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SUMMARY

DOCTORAL THESIS

SELF-ASSESSMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AS A PEDAGOGICAL FOUNDATION AND FORMATIVE PRACTICE IN THE MORAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOLERS

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SELF-ASSESSMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AS A PEDAGOGICAL FOUNDATION AND FORMATIVE PRACTICE IN THE MORAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOLERS

ABSTRACT

The doctoral thesis entitled *"Self-assessment in early education as a pedagogical foundation and formative practice in the moral development of preschoolers",* investigates the impact of self-regulation and reflection mechanisms on the development of the moral profile of the preschooler. The research highlights the fact that self-evaluation is not just a method of control, but a real tool for building moral autonomy.

Chapter I analyzes the conceptual foundations of assessment, proposing the transition from the simple measurement of results to "evaluation *as* learning". The major theoretical conclusion is that, in this paradigm, the child ceases to be a passive receiver of the adult's appreciations, becoming able to analyze his own path. Chapter II explores the psycho-pedagogical dimensions of the process, showing that preschoolers can develop self-regulation skills if they benefit from appropriate visual tools. Self-assessment is presented as an essential mechanism for increasing self-esteem and intrinsic motivation. Chapter III creates a connection between reflection and morality. The theoretical foundation emphasizes that the internalization of rules does not occur through conformism or fear, but through the exercise of judging for oneself the correctness of one's own actions, facilitating the transition from heteronomous morality to autonomous morality. Chapter IV includes the applied research carried out, structured over five correlated stages. The Preliminary Study investigated the managerial vision, emphasizing the need for a "real voice" of the child in the assessment process. Study I identified an acute need for practical tools to replace the initial theoretical training of teachers. Study II analyzed the dynamics of group activity, highlighting the tension between the desire for innovation and the difficulty of ceding the control to the child. Study III tracked the correlation between self-assessment practices and moral qualities, using visual tools and model characters to activate the moral qualities of preschoolers. Study IV presents the experimental research carried out, which aimed to test hypotheses centered on the role of self-assessment in the moral development of preschoolers, by capitalizing on a set of teaching materials included in a methodological kit. Chapter V summarizes the results of the experimental research carried out, validating the efficiency of the systematic application of self-assessment techniques as determining factors in the reflective maturation of preschoolers.

Keywords: early education, moral development, self-assessment, methodological kit, formative practices.

CHAPTER I. ASSESSMENT AND SELF-ASSESSMENT IN EARLY EDUCATION: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND OPENINGS TO FORMATIVE PRACTICES

In the educational process in the group, assessment is no longer seen as a control, but as a dialogue that tends towards internalization. The foundation of this change lies in the transition from external assessment (carried out by the educator) to self-assessment (carried out by the child). This transition is essential to transform the preschooler from a simple object of instruction, into an active subject aware of his own evolution (Stan, 2010, p. 10). Basically, self-assessment represents the child's ability to make assessments about his own performance.

This transition is not just a technical procedure, but a form of self-education. Ioan Cerghit (2008, p. 374) emphasizes that through self-assessment, the child learns to compare what he has achieved with what he has set out to do, thus developing a healthy critical spirit. This active involvement decreases resistance or fear towards the adult's assessment, as the mistake is seen as a source of information to do better next time. However, this inner mirror does not appear spontaneously, Dulamă (2005, p. 90) shows that self-appreciation is a capacity that is educated. The child learns to evaluate himself correctly, constantly referring to landmarks and models offered by educators or peers. It is an exercise of objectivity, where the child no longer says that it is good just because he likes the result, but because he understands the criteria he must meet.

As Oprea (2012, p. 52) points out, when the teacher follows "what the preschooler does" and especially "how he does" during the game, assessment is no longer a control tool, but a pillar of his own development. Basically, in the group, we do not check isolated knowledge. We observe the child in all his complexity, starting with the way he interacts with colleagues or with the materials made available to him, what initiatives he takes, how he solves problems and how he grows from a motor, cognitive and affective point of view. This holistic approach allows us to see the real child, with his unique potential, giving us exactly the landmarks we need to guide and personalize his educational path.

Assessment acts as continuous feedback, but to be truly effective, it must be designed in such a way as to arouse children's interest, helping them to monitor their progress on their own and naturally identify where they encounter difficulties. At the same time, it provides the educator with clear clues that she needs to adapt her teaching methods (Ionescu, 2007, pp. 306-307). As Stoian (2018, pp. 126, 129) shows, preschoolers have more to gain when they are

directly involved in their own evaluation. When we focus on what they know how to do practically, their knowledge turns from abstract concepts into real working tools. By resorting to alternative assessment methods such as portfolios, projects or experiments, the educator gives up the role of examiner and becomes a partner who builds a safe and relaxed environment, a real bridge between the child and knowledge.

For this environment to work, the starting point must always be the deep knowledge of the child. A quality education means, by definition, adapting to the needs and interests of the learner (Glava & Glava, 2002, p. 27). That is why, when we analyze the path of a preschooler, we should not evaluate him only by comparison with some external standards, but in relation to his own potential.

To have realistic educational expectations from a preschooler, it is not enough to just look at what he knows or what he can do, we must deeply understand his feelings and motivation. This is where the essence of the relationship between the educator and the preschooler comes in. As Stan (2014, pp. 45, 49) points out, authentic evaluation goes beyond behaviors that we can see with the naked eye. It means paying attention to his emotional reactions, his own pace of learning and the things he is passionate about, in order to build a complete profile. Moreover, this process works both ways, since, knowing the child, the teacher herself evolves, adjusts her methods and becomes an increasingly better guide. Assessment thus becomes a space of mutual respect, in which the preschooler gets a voice, and the adult learns how to listen to it (Ilie et al., 2012, p. 143).

According to the research of Jacob et al. (2020), self-assessment allows the child to monitor their effort and manage attention in real time. The pedagogical implications of this process are closely related to self-regulated learning. A social-interactive learning environment, such as the one in the group, helps him to take over assessment strategies by communicating with others. It thus transforms the feedback received from the educator into an inner voice that guides his or her ability to identify successes or possible errors during the activity on his own (Jacob et al., 2020, p. 116). Beyond adult assessment, the profound purpose of early childhood education remains the formation of the preschooler's ability to reflect on his or her own success, a process known as self-assessment.

CHAPTER II. INTEGRATING SELF-ASSESSMENT INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

In the Romanian lexicographic landscape, the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language defines *self-assessment* as the fact of self-appreciation or of establishing the value of one's own activity. The most complex structure of self-assessment is found in educational psychology, where Zimmerman (2000, p. 16) places this act among the cognitive subprocesses, as an integral part of self-regulated learning. He states that self-assessment is composed of two distinct psychological processes: self-judgment, which involves comparing performance to a standard, and self-reaction, which includes the child's emotional and cognitive response to his or her own outcome (satisfaction, adaptation, defensiveness). This perspective demonstrates that the term has mixed components, and ignoring the emotional side (especially at preschool age) would make this process incomplete.

From a pedagogical point of view, Manolescu (2010, p. 65) emphasizes that any act of assessment, including the one carried out by oneself, has three structural elements: the referential (the assessment criteria), the object of the assessment (the performance itself) and the comparison operation. Thus, the self-assessment component is not limited to a final result but necessarily includes the child's knowledge of the criteria before making a judgment. This view is supported internationally by Andrade and Valtcheva (2009, p. 13), who reject the idea that mere notation is part of the authentic composition of this term. He explicitly argues that self-assessment should not be confused with self-grading. Extending this perspective, Panadero (2017) integrates self-assessment into the broader framework of self-regulated learning. This delineation is salutary for early education, demonstrating that preschoolers can be engaged in self-assessment (reflection on the process), even if they do not yet have the maturity or the tools for self-grading.

To be truly functional, it is very important to integrate self-assessment into classroom activities, as it can be placed at the centre of the teaching-learning-assessment triad. Self-assessment can be carried out in two distinct ways: involving the student in a dynamic and informal process, where he sets his own objectives and tilts the balance towards the intrinsic extreme, while the evaluation of his own performance in relation to predefined criteria moves it towards the extrinsic extreme. The authors also highlight three levels that influence how the student develops: the socio-cultural level (formal and informal contexts), the level of self-assessment itself ("how do I know they have learned") and identity or self-knowledge (Bourke & Mentis, 2011).

Self-assessment thus becomes a process through which the child learns to manage his thoughts and states on his own to achieve his goals (Efklides & Misailidi, 2019, p. 502). This monitoring exercise not only develops autonomy in learning, but shapes how the preschooler begins to follow the rules and communicate with others during play. Basically, the responsibility that the child acquires towards his own work becomes the foundation on which his ability to understand the states of others and to act correctly in the group is later built. This makes the natural transition from regulating activity to forming the first moral behaviors.

