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EXTENDED SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

THE EFFECTIVE USE OF INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES IN MULTIGRADE TEACHING

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Statement

I, the undersigned, Acatrinei Irina-Roxana, having the quality of doctoral student of the "Babeș-Bolyai" University, declare the following:

- The doctoral thesis entitled " THE EFFECTIVE USE OF INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES IN MULTIGRADE TEACHING" was carried aut by strictly observing the four values of academic integrity – honesty, responsibility, replicability and validity of knowledge.
- The similarity of the doctoral thesis was carried out at the Doctoral School "Didactica. Tradition, Development, Innovation", using the Turnitin Report.
- The thesis complies with the writing standards specified in the APA Publication Manual (7th edition).
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Abstract

The doctoral thesis entitled *" The effective use of instructional strategies in multigrade teaching"* aims to highlight organizational and methodological aspects of multigrade teaching. The paper comprises six chapters. The first chapter focuses on presenting the conceptual framework regarding the organization of school units and classes under multigrade conditions, the determining factors, and specific elements of this type of education in various educational systems, including Romania. The second chapter presents curricular approaches specific to multigrade teaching and the particularities of this type of education in relation to teachers and enrolled students. It outlines the teacher profile and perspectives on initial and continuing training for this educational model as it exists in Romania. For students, it highlights both challenges and opportunities in their cognitive and non-cognitive development within the context of multigrade learning. The third chapter describes ways to adapt teaching strategies to the specifics of multigrade education, assessment elements in this educational context, methods for effectively combining different types of lessons, and features of instructional planning for this model. Chapter four provides a description of the research design and the actual psycho-pedagogical investigation, structured into five studies. The first three studies utilize data obtained through questionnaire-based surveys, analyzing teachers' opinions on various organizational and methodological aspects of this educational format. Study I reveals details about teachers' familiarity with multigrade education during initial and continuous training, as well as the usefulness of informational and material resources in teaching. Study II presents effective benchmarks for designing and conducting direct teaching activities in multigrade settings, along with the methodological aspects guiding both direct and indirect instruction. Study III offers an overview of multigrade education in Romania, emphasizing its advantages and disadvantages, as well as the challenges encountered. Study IV analyzes the opinions of religion teachers regarding the particularities of this type of education from the perspective of their discipline. Study V provides an original and useful perspective on conducting teaching activities in multigrade conditions through a flexible approach to religion class, specifically by introducing sequences of contextualized learning.

Keywords: multigrade education, teaching strategy, contextualized learning, direct activity, indirect activity

CONTENT

CHAPTER I. HISTORICAL, LEGISLATIVE AND ORGANIZATIONAL LANDMARKS REGARDING MULTIGRADE TEACHING IN EUROPE AND IN ROMANIA

Multigrade education represents a type of schooling predominantly found in isolated, depopulated rural areas. It involves student classes organized in a simultaneous teaching system. The specific nature of multigrade teaching activities lies in "the alternation between the teacher's direct interaction with one class and the indirect, independent activity of the other class or classes" (Molan, 2014, p. 55; Britchi, 2016).

Scientific literature in Romania uses various terms considered to be synonymous. In international specialized literature, several terms are also used. The most commonly encountered is multigrade, with multigrade schools being defined as those in which students of different ages, grades, and abilities are grouped in a single classroom (Bharadwaj, 2008). Alongside multigrade (multigrade / multi-grade schooling), the term multi-age (multiage / multi-age schooling) is also used. However, these terms are not synonymous. What differentiates them are the reasons for which the classes were created: multi-age classes refer to mixed-age classrooms created for pedagogical reasons, while multigrade classes are established out of necessity (Cornish, 2010). In this research, I will use the terms *multigrade education*, classes organized in a simultaneous system, and non-multigrade classes.

