formed sensory-motor mechanisms, which allow the assimilation of information but also about those social and emotional mechanisms which enable the child to adapt easier to the school environment. Thus, the learning activity obliges the child to integrate himself in a common activity, which involves a minimum of self-possession and self-control, the capacity to internalize and to execute verbally formulated tasks, to collaborate with the school teacher and also with his peers. On the other side, the child must mobilize for a continuous activity, which has a strictly determined duration, which can be expressed through an increased capacity of maintaining attention. This involves an energetic-motivational side, having natural limits and oscillations and a volitive side, a minimum of self-regulation and self-control conditioned by the development of internal inhibition, by the interiorization of the verbal command, by the forming of the self-conscience. (Kulcsar, 1978). The age category of 5-6 years presumes multiple acquisitions on the cognitive, social and affective level, being the period of the most intense psychical receptivity, mobility and possibilities, a period of progress on all the levels of the psychical life. It is presumed that until 6 years the child develops his cognitive capacities and language necessary for literacy and numeracy. Also he develops the abilities to manage his own emotions and to manage stress without anger, to cooperate with others around him. The specialty studies confirm that if at the beginning of schooling the child possesses social competences, the ability to cope with stress and a high level of tolerance to frustration, a high level of physical maturity and a motor development in accordance with his age as well as a solid base of language and cognitive skills development, then he can have advantages in assimilating knowledge and in accommodating to the requirements of school life. The degree of adaptation to school life shows the child capacity and need to know, to assimilate, to interiorize external demands of programmed educative influences together with the desire and the capacity to model oneself, to accommodate and to exteriorize. School success (generally appreciated through the learning outcomes) represent a maximum level of school adaptation. School success can be considered an indicator of certain aptitudes, as a motivational element but also as an expression of the pupil’s attitude towards school activities. It is appreciated as being the expression of the concordance among the child capacities, his personality traits and school exigencies (Coașan, 2000). The analysis of school success alongside global success allow us to identify its dimensions determined by the nature of its sustaining abilities, by the areas of social
expression, by the contribution of certain psychical processes which produce it, by the contribution its aptitudinal development factors as well as by the nature of aspirations and the personal style it promotes. (C. Crețu, in Negovan, 2006). School success is a cumulative process which involves both the use of new aptitudes and the improvement of the existing ones (Entwisle & Alexander, 1990). It is expressed by high performances and an increased efficiency in the pupil’s learning activity (Păișă Lăzărescu, 2005). Information about the modality children acquire the literacy and numeracy competencies indicates the specific importance of school abilities, of general cognitive competencies but also particularly of oral language and of conceptualizing skills. Although the idea that the structure of school success is considerably stable in childhood was generally accepted, studies in the field demonstrate transitory fluctuations and fundamental changes in the course of of their success (Kowaleski-Jones & Duncan, 1998, in Duncan, 2007).

From a functionalist perspective, school readiness is conceptualized in terms such as a reference point of development which can be a good support for school success (Ionescu & Benga, 2007). Thus, school-readiness can be considered a criterion of postponing schooling, through a differentiate diagnosis as early as the preschool period (Graue, 2006; Snow, 2006, in Ionescu & Benga, 2007). Researchers of the program The National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1997) complete an articulate model of the concept of school readiness. This model adopts a multilevel approach, including four components: ready child- the child ready for school (the ability of the child to participate and to learn during school experience; ready families: there are important discrepancies as regards academic performance according to family factors- socioeconomic status, ethnic group. Familial atmosphere and parental style, etc. (NEGP, 1997; Rouse, Brooks & McLanahan, 2005); ready schools: the quality of educational programs, the educational climate, the quality of the educational act, the quality of the emotional support offered by the teacher (in Benga & Ionescu, 2007) and ready community: social services which can promote the quality of educational programs at all levels. (NEGP, 1997, Ionescu & Benga, 2007). Starting from this model, M. Miclea şi L. Mihalca, (2007) operationalize the concept of school readiness in three components: particular aptitudes and knowledge the child brings to school; the capacity of the environment the child is part of to favour early development and learning; the capacity of school to promote support in order to develop the newcomer.

A multidimensional understanding of the concept of school readiness notifies us numerous transactional effects which are operational between the child and the context. (Getting Ready, 2005). The development, the maturity and learning are better understood in an ampler contextual
framework, in an organized system of interaction and transactions. In order to obtain school success, the child must possess at the beginning of schooling a set of preliminary behaviours, according to the classifications in the speciality literature (NEGP, 1997; Duncan & al., 2007; Meisels, 1998; Ionescu & Bega, 2007; Sassu, 2007; Miclea & Mihalca, 2007). These are grouped in developmental domains: physical and motor development refers to characteristics such as physical development according to age level, fine motor aptitudes, gross motor aptitudes, a good health state; cognitive abilities: the ability to focus upon a task, the inhibition of irrelevant behaviours or of irrelevant stimuli, the task persistence, memory, language and communication abilities, the ability to organize information, aptitudes of problem solving, the interest for learning, curiosity; social and emotional abilities: obeying, following instructions, abilities of group work, responsibility, cooperation, initiative – represents social abilities related to the learning activity: respect for the others, positive interactions- represents interpersonal social abilities, admitting own emotions an others’ emotions, obeying rules, emotional and behavioural regulation, positive affects – represents emotional abilities; preacademic abilities: knowledge about the properties of objects: (colour, size, functions), understanding relations among objects, events, people, categorizing abilities, simple mathematical problem solving; temperament/ personal characteristics: reactivity and self-regulation. (Miclea & Mihalca, 2007). These developmental domains are also called „academic facilitators” of learning (Di Perna, Volpe & Elliott, 2002), because certain preexisting aptitudes, attitudes and behaviours seem to contribute to the optimization of the learning activity.

2. Conclusions

The beginning of schooling represents an important stage of our evolution, a transition from a well-known secure environment- the kindergarten environment to new, challenging one- the school environment; from the specific activity of play where the world is dominated by and answers to our own wishes, where the voluntary effort is supported by the activity of play to the specific activity of learning, by which we can dominate the word while this domation does not always responds to our own needs and desires, where voluntary effort must be supported by us even if it is not challenging. The modality associated to this transition (adaptation or inadaptation) will certainly determine our subsequent successful evolution.

References