A frequently asked question in preschool pedagogy is the optimal time to introduce self-assessment. The analysis of the literature provides answers that contradict classical prejudices. As early as 1984, Stipek (p. 161) refuted the myth that preschoolers were not realistic or capable of metacognition. The author demonstrated that, from the age of 3-4, children possess sequential logical thinking, using the memory of past experiences to make predictions about future performance. Thus, the onset of self-assessment may be placed much earlier than traditional theories suggested.

For this early reflection to be effective, it needs concrete support. Moxley et al. (1990) advocate the use of progress charts. Their case studies show that a 4-year-old can check the correctness of the numbers on their own, and a young schoolchild can monitor their creativity, provided that the support is visual. Thus, self-assessment works optimally only when abstract criteria are translated into graphs or checklists that the child can manage independently.

A fundamental method of structuring this process is its integration into the daily routine. Albro and Ebert (2014, pp. 12-14) analyzed the effectiveness of the "Plan-Do-Review" model, specific to early childhood education. Within this model, self-assessment is not an isolated event but becomes a natural part of the review stage. After the game activity is over, the teacher gathers the children in a circle and guides them to compare the initial intention (plan) with the result.

However, Liebovich (2000, p. 238) draws attention to the fact that there is no universal "magical age" at which a child suddenly becomes capable of self-assessment, and Gullo (2005, pp. 34-35) believes that in the first years of life, children perceive themselves as much more competent than they really are. The child's ability to look at himself and appreciate his own work has been a central topic in modern pedagogy, being approached from perspectives that combine developmental psychology with teaching strategies.

CHAPTER III. MORAL EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL BEHAVIOR AT PRESCHOOL AGE

Moral development is not an effect of chance, a transformation that occurs suddenly, but it is a continuous process of maturation, through which the child learns to balance personal desires with the rules of the group to which he belongs. Understanding this path is essential, because moral judgments and decisions are not the result of a "magical" process. They arise as a result of how our mind processes the information available at a given time (Fiedler & Glöckner, 2015, p. 139).

At the kindergarten level, the first aspect of moral development concerns the way in which the child chooses to act "here and now". The moral decision is not an instinctive reaction, but the result of a rapid cognitive process, described by Crick and Dodge in 1994 (p. 74). This decision in real time is strongly influenced by the social context and the presence of the educator, who can help the child identify the correct answer before he acts impulsively.

Moral formation is a complex and continuous process, the foundation of which is laid from the first years of life. Then the child learns through imitation to adopt the first habits of civilized conduct. The fundamental benchmark for the evaluation of morality remains, in this context, the balance between what we declare and what we do, the central element of moral education is the transformation of external norms into internal values. Such a success does not occur spontaneously, but is the result of a meticulous effort, supported by kindergarten teachers. It is clear that the way a child is educated at this stage will shape his entire existence (Stan, 2021a, p. 163). Values such as empathy, initiative, sincerity, perseverance and generosity cease to be simple words spoken by adults and become real actions through which the little one learns to discover himself and to value others.

Empathy is not just a momentary emotional reaction, but the foundation on which the entire moral conduct of the preschooler is built and involves a complex process through which the child learns to "read" the states of those around him, combining what he feels with what he understands about the context of the other. Salerni and Caprin (2022, p. 2) show that this capacity is amazingly refined in the first years of life. In the community, the child constantly observes the reactions of others, learning that the sadness of a colleague has a cause and that he can be the one who brings about a change. As Williams and Berthelsen (2017, p. 82) point out, when educated correctly, empathy becomes the main source for generosity and initiative, since the child does not help just because he is asked, but because he feels the need of the other as if it were his own.

The moral initiative is the moment when morality ceases to be a form of obedience to the adult and becomes a personal choice. It is that action that we see in the child who gets up to help a classmate, without the teacher asking him to do so. This quality is closely related to the way the child perceives himself. Stan and Opriș (2025, p. 835) explain that when a child learns to recognize his progress and small strengths, he gains the confidence to act spontaneously. The moral initiative shows us that the child has internalized the rule so well that it has become a part of him. It is no longer about being good for the reward, but about the pleasure of being useful.

Sincerity is the binder that gives authenticity to group interactions. In preschool age, sincerity is not a theoretical lesson, but a trait that is learned exclusively through what the child sees in the adult in front of him. Since official documents in Romania unfortunately offer very few benchmarks on what the moral profile of the educator should look like, this task falls entirely to the personal example (Petcu-Nicola & Opriș, 2023). When the adult practices a calm but firm parenting or teaching style, the child no longer feels the need to hide everything for fear of punishment.

Moral perseverance (the ability to do good deeds) often overlaps with perseverance in learning tasks. On a moral level, this "positive stubbornness" allows the preschooler to complete a gesture of help, even if it requires physical effort or sacrificed play time. Perseverance is cultivated when the adult praises the effort, not just the result. It gives the child the inner motivation not to give up when things get tough. *Generosity* is the quality that is refined through constant social practice. Salerni and Caprin (2022) emphasize that early socialization experiences are essential for transforming a selfish impulse into a generous one. In collective games, the child discovers that sharing resources (toys, time, attention) brings him long-term benefits in the form of friendship and collaboration. Generosity is therefore not a "loss" for the preschooler, but a way to build a respected place within the group.

Forming these qualities does not mean ticking some boxes in an evaluation table but laying the foundations for the future adult. Every gesture of generosity between children, every moment of sincerity or initiative, are the small victories that show us that we have managed to plant in their soul something that will remain there long after they leave our group: the joy of being good and the courage to be themselves. The purpose of moral education in the preschool context is to promote the moral development of children, teaching them to distinguish between good and bad, to develop empathy, to learn to cooperate and to assume responsibilities.

CHAPTER IV. PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH ON SELF-ASSESSMENT IN PRESCHOOLERS

The general aim of the research was the multidimensional analysis of self-assessment practices in preschool education (from the perspective of management, teacher training and teacher practices), in order to substantiate, elaborate and experimentally validate a package of educational resources (*Teacher's Guide* and *Child's* Notebook), aimed at optimising the reflective capacity of preschoolers and contributing to their moral development.

Typology of the research carried out

We designed the route of this research starting from the overall reality of the education system and gradually descended to the level of kindergarten, in order to finally offer a practical and tested solution in the group. The succession of the five studies was justified by the need to accurately diagnose the reality in kindergartens, on the assumed topic, before investigating and proposing any tool for improvement.

The preliminary study, *"Principals' and Inspectors' Perspectives on Self-Assessment and Moral Education in Preschool Education" looked at the* way in which managers in preschool education view self-assessment and moral education. We set out to find out if these concepts really apply in kindergartens or exist only in paper. Their answers brought to light the clear distance between the intentions of the official documents and the reality of the group. Thus, we have established clear directions through which self-assessment is no longer a simple theory, but a useful practice for preschoolers.

Study I, *"The need for training on aspects related to self-assessment, in preschoolers. Exploring the teachers' opinion"* analyzed how ready educators feel to apply self-assessment to the group and to what extent initial (college) or continuing education (training courses) has helped them. Their answers highlighted the distance between the theory learned and the real needs in kindergartens, showing us both the current level of trust of teachers on this topic, as well as their desire for improvement. At the same time, we managed to find out what are the most effective methods through which self-assessment can support the moral development of preschoolers.

Study II, *"The use of self-assessment in preschoolers. Quantitative research"* looked at how self-assessment applies to the group compared to traditional assessment. We aimed to find out if the experience of the educator and the kindergarten environment influence the methods and pace of recording children's progress. The data obtained showed that there is a clear link

between the use of digital platforms and a higher frequency of self-assessment. We demonstrated the practical benefits of this approach, showing its positive impact on the entire educational triangle, children, parents and educators.

Through study III, *"Self-assessment and development of moral attitudes in preschoolers. An analysis of methodological resources and group practices"* we followed exactly what resources and practices the group educators use. We looked at how they turn self-assessment into a real tool for shaping children's character, focusing on the chosen teaching methods and materials. The data showed us that the experience at the department and the kindergarten environment (rural or urban) directly influence the strategies adopted.

Study IV, *"The Benefits of Self-Assessment Tools in Optimizing Moral Qualities in Preschoolers"* is the central pillar of the research, detailing the experimental research undertaken and the results obtained. The aim of this study was to highlight the real impact of self-assessment on children's behaviour. We investigated how its constant use in the group helps, concretely, to develop five essential character traits: empathy, initiative, sincerity, perseverance and generosity. On a practical level, we ran an intervention program during five stages, using the "methodological kit". This tool aims to produce a significant change in the activity of the experimental group, to help preschoolers no longer depend on adult validation, teaching them to assume their own behavior on their own and consciously.

Methods and tools for research, analysis and statistical interpretation used

In order to ensure the scientific rigor of the approach and to avoid the limitations of a single approach, we opted for a complex investigative approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods: the psycho-pedagogical experiment, the questionnaire-based investigation, the interview, the analysis of documents, the analysis of the products of the children's activity, the test method, the case study, the observation.