The earliest forms of educational organization worldwide, including in Romania, were characteristic of multograde teaching (Cornish, 2021). Today, multigrade are typical of disadvantaged, sparsely populated, isolated, and hard-to-reach areas. In most countries, demographic and geographic factors require the organization and operation of multigrade classes. In mountainous regions, scattered settlements predominate, which are difficult to access in terms of transportation, infrastructure, and communication, and have small populations (Moldoveanu, 1992). In coastal areas, there are sparsely populated islands with limited accessibility. In the educational system, multigrade classes are organized when the number of students does not meet the threshold established by current legislation.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has considered multigrade classes to be one of the most suitable means for many nations to achieve the second Millennium Development Goal — "Achieve universal primary education" (United Nations, 2025), established in the year 2000. This goal was based on the popular slogan Education for All (Cornish, 2006). The year 2015 marked the transition to the Sustainable Development Goals. The fourth goal, Quality Education, aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (Sustainable Development Goal 4, 2025). With the redefinition of these

goals, schools with multigrade classes continue to be targeted, with a focus on improving the quality of the educational process conducted in these settings (Cornish, 2021).

The various factors influence the creation of these classes: the number of students enrolled in each grade, the number of available teachers, and the availability and efficient use of resources (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2019). In Asian countries in particular, the organization of multigrade classes is also influenced by factors such as: the decline of the indigenous population, the presence of ethnic prejudices, the involvement of children in agricultural work, school failure, and the difficulty of attracting girls to school (Moeini et al., 2016). The existence of ethnic prejudices is also a relevant factor in Romania: maintaining multigrade classes ensures access to education for the Roma population, as well as for the Hungarian minority in many communities.

In developing countries, multigrade schooling has been considered the most appropriate solution to ensure all children have access to education, to maintain educational institutions in disadvantaged areas (Albulescu, 2020), to increase school attendance rates - especially among girls, to improve children's cognitive and social skills in increasingly complex intercultural contexts (Opriş, 2019), and to significantly reduce their antisocial behavior (Moeini et al., 2016).

Multigrade teaching was the dominant form of education in most European countries until the emergence of industrialization and urbanization. Following these social developments in the 19th century, schools began organizing their classes by age and knowledge levels. Multigrade classes remain a significant feature of the educational system in Ireland - both in Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom, and in the Republic of Ireland (Mulryan-Kyne, 2005; Casserly et al., 2019). Small schools dominated the early Irish education system, a trend driven by population distribution and the control exerted by both the Catholic and Protestant Churches over schools. In all four countries of the United Kingdom, the education system underwent changes following the national decentralization in 2010 and now functions differently, adapting to local socio-economic contexts. The grouping of small schools into *clusters* or *federations* is the most popular approach for their development and support, and an effective measure to prevent their closure. Cluster-type groupings reduce the professional isolation of teachers and the social isolation of students; for them, joint activities can be organized that foster collaboration. Teachers in small rural schools with multigrade classes in the UK face numerous and diverse challenges. Time remains a limited resource; however, flexibility is a key characteristic of the teaching process. This is reflected in the different ways students are grouped and in teaching strategies adapted to the specificities of this type of education (Casserly et al., 2019; Acatrinei, 2024).

In the Nordic countries, Sweden, Finland, and Norway, multigrade teaching shares common elements related to historical context, determining factors, current threats, the role of small schools in rural communities, and the identification and implementation of effective educational practices. The 1990s brought significant changes to the educational systems in all three Nordic countries. Societal changes have always been reflected in the structure of the school network (Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009). The decentralization from national to local level and the financial burden it imposed led local authorities to assess the status of small schools and, in many cases, to decide on their closure. In terms of per-student costs, maintaining a school with two classes was twice as expensive as managing a school with seven or more classes. In the 2000s, school closures were primarily driven by high maintenance costs. A report published during this time showed a 10% decrease in the number of schools in densely populated rural areas, but the continued existence of very small schools, with no more than 50 students (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). The distance between students' homes and the schools they attended gradually increased; at the time, around 1,000 students in grades I-VI were studying more than 20 kilometers from their homes, and 200 students were traveling more than 30 kilometers.

In the context of national decentralization - a dominant process in European countries during the 2000s - small schools with multigrade classes were increasingly threatened with closure. European-funded projects under the Lifelong Learning Programme (Comenius) - such as the NEMED Project (Network of Multigrade Education) and the ZEUS Project (Satellite Network of Remote Schools) - provided real support in the natural development of these schools, helping them fulfill their mission and demonstrate the delivery of a quality educational experience.