For the processing of the numerical data resulting from the application of the pretest, post-test, retest, notebooks filled in by preschoolers and observation grids applied to preschoolers in the groups selected for research (from study IV), but also of the data from the online questionnaire addressed to teachers in preschool education (studies I, II and III), the IBM SPSS Statistics 20 statistical program was used. Adrian Labăr (2008) considers this program to be the most useful in the analysis of statistical data.

For the qualitative analysis of the data in the interview guide, we used the KH Coder program, (Higuchi, 2023) tool that helped us to deeply interpret the responses of principals and inspectors for early childhood education (preliminary study). This program offers the

opportunity to work with a large volume of qualitative data, transforming respondents' responses into a coherent, verifiable and easy to argue academically structure.

For the processing of the qualitative data obtained at the focus-group, we used the QDA Miner Lite software (Adu, 2023). Through its manual coding features, the program helped us quickly identify recurring themes, nuances of speech, and differences in participants' ideas, while maintaining fidelity to their "voice."

Preliminary study: PERSPECTIVES OF PRINCIPALS AND INSPECTORS ON SELF-ASSESSMENT AND MORAL EDUCATION IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

We consider it essential to find out the opinion of those who have the power to contribute to the change of mentalities and educational practices and who see the education system as a whole. For this reason, we have turned our attention to teachers who occupy management positions. Thus, the sample consisted of 4 school inspectors and 15 kindergarten directors from 8 counties of the country. The study aims to determine how integrated self-assessment actually is in preschool activities.

The results indicate that self-assessment is perceived as a relevant and necessary element in the Early Childhood Education Curriculum (2019). Overall, all the experts interviewed recognise the huge potential of self-assessment for the development of children and call for the creation of clear national guidelines, age-appropriate visual tools and training courses that make this process a mandatory presence in school documents.

The analysis, supported by both KH Coder and the direct experience of inspectors and principals, shows that the continuous training of teachers has visibly evolved in recent years. The improvement programs have been modernized and today place a much greater emphasis on the emotional universe of the child. However, academic training often remains theoretical, providing few practical resources for translating concepts into concrete activities. Because there is a lack of benchmarks for the use of self-assessment in preschoolers, educators are forced to use their intuition and their own experience to "invent" games and methods to teach children to reflect on their own progress. Although children are ready to take this step through play, they lack essential visual resources, such as reflection boards.

The respondents' responses highlight the fact that currently adapting self-assessment to the diversity of preschoolers is a process that is only partially and unevenly carried out. Although educators generally manage to adjust the pace of activities according to each child,

cultural and family dimensions remain in less explored areas. They are managed rather intuitively, without there being a clear system that integrates the child's home context into his or her self-assessment process at kindergarten. Self-assessment is not a simple assessment technique, but a strategic investment in the education of the future responsible adult. When practiced constantly, correctly and permanently linked to moral values, self-assessment becomes a continuous source of self-knowledge, empathy and responsibility. Centered on the child and built through play and reflection, it can become a successful pedagogical practice, only if it is supported by a solid methodological infrastructure, connected to the reality on the ground.

The implementation of effective self-assessment practices is often hampered by a lack of a clear framework, unequal resources, and limited time. The solution requested by all participants in the study is a common strategy, assumed from the ministry level to the educational unit. This should include unitary guidelines, reduce bureaucracy and create a real partnership with the family, so that moral education is supported from all directions. Also, monitoring of self-assessment should be based on a balanced mix of indicators, collected through direct observation, portfolios and parental feedback. The emphasis should not be placed on measuring the child in the classic sense, but on the quality of the process and on the way in which the institution manages to support the educator in this endeavor.

The conclusions highlight the fact that self-assessment is an essential pillar in the development of the moral autonomy of the preschooler. Its development depends on playful and visual tools that make the process easy to understand and meaningful for children. Although there are obstacles such as bureaucratic pressure or lack of time, the future direction indicated by the experts is one of hope: transforming school inspection into a mentoring process and creating networks of good practices, in which the entire educational community works together for the good of the child.

The results highlight the fact that self-assessment in preschoolers goes beyond the scope of a simple learning technique, being perceived by experts as a strategic investment in the development of the character and autonomy of the future adult.

Study I: THE NEED FOR TRAINING ON ASPECTS RELATED TO SELF-ASSESSMENT, IN PRESCHOOLERS. EXPLORING THE TEACHERS' OPINION

Most researchers agree that initial and continuous teacher training in the field of preschool self-assessment is essential for the development of an effective education system. The present study aims to highlight the relationship between the methods of initial and continuous training in training on aspects related to self-assessment in preschoolers, the current level of training of educators in the field of self-assessment and the opinion of teachers regarding the need for improvement on this issue.

Respondents consistently indicate that the training process they carried out on their own or through refresher courses after completing their studies had a much greater impact on the skills acquired on aspects related to self-assessment. Teachers feel much more in control of self-assessment methods due to the experience gained later and not necessarily due to the theoretical basis received during their studies, pedagogical high school or college. Although the initial training provides the first notions of assessment, they are perceived as less relevant or less applicable in the specific context of self-assessment in the group of children.

Mastering this field is not an innate skill, but one that develops and consolidates throughout your career. The data shows that there is a statistically significant association between the level of training of teachers on aspects related to self-assessment in preschoolers and socio-demographic and professional variables of respondents (seniority, grade, age), through the clear assessment of the level of competence as the years of activity add up. If at the beginning of their careers (0-5 years), only a small percentage of teachers (15.3%) feel very well prepared, in the case of those with more than 35 years of experience, almost half of them (49.2%) declare a very good level of training. This shows that long group practice helps the most in the field of self-assessment.

Investment in vocational training is directly influenced by teachers' belief that these courses bring a real benefit to their group work. Although only a very small percentage of teachers have participated in such courses so far (8.1%), there is a huge opening for the future, with 92.1% of respondents expressing their intention to participate. This discrepancy suggests an acute need for training courses on self-assessment in preschoolers, with 95.8% considering them useful for their work. This correlation between participation and usefulness shows that teachers' motivation is a pragmatic one, they are especially looking for tools that facilitate the work with preschoolers in the self-assessment process. The data shows us that the people who do not intend to attend such courses are mostly the same ones who do not find them useful.

The data obtained show that there are statistically significant differences between the ways of optimizing the self-assessment process in preschoolers. Respondents do not consider all solutions to be equally useful, but show a clear hierarchy of options that would help them the most in group work. Participation in courses (43.6%) took first place, followed by reading a practical guide (29.4%) and making support materials (21.5%). This hierarchy shows that there is a major emphasis on the need for structured training and concrete resources, ready to be used in the group. We observe, therefore, that not every method of professional support is considered equally valuable by the respondent teachers.

Study II: USE OF SELF-ASSESSMENT IN PRESCHOOLERS. QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Self-assessment is essential in the development of self-awareness and social skills in preschool children, having an important role in their development. To be effective in early education, it must be adapted to the cognitive and emotional level of the child, using interactive methods and games. The present study aimed at an in-depth and multidimensional analysis of the self-assessment process among preschoolers, aiming to determine how this pedagogical tool can be optimized to become an effective mechanism for regulating learning.

The data show that the direct evaluation carried out by the teacher remains the main method and the most frequently used in the group, respondents tend to give higher marks to the classic assessment, which occupies the first place in the hierarchy of pedagogical preferences. Although it is considered a modern and useful method, self-assessment in preschoolers (where children analyze their own progress) is in an intermediate position. It is used significantly less often than traditional valuation, but much more often than intervaluation. This suggests that educators are beginning to integrate the "voice of the child" into this process, but the control of assessment remains predominantly with the adult.

Inter-evaluation, the process by which children evaluate each other, is the least used evaluative action used of the three analyzed. Self-assessment is gaining ground and is much more present in lessons than interassessment, but it has not yet managed to balance the balance with traditional assessment, indicating the need for additional methodological support to encourage the child's autonomy in this process. We can conclude that there are statistically significant differences between the self-assessment in preschoolers and the other assessment actions used by the respondents.

We wondered if there are statistically significant differences depending on variables related to the teacher's personal equation (level of education completed, seniority in education, teaching degrees), in the use of self-assessment in preschoolers. The results of the applied statistical tests show us that there are no statistically significant differences depending on the studies and seniority in education of the respondents, but only according to the teaching degree, the first-degree educators being the most familiar with the self-assessment techniques. The data show that the level of expertise confirmed by the teaching degrees directly influences the frequency of the use of self-assessment.

Beyond individual professional skills, the success of any teaching strategy is often shaped by the concrete conditions in which the group activity takes place. The next question shifts the focus from the teacher's internal profile to environmental and organisational factors, exploring the extent to which the environment of residence, the age level of preschoolers or the size of the group represent barriers, or on the contrary, facilitators for the use of self-assessment techniques used in preschool education: 'self-grading', 'rubric', 'traffic light' and 'checklist'. The results indicate that most of these teaching tools are used with a relatively constant frequency, regardless of external conditions. This suggests that educators perceive these techniques as easy to adapt, regardless of the resources or specifics of the kindergarten in which they work.

We aimed to see if there are statistically significant differences between the key stages in the process of self-assessment in preschoolers depending on the environment in which the kindergarten is located and the type of education. We can affirm that there is a remarkable professional consensus, with the results suggesting that educators follow the same methodological steps regardless of the resources or location of the institution. The statistical tests applied for all five stages (presentation of the task, encouragement of questions, use of grids, mutual evaluation and presentation of success criteria) recorded values of the significance threshold above 0.05, which confirms that the residence environment is not a factor that would change the structure of this pedagogical approach.

The data confirm that there are statistically significant differences between the ways of recording progress in self-assessment in preschoolers. The results of the data analysis indicate the overwhelming preference of teachers for tools that allow a clear and punctual record of each child, to the detriment of methods based on narrative or collective reflection. Most respondents believe that the most effective way to track the child's evolution is through

personalized tools. Out of the total of 1490, a massive number of respondents (1203) use the "individual progress sheet", making this tool a standard for recording group self-assessment.

We set out to verify whether there is a positive correlation between the frequency of use of self-assessment in preschoolers and the evaluation of the usefulness of educational software in this process. The results indicate a positive and significant link between the frequency with which educators apply self-assessment and the way they appreciate the usefulness of educational software. The dominant opinion of respondents suggests that technology is not an isolated element, but a facilitator that makes the reflection process more attractive and manageable for the little ones.

The participants believe that the digital environment provides immediate feedback, which is essential for the preschooler to understand where he is and what he has to improve. At the same time, educational software is seen as a methodological support that allows an interactive recording of children's success. This synergy between digital and pedagogical is also supported by the research of Darling-Hammond (2006), who argues that modern teachers need tools that allow them to approach didactic strategies for authentic learning.

The success of a modern educational approach is evaluated not only by the individual progress of the child, but by the way in which it brings added value to all those involved in the pedagogical act. The last research question aimed to verify whether there are statistically significant differences between the beneficiaries of the use of self-assessment in preschoolers (preschoolers, educators, parents). The almost unanimous opinion of the study participants is that the biggest winners of this process are children. Many teachers believe that self-assessment in preschoolers supports them in their own work, giving them a clearer perspective on how children perceive their tasks and allowing them to adjust their teaching strategies in real time. A considerable number of respondents believe that self-assessment facilitates more transparent communication between kindergarten and home, giving parents a deeper picture of their child's progress.

The second study provides a clear and unified view of how self-assessment is integrated in kindergartens in Romania, highlighting the fact that there is a shift from a model centered on teacher authority to one that encourages early child autonomy.

Study III: SELF-ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL ATTITUDES IN PRESCHOOLERS.

Study III aimed to analyze how respondents use self-assessment to build the moral skills of the little ones, looking at whether professional experience changes this approach, or whether the kindergarten environment influences the choice of working methods and preferred resources in carrying out moral activities in kindergarten.

The results of the research confirm that the way teachers use self-assessment is not uniform, but varies significantly depending on the professional path of each one. We can say that there are statistically significant differences in the educator's targeting of the development of moral skills and attitudes in preschoolers through the use of self-assessment, depending on seniority in education and teaching degrees. As for the seniority at the department, the data show that the interest in the development of moral skills through self-evaluation follows an interesting trajectory. It is very high at the beginning of the career and returns in force to teachers with very rich experience.

Although the basis of moral education is unitary, the frequency of use of certain methods varies significantly depending on the context of the community, the most visible differences appear in the case of moral conversation, memorization and dramatization, in rural areas these methods being used with a higher frequency than in urban areas. This suggests that in the villages there is a greater emphasis on direct dialogue, on fixing values through lyrics and on staging moral behaviors, actively integrating traditions and community interaction into the educational act. On the other hand, methods such as storytelling, moral example, didactic play or exercise are used in a fairly similar way in both environments, this standardization demonstrates that these pedagogical methods are considered essential regardless of the resources or location of the kindergarten.

We also wanted to find out if there is an association between teachers' preference for composing moral stories and the use of material resources (children's Bible, storybooks with moral-civic/religious-moral substrate) in the moral education of preschoolers. The results show that the choice of resources in moral education is significantly influenced by the creative availability of the teacher, the data indicating a strong and positive association between the tendency to compose stories and the use of storybooks with a moral-religious or moral-civic substrate. A particularly interesting aspect arises in relation to the use of the Bible for children,

teachers who prefer to compose their own materials, tend to use this resource to a much lesser extent than the rest of their colleagues. This difference highlights the existence of two different pedagogical profiles, on the one hand teachers who choose to transmit moral values through established resources and on the other hand those who prefer a more personal path, based on their own creativity.

The study shows that children's preferences for certain teaching means are not at all accidental, as the little ones have a very clear hierarchy of resources that attract their attention and help them better understand human values. The children's favorite medium is, without a doubt, the didactic film. This preference shows us that at preschool age, movement, image and emotion transmitted through the screen is the shortest path to the child's heart. Basically, an animated character who goes through a moral dilemma captivates the little ones much more than any other static material, facilitating a quick internalization of the message. On a secondary level, children tend to appreciate resources that allow them to "browse" stories or interact with tangible characters such as picture books, educational boards or puppets.

The way of recording progress in self-assessment is far from uniform, teachers showing a clear preference for certain methods that allow them a more efficient and organized monitoring of the evolution of the little ones. The most used methods are observation grids and checklists, which are the pillars on which most respondents rely, regardless of the environment in which they work or their professional experience. This choice demonstrates an orientation towards practical tools, which allow a quick and clear recording of the behaviors and skills acquired by children.

In rural areas, there is a more pronounced inclination towards the organization of contests with moral themes, frequently used as tools for motivation and learning values. In contrast, city kindergartens tend to place greater emphasis on inviting outsiders to talk to preschoolers about values and behavior patterns. Also, the results of statistical analyses confirm that there are statistically significant differences between the formal sources (methodological guides, specialized journals) and the informal ones (own experience, good practice guides, websites) selected by educators for the design of moral education activities. The analysis of the sources used for the design of moral education activities reveals a very balanced professional profile of the educator. On the one hand, the methodological guide remains the main pillar of safety, being the most frequently used individual source, while academic journals and simple intuition based on one's own experience are left to the last. The study shows that self-assessment is a bridge between knowledge, honesty and responsibility.

Study IV: THE VALENCES OF SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOLS IN OPTIMIZING MORAL QUALITIES IN PRESCHOOLERS.

The substantiation of the experimental approach starts from a pedagogical reality frequently encountered in the classrooms, the significant discrepancy between the theoretical knowledge of moral rules by preschoolers and their voluntary application in their own behavior. Although most preschoolers are able to list desirable behaviors, such as generosity or empathy, their implementation often remains conditioned by the presence and authority of the adult.

In this context, the present research aims to go beyond the traditional approach, based on reward and external sanction, proposing an intervention model centered on self-regulation and self-assessment mechanisms. The tools used in the present research (self-grading, traffic light technique, checklist, evaluation rubric) had precisely this purpose: to facilitate the transition of preschoolers from simple dependence on adults, to conscious assumption of moral behavior.

General hypothesis:

The use of self-assessment techniques (self-grading, traffic light technique, checklist, assessment rubric) in early education, within a formative intervention, leads to the improvement of the level of moral development of preschoolers, by optimizing the cognitive dimension, socio-emotional development and emotional and behavioral self-regulation.

Secondary hypotheses:

I1. The use of self-assessment techniques in formative intervention leads to a statistically significant improvement in the cognitive dimension of moral development in the preschoolers in the experimental group, compared to the control group.

I2. The use of self-assessment techniques leads to differentiated increases in the level of cognitive moral development in preschoolers, depending on the group in which they are.

I3. The use of self-assessment techniques leads to significant improvements in socio-emotional development in preschoolers, evidenced by observational indicators and differentiation according to age and gender.

I4. The use of self-assessment techniques contributes to the improvement of emotional and

behavioral self-regulation in preschoolers, reflected in the optimization of the relationship with oneself and with others.

Research variables:

In the experimental research, *the independent variable* was represented using self-assessment techniques (self-grading, traffic light technique, checklist, evaluation rubric).

The dependent variables were structured according to the research hypotheses:

- the level of moral development at the cognitive level, assessed by the scores obtained by the preschoolers in the specific tests, compared between the experimental group and the control group;
- the different level of moral development at the cognitive level, depending on the age group, evidenced by the differentiated variations and increases in the performance of preschoolers;
- the level of socio-emotional development, assessed by observational indicators such as empathy, initiative, cooperation and manifestation of prosocial behaviors, analyzed according to age and gender;
- the level of emotional and behavioral self-regulation, evidenced by observational indicators such as self-control, perseverance, balancing behavioral reactions and the quality of relating to oneself and others.

Structure and particularities of research

Given the complexity of the variables involved in moral development at preschool age, the investigative approach was structured on a mixed research design. This methodological architecture combines statistical rigor (offered by the representative sample of 330 preschoolers) with the finesse of the qualitative in-depth analysis (provided by the case studies and focus-group). The research was carried out in an extensive institutional framework, comprising a network of 12 preschool education units. The selection of these locations was not random, but aimed to ensure a socio-educational diversity that would give external validity to the results.

Research methods and tools used

To capture a complete picture of the changes that occurred in preschoolers, both at the level of thought (what they understand about morality) and at the level of deed/action (how they behave), we used a mixed system of research methods and data collection tools. In order to objectively measure the children's progress, we designed, together with the partner educators, a set of three docimological tests (pretest, posttest and retest), built on a unitary

specification matrix. Each test included 10 items based on Bloom's revised taxonomy, assessing preschoolers gradually, from the simple recognition of a behavior in images, to the level of analysis, where we asked them to justify their moral choices.

To guarantee the accuracy of the data, the test was used differently for children than for educators. It was applied to the preschooler in the form of an open-ended interview, presenting only the image, not the answer options, thus, we avoided the risk of simply guessing the "right" option. He freely verbalized his solution, and the teacher had the task of coding this spontaneous response, checking the option that best corresponded to his words.

An essential methodological element was the digitization of the data collection process. In order to efficiently and rigorously manage the large sample of 330 preschoolers, the administration of the three test stages was carried out exclusively in digital format, through the Google Forms platform. The educators entered the children's answers directly into secure forms, each preschooler being assigned a unique identification code. This practical decision guaranteed the confidentiality of the data. Moreover, the direct completion in the platform eliminated the risk of human errors inherent in manual transcription from paper and facilitated the automatic generation of a unitary database, ready for subsequent statistical analysis.

The core of the research was the formative stage, based on the introduction of the independent variable through the methodological kit. To guarantee a rigorous standardization of the intervention, so that all children benefit from the same learning conditions, regardless of the kindergarten or environment they come from, we have designed and physically distributed an educational package, complete and unitary. This kit was printed entirely in color, to respect the visual specificity of the preschool age and included: *the child's notebook* (166 individual copies were distributed, one for each preschooler in the experimental groups), *the teacher*'s tutor, one for each group where the experiment was implemented. It served as a detailed planning tool, providing the "turnkey" didactic scenarios and moral stories necessary to carry out the activities.

In order to support the playful and applicative character, the kit was completed with a rich material base*, the set of auxiliary teaching materials* that included all the inventory necessary for daily activities: tiles for traffic lights, drawings and silhouettes for stories, poems, board games, cutting elements, envelopes with solutions for the various sections in the notebook and dice with behavioral tasks. The distribution of identical and complete materials in all locations eliminated variations in the quality of teaching caused by the lack of resources in the group and ensured that all children were exposed to the same formative stimuli.

As the very detailed monitoring of all the preschoolers in the experimental groups would have been logistically impossible and would have overcrowded the work of the teachers, we resorted to a strategic selection. By applying a sampling step, we selected five representative preschoolers from each experimental group for in-depth monitoring.

For these five preschoolers, we used the Behavior Observation Grid, a tool periodically completed by the educators. The element of methodological innovation at this level consisted in the digitization of the observation process through the Kinderpedia educational platform. Specifically, each teacher involved created a personalized account on the platform and generated the profiles of the preschoolers in their experimental group. This move to the digital environment had major practical advantages, it allowed the educators to record the children's reactions in real time, directly from the classroom, in an organized environment.

In order not to limit ourselves only to the figures and statistical trends obtained on the extended sample, we have additionally integrated into the research design a qualitative dimension, the case study protocol. We selected with the help of the educators and by capitalizing on the data from the initial tests three preschoolers, representing distinct behavioral typologies frequently encountered in the educational environment: the typology of the impulsive child, the anxious child and the one dependent on adult validation.

The methodological picture was completed, at the end of the experimental phase, by a focus-group session attended by nine educators directly involved in the group implementation of the research. The discussions were extremely valuable for the research. They highlighted not only the obvious successes, such as positive changes in preschoolers' behavior, but also the practical challenges.

Follow-up study (sustainability of the model three years later). At 3 years from the completion of the formative stage, we conducted a longitudinal study on a sample of 12 educators who participated in the initial implementation. The purpose of this approach was to collect new data, at an appreciable distance from the research period and to measure the long-term impact. We aimed to find out to what extent self-assessment tools have been internalized by teachers and transformed into current educational practices.

Moreover, this study allowed us to see how the self-assessment methods included in the teaching tools used in the research stand the test of time, thus suggesting their ability to be successfully transferred and used with new generations of preschoolers as well.

Pre-experimental stage

This initial phase began with the institutional and administrative steps: the selection of

kindergartens where the research was to be implemented, discussions with the management teams and the signing of official collaboration agreements with the "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, the organization of meetings with parents, informing them about the objectives of the study and signing the informed consent form. The pretest was then applied; the experimental and control groups were established.

An important step of this stage was the 2-hour training session, dedicated to the educators who agreed to facilitate the training program. On this occasion, the Methodological Kit was distributed to them, and they were familiarized with the research protocol. The correlation of the activities in *the Teacher's Guide* with the tasks in *the Child's Notebook*, the procedure for uploading multimedia evidence (photos, videos) to Kinderpedia and the correct way to fill in the Observation Grid were discussed.

Presentation of the pretest

In the pre-experimental stage, we evaluated the initial level of moral development of the 330 preschoolers, through the pretest. From the perspective of assessment theory, the items used in the pretest fall into the category of objective multiple-choice items. This methodological choice was essential to ensure the fidelity of the research, eliminating the subjectivism of the educator in grading (the answer is either right or wrong, without intermediate interpretations).

However, the way of administration conferred a special particularity for preschoolers. They functioned as semi-objective items with short or restricted answers, because the teacher did not read their answer options (a, b, c, d), the child had to generate the solution himself, which increased the validity of the test. The answer was not "guessed" but mentally constructed by each preschooler. For us, as researchers, framing the preschooler's response in the standardized grid allowed the transformation of qualitative data (the child's words) into quantitative data (score 0 or 1), thus facilitating subsequent statistical analysis in the SPSS. Thus, the instrument managed to combine the rigor of quantitative measurement with the naturalness of the dialogue specific to the preschool age.

Formative experiment

This stage represented the core of the investigative approach, taking place over 25 weeks. The intervention was structured on a "scaffolding" design, following a clear weekly routine to ensure the consistency of learning. The activities began every Monday, at the "Morning Meeting", by reading a story with moral content from the Teacher's Guide. The initial

goal was to familiarize preschoolers with abstract values and concepts (empathy, initiative, perseverance, sincerity, generosity). Subsequently, during the week, teaching activities were carried out, and self-assessment tools (traffic light cards, emoticons) were gradually introduced. At the end of the week, after the notions were well understood and practiced, the preschoolers worked independently in the notebook (on the sheet corresponding to the story), directly applying one of the self-assessment techniques concerned: self-grading, traffic light technique, checklist or evaluation rubric.

Throughout the intervention, the monitoring was rigorous and transparent. The teachers constantly documented the process, uploading multimedia evidence (photos and videos) from the group activities to the Kinderpedia platform. For the preschoolers in the depth sample (the five children selected by sampling step in each group), the observation grid was completed and updated every five weeks. To ensure the accuracy of these digital assessments, the teachers permanently maintained a physical notebook of observations in the group, where they wrote down the children's spontaneous reactions.

Content sample selection

In terms of content, the tutor works as an integrated resource, bringing together in one place all the elements necessary for the development of the program, from theoretical to applicative support. In its pages there are detailed the specific methods of self-assessment, such as self-grading, traffic light technique, checklist or evaluation rubric, explained by concrete visual examples, so that their application becomes intuitive. More than just a presentation of tools, the tutor connects these methods with the universe of moral stories, offering suggestions for practical activities, role-plays, and reflection questions that turn reading into a life lesson.

The five moral qualities we have pursued in this research were not chosen at random. For our study to be truly useful in the group, we have made sure that these qualities are present in the official documents that guide preschool education today: Early Childhood Education Curriculum (2019) and Fundamental Milestones on Early Child Learning and Development from Birth to 7 Years (RFIDT 2010/2024).

Seen as a personal extension of group activities, *the Child's Notebook* represents the individual work tool of the preschooler, being the point of convergence between play, teaching task and moral reflection. Going beyond the status of a simple collection of worksheets, this notebook has been structured in the form of an attractive visual diary, which invites the preschooler to become the protagonist of his own training and to monitor his progress in a friendly and age-friendly way.

Post-experimental stage (post-test)

After the 25 weeks in which the preschoolers in the experimental groups were systematically exposed to the formative intervention, and those in the control groups followed the usual educational path, both groups were subjected to the post-test, at which time we measured the impact of the methods used on the children's moral qualities.

Remote verification stage (retest)

The last phase of the investigative approach aimed to verify the stability of the acquisitions about a month after the end of the training program. In order to ensure statistical validity and direct comparability of the data on all three test moments, the retest was administered in strict compliance with the same methodological protocol. The test was developed according to the same specification matrix as in the pre-test and post-test, applied through an individual interview (exclusive presentation of images) and digitally recorded through Google Forms platform. This stage highlighted the extent to which the level of moral understanding and self-assessment of preschoolers was maintained even after direct intervention ceased.

To really understand what happened in the group rooms beyond the numbers, we organized at this stage an open discussion (focus-group) with the educators involved. We wanted to find out the "unwritten story" of the experiment, remarkable elements observed by the educators during the experiment, guiding the conversation according to a set of 10 key questions. The data allowed us to get an overview with qualitative data.

Results of experimental research

This subchapter summarizes the results of the experimental research, aiming to test the general hypothesis, according to which *"The use of self-assessment methods in early education, within a formative intervention, leads to the improvement of the moral development of preschoolers, by optimizing the cognitive dimension, socio-emotional development and emotional and behavioral self-regulation".* The data are presented analytically, detailing the stages by which each secondary hypothesis was tested.

The first hypothesis aimed to test the statement according to which *"The use of self-assessment methods within the formative intervention leads to a statistically significant improvement of the cognitive dimension of moral development in preschoolers in the experimental group, compared to the control group".* The research approach was subordinated to the first objective (O1), which aimed to assess the initial level of development of moral

qualities (empathy, initiative, perseverance, sincerity and generosity) in the pre-test stage. The data collected in this phase were used in the sampling. The results showed that only a small proportion of preschoolers, 8.8% in the experimental group and 10.1% in the control group, were at a high level, the rest showing a behavior dependent on strict adult guidance.

The second objective (O2) of the research consisted in carrying out the training program through the systematic integration of visual self-assessment tools. Unlike the control group, where evaluation remained a predominantly task of the teacher, this responsibility was gradually transferred to the preschoolers in the experimental group, through specific techniques: *self-grading* and *evaluation rubric* for reporting to quality standards, *traffic light technique* for monitoring behavior in real time and *checklists* for structuring the steps of a task. These teaching tools functioned as a symbolic "mirror" through which the children learned to manage their inner impulses on their own and to logically analyze how much effort they made, or how correctly they related to others, transforming external norms into consciously assimilated cognitive landmarks.

The effectiveness of this approach has been fully proven by the achievement of the third objective (O3), which focuses on investigating quantitative changes in the post-test phase. The results reveal a significant discrepancy between the two groups, statistically validating the superiority of the approach brought by the independent variable. While the control group made minimal progress, which is natural for the natural pace of development (an increase from 10.1% to 13.4% at the high level), the preschoolers in the experimental group made a significant leap, with the percentage of those who achieved moral autonomy increasing almost 5-fold, to 49.1%. Another relevant indicator for the success of the intervention was the impressive reduction in the number of preschoolers at a low level of moral development, which fell from 45.3% to only 9.4%. These data show that the evolution towards behavioral autonomy was not accidental, but the direct result of the introduction of the independent variable through the constant use of self-assessment tools that facilitated the rational understanding of moral values, thus confirming the first secondary hypothesis.

The second secondary hypothesis, *"The use of self-assessment methods leads to differentiated increases in the level of cognitive moral development in preschoolers, depending on the group in which they are",* was tested through a research approach aimed at achieving the fifth objective (O5), focused on the investigation and differentiated analysis of the effects of the independent variable according to the age group (middle and high). The research highlighted that although all children progressed, the impact of self-assessment varied

significantly. In the large groups, the reflective component was more accentuated by the more successful use of the evaluation headings, while in the medium groups, progress was more strongly mediated by the immediate visual support of the traffic light, with statistically significant differences between the groups. Variations in results indicate that the use of self-assessment is effective in both groups, but they are also flexible. The results are obtained according to the cognitive maturity of the collective, the emphasis at the same time the transition to moral autonomy in a personalized way. The analysis of the data shows that the second secondary hypothesis is also confirmed.

The third secondary hypothesis aimed at testing the claim that *"The use of self-assessment methods leads to significant improvements in socio-emotional development in preschoolers, evidenced by observational indicators and differentiated according to age and gender".* It was tested by research approaches subordinated to objectives four and six (O4, O6). Through the method of systematic observation (O6), the dynamics of the development process at the level of cooperation and empathy behaviors were investigated, observing a deep internalization of them. Moreover, the evaluation of stability over time by performing the retest (O4) certified that this progress was not a passing one. In the experimental group, performance was maintained at 96% (a minimum fluctuation from 49.1% to 47.2%), proving that socio-emotional acquisitions became stable character traits, positively influenced the maturation and gender difference of each child. The analysis of the results leads to the conclusion that the 3rd secondary hypothesis is also confirmed.

The fourth secondary hypothesis aimed at testing the statement according to which *"The use of self-assessment methods contributes to the improvement of emotional and behavioral self-regulation in preschoolers, reflected in the optimization of the relationship with oneself and with others".* The qualitative analyses of the data provided by the case studies on individual trajectories (O7), showed that the introduction of the independent variable, through the systematic use of visual tools, acted as a "brake" for impulsivity or as “scaffolding" for independence. The success of this self-regulation process is also confirmed by the investigation of teachers' perceptions (O8). The results from the focus group and the sustainability analysis over a period of 3 years show that the educators constantly capitalized on the didactic elements used in the formative experiment, reporting an optimization of the atmosphere in the group and a frequent use of self-notation (82%). Thus, the control initially imposed by the adult has turned into an internal resource, further validating the fact that self-evaluation leads to effective and lasting changes, to the responsibility of the preschooler in his relationship with the world. The

data thus indicate that the last secondary hypothesis is also confirmed.

It can thus be stated that the optimization of the cognitive dimension was validated by the statistically significant difference recorded at the post-test, where preschoolers showed an internalization of moral qualities. The maturation of socio-emotional development was noted by the stability of the purchases at the retest, proving that it was not an accident or a happy result, momentary, caused by the children's enthusiasm to use new and brightly colored materials. The efficiency of emotional and behavioral self-regulation, supported by case studies and feedback from teachers, showed that the true essence of self-assessment methods lies in making the child responsible.

Through the significant transfer of control from the adult to the preschooler, self-assessment transforms moral norms from a set of external obligations into an internal resource, independently aware and applied in the relationship with oneself and those around oneself. The corroboration of the research data on the four secondary hypotheses shows that *the general hypothesis of the research* is fully confirmed. The use of self-assessment methods in early childhood education is a determining factor in improving the moral development of preschoolers.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Conclusions derived from the analysis of the theoretical foundations

The theoretical analysis in the first three chapters shows that the transition from the assessment made exclusively by the adult to the self-assessment of the preschooler is not a simple difference of method, but both a complex approach and a scientifically based necessity. The study of literature has led us to three major theoretical conclusions, which support and explain our entire practical approach:

Moving to assessment as a learning process

Pedagogical theory has evolved from simple outcome measurement (Tyler, Stake), to formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2002) and, finally, to the concept of 'assessment *as* learning' (Earl, 2003). In this paradigm, the boundary between learning and being evaluated tends to disappear. The preschooler is no longer just a passive receiver of the teacher's appreciations or sanctions but becomes able to analyze his own behavior in order to correct it.

Relevance for the research: This theoretical conclusion substantiated the design of the teaching means through which the independent variable, namely the methodological kit, was introduced. It showed that the proposed self-assessment techniques (self-grading, traffic light technique, checklist or rubric) represent real learning contexts for the child. We have thus shown that the act of evaluation must build autonomy, not just ascertain a situation.

Preschoolers are capable of self-regulation if they have the right tools

The second important conclusion of the theoretical foundation debunks the myth that self-assessment is a too complicated process for preschoolers. Studies on self-regulation of learning (Zimmerman, 2000; Panadero, 2017) and about the use of assessment rubrics at an early age (Andrade, 2019) confirm that analysis skills can be activated from an early age. The essential condition is that the abstract is translated into visual elements, perfectly adapted to the preschooler's thinking.

Relevance for research: This theoretical foundation justified the decision to use visual supports (colors, smiley faces, images) instead of classic materials. Moreover, he explained the mechanism by which the independent variable produced the expected results: the tools served as cognitive and formative support, giving the impulsive or dependent child the clear structure he needed to stop, analyze his reaction and correct it.

Self-evaluation is the surest way to internalize moral rules

Moral development involves the transition from following a rule only out of fear of the adult (situational conformity, Kochanska, 2002) to respecting it out of conviction (moral autonomy). This transition from the rule imposed from the outside (Piaget, 1932) to real autonomy is the supreme goal of character education. Synthesizing these theories, we conclude that the classical methods (stories, moral discussions), although useful, are insufficient if they are not followed by a direct reflection of the child on his own facts.

Relevance for research: These conceptual landmarks represent the very heart of the thesis: self-assessment is the ideal environment for internalizing moral values. By giving the child tools to know/admit for himself when he made a mistake (without fear of being scolded) or when he was generous (without expecting an external reward), we transformed the rules of the group into personal beliefs. This explains why the preschoolers in the experimental group recorded large jumps in the indices of sincerity, empathy and perseverance. They were not trained to avoid punishment but learned to consciously assume their own behavior.

Conclusions drawn from the preliminary study. Perspectives of educational management

The preliminary study, focused on the vision of school principals and inspectors, confirms a major change in perspective: self-assessment in preschoolers is no longer just a simple tool for "ticking" successes, but becomes an essential process for internalizing values. The analysis of the data clearly shows that its main role is to help the preschooler to move from the rule followed out of fear of punishment or submission to the adult (heteronomous morality - Piaget 2012, Cucoș 2014), to an independent conduct, based on the understanding of the consequences (autonomous morality). For this transition to succeed, education managers proposed interventions on three distinct levels, but connected to each other.

At the level of direct group activity, a first major conclusion is the need to give a real voice to the preschooler in the assessment process (Clark, 2017). This means giving up the traditional model based on external rewards (the dots granted exclusively by the educators) and getting them used to reflecting on their own actions daily. Thus, the "portfolio of moral progress" (Trávníčková, 2020; Seitz & Bartholomew, 2008), along with accessible visual tools such as the emotion graph or the tree of good deeds, transform abstract rules into easy-to-understand experiences. As Dumitrana (1999) or Glava et al. (2009) point out, through this type of support, the teacher no longer treats the preschooler as a simple performer but guides him to judge alone and act independently.

The portfolio is a complex assessment mechanism, which integrates a variety of

concrete results to allow the educator to formulate objective assessments about the child's evolution. Due to its reflective nature, this tool cultivates preschooler responsibility. It also allows them to choose the work assignments and techniques used, thus facilitating the transition to self-assessment. The focus shifts from the finished result to the quality of the learning process itself, becoming an essential support for the harmonious formation of the child's entire personality (Stan & Băbuț, 2022, p. 7502).

Moving beyond the level of the group, the results show an acute need to change the mentality at the level of school management and inspection. Respondents propose abandoning classic inspections, in favor of a pedagogical mentoring model (Glickman et al., 2013), in which the inspector becomes a facilitator of innovation, providing constructive feedback (Quintelier et al., 2020) and valuing creativity. The main obstacle identified is excessive bureaucracy, which is why reducing administrative burdens and creating professional learning communities (Ministry of Education, 2024) are seen as vital solutions. They have the role of giving teachers the time they need to interact directly with the child and analyze good practices with their peers.

Learning communities represent, in Mara's (2023, p. 5684) view, the ideal framework for professional development, offering teachers the opportunity to evolve together through constant involvement and dialogue. Here, teachers benefit from personalized guidance from mentors and training programs tailored exactly to the real needs of the school. Although the improvement effort is directly aimed at the teacher, the final beneficiaries are the children, who enjoy a modern educational act. The author believes that work-based learning is the most effective strategy for sustainable reform, based on the exchange of experience and mutual support in the face of difficulties.

Finally, character education lasts over time only if the message from kindergarten is found outside it. Values only make sense for preschoolers when they are validated by the social environment in which they live, which implies a real partnership with the family (Răileanu, 2021; Băbuț & Stan, 2021) and a real openness to the community. The involvement of parents as partners in the evaluation and the development of joint projects with various local organizations or institutions provide children with real contexts where they see directly the effects of the good deeds they do (Glava & Glava, 2002). Overall, the preliminary study shows that the effective implementation of self-assessment requires a change including at the system level. Cutting red tape, supporting directors and partnering with the family are not just options, but mandatory conditions for success.

Conclusions drawn from the study I. The need for teacher training

The first quantitative study, based on the response's of 1490 teachers in preschool education, surprised a major discrepancy between the initial theoretical preparation and the practical realities of the implementation of group self-assessment. Beyond the statistical analyses, the study gave voice to practitioners, highlighting the fact that the training offered in the faculty or pedagogical high school is often perceived as excessively theoretical. Once at the department, educators feel an acute lack of tools applied in the field of self-assessment in preschoolers, being forced to make up for this gap through individual study or appealing to colleagues. This vulnerability of beginners is not a simple impression but reflects a problem of the Romanian education system. As the European Commission (2023) points out, the lack of well-structured mentoring programs leaves young teachers to manage the gap between university theory and classroom practice on their own, a reality also confirmed by the research of Darling-Hammond (2006).

The study participants show that the ability to correctly use self-assessment in preschoolers is built directly in the group, through experience and by preparing for teaching degrees. The fact that educators compensate for initial gaps through professional maturity confirms the theories of Korthagen (2010), who emphasizes that pedagogical mastery does not result from a simple accumulation of concepts, but is the result of a constant reflective practice, in which the teacher constantly analyzes and adjusts his methods.

Even if they rely more on intuition and experience, teachers want a scientific foundation of the way they do the assessment. Almost all respondents consider specialized courses to be essential for their professional progress, signaling an urgent need for continuing education programs specific to early childhood education. Moreover, the study reveals a clear preference for practical solutions. The educators believe that methodological guides, concrete work tools and applied training are much more useful to them than simple assistance with the activities of their colleagues. This need for operational benchmarks resonates with the approach of Hattie (2012), who argues that teachers need methods with a strong "visual impact" and concrete tools to ensure the success of each child.

The conclusions of this first study suggest that educators are fully motivated to integrate self-assessment into their daily routine, but success depends on moving from predominantly theoretical training to a much more concrete methodological support. For our research, these results were essential, as they directly guided the practical experiment. The acute need of teachers to have clear visual tools that are easy to implement in the group was an important

argument for which we created and used, subordinated to the independent variable, the set of materials that we called the methodological kit, proposed in the last part of the thesis.

Conclusions drawn from study II. The dynamics of self-assessment in group practice

The second quantitative study goes beyond the theoretical training of teachers and analyzes what happens in the group. If the first study highlighted the shortcomings in the initial training, this stage went to the "heart of the job", following how the habits of the educators, the rules of the institution and the available resources help or, on the contrary, block the autonomy of preschoolers.

Although everyone recognizes the value of self-assessment, our data show that traditional evaluation, done exclusively by adults, remains the main teaching tool in the group, the fact that educators hesitate to cede the power to evaluate themselves to preschoolers, is also a well-known barrier in the specialized literature (Black & William, 2009). As Hattie and Timperley (2007) explain, teachers prefer the classic "correction feedback" because it gives them confidence, while guiding the child towards self-regulation requires more effort and patience. In addition, distrust in children's ability to evaluate themselves correctly (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009) is amplified by pressures in the system. The reports of the CRED project (2023) show that although the new Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (2019) requires the active involvement of the child, parents' expectations of receiving accurate results push educators back into the comfort zone of the classic assessment. We are stuck, therefore, in the tension between using evaluation to help the child learn and using it only as a final verdict given by the adult.

Beyond these constraints, the study highlights that the true mastery in applying self-assessment does not come from the years of college or from the simple seniority at the department, but from the professional maturity proven by the teaching degree exams. This conclusion confirms the theory of Korthagen (2010), which shows that pedagogical excellence occurs when practical intuition blends perfectly with performance standards. Moreover, our data show that female educators adapt remarkably, managing to integrate self-assessment techniques regardless of the material shortages in kindergartens, keeping more complex techniques (such as self-correction), only for children whose development allows it. This flexibility aligns directly with the OECD recommendations (2024b) on creating child-friendly learning environments.

A novelty brought by our research is the openness of teachers to technology. They see educational software as a major help, capable of making self-assessment more transparent and

attractive for today's children. In fact, 98.2% of the 1463 respondent teachers admit that preschoolers have the most to gain from this process. This huge percentage suggests that while they are hesitant to relinquish control, educators know that preschoolers are capable of self-assessment. The perspective validates Andrade's (2019) idea, according to which the truly useful formative assessment occurs directly in the mind of the learner, transforming the child's responsibility into a tool for transparent communication with the family.

For our research, these results were decisive. The tension between educators' desire to use self-assessment and their fear of giving up classic control showed us that there is a need for a tool to facilitate this transition. This is also the reason why we created the materials from the methodological kit used in the training experiment, designed to provide educators with useful, attractive and safe visual support, through which they can transfer step by step part of the responsibility to preschoolers. We have thus shown that the rigor of assessment and the autonomy of the preschoolers are not mutually exclusive, they can work perfectly together.

Conclusions drawn from study III. Self-Assessment and Moral Education

The third study clearly shows us that moral education is much more than a set of abstract rules. In preschool education, moral education is a living experience, shaped by the mastery of the educator and the needs of the preschooler. The first conclusion is that the ability to manage this process does not come only from the simple passage of years at the department. It is refined over time and reaches a real balance with the achievement of the first teaching degrees (especially the definitive degree). This evolution confirms Biesta's (2021) idea of "pedagogical tact", that excellent intuition of the teacher to know exactly when and how to intervene. When the adult creates this space of emotional safety, self-assessment becomes the child's first real exercise in honesty. As recent studies show (Sticker et al., 2021), at 4-6 years old, preschoolers begin to see themselves as people capable of helping, sharing and offering consolation, outlining a first moral image of themselves.

The way in which this moral education is done depends a lot on the environment in which the child lives. Our data showed interesting practical differences. In rural areas, female educators rely heavily on tradition and community spirit, and in urban areas, kindergarten opens up to a diversity of community actors, transforming these interactions into real life lessons. Regardless of the environment, anchoring moral values in the child's immediate reality is essential. Moreover, the new regulations (such as OME no. 6584/2024) propose that we draft a descriptive report at the end of the large group. This means that monitoring the socio-emotional and moral progress of preschoolers is no longer just an option of the educator, but a

necessity and an official obligation.

Another major conclusion shows us how children internalize these values. They clearly prefer tools that capitalize on the "language of emotion" and dynamic visuals. The fact that we use educational films and animated characters is not a simple attempt to entertain children, but a pedagogical strategy with proven results, which simply pursues complicated ethical notions. As Hattie (2012) argues, when a child follows a character who solves a moral problem, his empathy acts much more strongly than at any theoretical explanation. In order to capitalize on this availability of the child, the educators show great flexibility. It combines official requirements with the opportunities offered by digital platforms and naturally integrates moral education into absolutely all activities of the day.

These conclusions were fundamental for the construction of experimental design. The fact that preschoolers react best to images and characters that offer them a behavior model has supported us to create a strictly visual and intuitive self-assessment tool. The materials were designed as a bridge between the educator's tact and the preschooler's need for independence.

Conclusions drawn from study IV. The Benefits of Self-Assessment Tools in Optimizing Moral Qualities

The experimental research started from the premise that the moral profile of the preschooler is not formed by itself, but is built step by step, and this process can be accelerated by constantly using self-assessment techniques. The data obtained confirms this hypothesis and provide us with some essential conclusions for early childhood education. It is highlighted that self-assessment tools work optimally together, as a scaffolding for moral development, each having a distinct role:

- By moving from the exclusive appreciation of the educator to the *self-grading process*, the preschooler is determined to internalize the success criteria. The downward evolution of the self-assessment error curve, recorded from the first to the last sequence of the experiment (S1-S5), reflects not only a better understanding of the work task, but a real maturation of the ego, the preschooler learning to look at himself reflexively without constantly waiting for the adult's confirmation.
- *The traffic light technique* functioned as an immediate social regulator, proving essential for cultivating empathy and generosity. Through immediate visual feedback, the children clearly saw how it affects others, managing to transform their impulsiveness into an assumed positive behavior.
- *The checklists* provided the logical structure necessary for educating the will. They

transformed an abstract concept (such as perseverance) into a succession of concrete and visible steps. Their success, especially noticed in rural areas, shows us how much children need rigor and clear steps in activity.

- *The evaluation rubrics* have clearly established the quality standard. Through their visual support, they eliminated confusion, becoming the basis on which we supported the development of sincerity and initiative in the experimental group. The data showed us that preschoolers used the rubric to calibrate their effort before completing the task, thus demonstrating an extraordinary ability to anticipate and regulate their work.

The sincerity shown by preschoolers in the self-assessment process, even in situations where their performance did not reach the maximum level, confirms that the intervention program managed to create a climate of emotional safety, in which the mistake was naturally assumed, as an opportunity to learn. Although the tools have proven to be universally valid, being able to be applied effectively regardless of the children's background, we have noticed that they also allow for a personalized approach. The rigor of the checklists was perfectly suited to the needs of the children who required a stable external structure, while the fineness of the rubrics met the expectations of detail-oriented preschoolers. Thus, self-assessment goes beyond its purely methodical status and becomes a true inclusive tool, capable of equalizing the chances for a quality moral education.

The research attests to the fact that the implementation of self-assessment techniques transforms the preschooler from a simple subject assessed into an active partner of his own training. This change not only helps him to better solve the tasks in the group but also lays a solid foundation for the crystallization of a fully autonomous moral conscience.

Conclusions drawn from the longitudinal qualitative analysis. Focus group and sustainability study

The data obtained at the focus group, together with the interviews conducted three years later with the educators involved in the experimental phase (follow-up study), show us that self-assessment in kindergartens where the experimental research was carried out has become a real and lasting practice.

Immediately after the experiment ended, discussions with the educators confirmed that preschoolers can really reflect on their behavior, provided that the process is integrated as a game and has visual support. At the beginning of the formative intervention, the educators especially appreciated the fact that they could manage the group more easily using the traffic light technique, while the preschoolers were attracted by the prospect of having control through

self-notation and checklists. In the end, however, the result was the same for everyone. An educational environment based on autonomy, responsibility and empathy has been created.

Further validation of the research came with the sustainability study, three years after the experiment was completed. The fact that the educators continued to integrate these self-assessment tools into their daily routine suggests that the application of the independent variable was also a training experience for these teachers that really helped them in the group. We believe that the teaching tools used have passed the test of time, proved to be useful and flexible in the face of the daily challenges of kindergarten.

Moreover, tracking these groups over time revealed an important generational change. The educators noticed that today's preschooler has less patience and there is a huge need for fast and interactive stimuli. Therefore, the big challenge is no longer to ask ourselves if we should use self-assessment, but how we can adapt it for the "digital native". Thus, the main direction, also requested from the department, is to move these tools to the digital environment (adapting them for smart tablets or interactive whiteboards) and a much closer collaboration with the family. Our long-term analysis validates the use of self-assessment not only as an effective teaching tool, but as a true *living and adaptable system*, capable of preparing the preschooler to consciously assume learning.

Limits of research

The results obtained are clear and fully confirm the hypotheses, they must be viewed considering some practical and methodological limits.

The first limit is related to the age of the children and the application environment. Our instruments have been calibrated and used exclusively for the medium and large groups. In a small group, at three or four years old, children do not yet have the necessary cognitive development to constantly analyze and assume their behavior, so the materials used in the formative experiment require significant reconsiderations and appropriate testing for this age. Also, the methodological kit was used strictly in the institutionalized environment (kindergarten). The fact that parents did not use these tools at home to test the results they can bring is a limitation of the study.

The second limit is the risk of the educator's subjectivity in the evaluation. In order to reduce this risk, training sessions were held for the educators who carried out the teaching activities within the research. Also, at the pretest, posttest and retest, children from the experimental group were not evaluated based on general impressions. Performance descriptors previously established with the educators from the experimental groups were used, where each

response or each action of the child was precisely scored, depending on the achievement of the targeted behavior, thus ensuring the objectivity and validity of the data.

Future Directions of Study

By going beyond these methodological limits, the validated success of the program opens up valuable perspectives for educational practice. A future direction of action aims at the continuous training of teachers, on aspects circumscribed to the use of self-assessment in preschool education, in order to facilitate the capitalization of these practices on a large scale.

The most challenging direction of research is dictated by the reality at the department. The follow-up study conducted with the educators three years after the experiment highlighted a change at the level of the new generations of preschoolers: a decrease in patience time and a major attraction to fast, interactive stimuli. Thus, a strategic direction for the continuation and development of this research is to test the use in the digital space of the self-assessment tools used in the experiment. Transforming the traffic light technique or checklists into interactive educational applications, usable on smart tablets or interactive whiteboards in kindergartens, would perfectly respond to the psychological profile of the "digital native". Such an adaptation would keep intact the reflective value of the self-evaluation techniques used in the experiment, but would also increase their degree of attractiveness, anchoring moral education directly in the technological reality of children.

Last but not least, starting from the particularities of carrying out moral education in children, and especially from the need to collect and interpret data over a longer period of time, in order to have more contextualized conclusions, we believe that a future study, carried out on a complete preschool cycle, could provide extremely valuable data on the results of the use of self-assessment techniques and tools.

Closing remarks

At the end of this research, we return to the essence of early childhood education: preschool. Beyond figures, statistics and complex theories, this paper shows that preschoolers have an extraordinary capacity to consciously contribute to their own development, when they are in a safe educational environment and receive the right tools. Self-assessment proved to be much more than a simple teaching method, it came a first real exercise of assumed freedom and responsibility.

The main value of this thesis lies in its practical usefulness. By successfully creating and using the self-assessment methodological kit, we have managed to build a solid bridge

between modern educational theories and the lively, unpredictable address of the group. This also responds to the urgent needs of educators to have practical, clear and efficient resources, and this toolkit supports the transformation of the theoretical goal of achieving "assessment *as* learning" into a simple, attractive and inclusive daily routine. The fact that these teaching tools have stood the test of time and are still used today in the kindergartens in the study confirms that our work has gone beyond the boundaries of an academic experiment, becoming a living resource for teachers.

Looking to the future, this work is not an end point, it opens a new field of reflection and educational action. In a society that moves astonishingly fast, in which generations of "digital natives" force the educational system to constantly reinvent itself, character education remains the safest anchor. Through its flexibility and the possibility of being quickly adapted including for the digital environment, the methodological and instrumental structure proposed by us can respond to such challenges.

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