Multigrade classes, especially at the primary level, are prevalent worldwide, although data on their number and the number of students involved is not systematically collected. They are widespread in Europe (Brown, 2010); in the early 2000s, 53% of primary school teachers in the Netherlands were teaching multigrade classes; in England, 25% of primary classes were multigrade; 40% of primary classes in the Republic of Ireland; 31% in Greece, and 35% in the Czech Republic. Such classes are also reported in significant numbers in Asia and Latin America, as well as in Australia and Canada, but in much smaller proportions - only about 3% in some U.S. states. For island nations such as the Republic of Maldives, where the school population is spread across 200 islands, the provision and management of education is a challenge. Multigrade classes offer an alternative for integrating all children into an educational setting, reducing dropout rates and illiteracy (Shareefa, 2020). In developing countries, particularly in Africa and the island regions of the Americas, multigrade classes are often the only accessible form of education for many children. Attending school is hindered by both internal and

external factors. Internal factors include parents' reluctance to send their children to school and the involvement of children in household tasks necessary for the family's survival. External factors include a lack of teaching staff, transportation difficulties, poorly equipped schools, and the low quality of instruction. National education policies, professional training programs, and material resources are often lacking, while communities face poverty and violence (Brown, 2010). Achieving the development goals set by UNESCO in 2015 - particularly those relating to access to primary education and the reduction of illiteracy - was hindered in many African countries. In this context, the quality of education provided by rural schools remains low, which leads many parents to be hesitant and refuse to invest in their children's education (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

The specific characteristics of multigrade education in these countries can be identified by examining three areas: the formation of multigrade classes, the teaching activity within these classes, and the attitudes of principals, teachers, and parents. In many African countries, facing various social challenges, students are placed in a certain class based on the time of their entry into the school system and the curriculum they have covered, and less often based on age. In such cases, the terms *multigrade* and *multiage* stand in contrast (Brown, 2010).

Multigrade education is a reality within the Romanian educational system. It is organized in rural areas, where demographic decline, geographical constraints, and socio-economic factors have necessitated its implementation. The guidance of teachers in these schools was provided by school inspectors, although they are often insufficiently trained regarding the specifics of teaching under multigrade conditions (Molan, 2014). Gradually, the quality of instruction in these classes has declined.

The new Education Law no. 198 of July 4, 2023, provides for the organization of multigrade classes in geographically or linguistically isolated localities where transportation cannot be provided, and where the minimum number of students falls below the legally required threshold—at least 10 students (Article 23, paragraphs 1 and 11). A noteworthy provision is that the 8th grade must function as a standalone class, regardless of the number of students. We consider this clause to be a consequence of the research report initiated by the National Center for Policies and Evaluation in Education and published in January 2024, titled Non-participation of Students in the 2023 National Evaluation at the End of 8th Grade. According to the report, the typical absent student is a boy living in a rural area who attended a school with multigrade classes (Apostu & Goia, 2023).

In Romania, this type of education has existed for approximately 200 years. Schools that implemented it were closely monitored until about 50 years ago (Molan, 2014). Concerned with ensuring access to education for all children, decision-making bodies had two alternatives: to strengthen

schools in central rural areas and provide transportation for students from remote villages, or to develop schools in all rural communities, including multigrade schools, and ensure quality education. Due to lower costs, the second option was chosen (Pavelea, 2020). The unique characteristics of this form of education pose specific challenges to education reform in Romania (Răduț-Taciu et al., 2015): the relatively small number of students allows for teaching activities with newly formed groups of children of different ages and cognitive levels; the material resources of small schools remain a constant priority for national authorities; the socio-economic and familial backgrounds of students lead to cognitive differences and varying learning abilities. The successful organization of this type of education has required compliance with certain pedagogical standards developed over the years: "the appropriate grouping of classes; the advance planning of class organization and assignment to teachers, preferably ensuring teacher continuity; the drafting of the schedule; planning of instructional activities; and the arrangement of the classroom space" (Popescu et al., 1968, p. 10; Gârleanu-Costea & Alexandru, 1995; Răduț-Taciu et al., 2015).

The organization of multigrade classes is inevitable in many countries around the world, including Romania. The closure of a school in a rural community represents the loss of an important center of that community, which will gradually lead to the threat of the community's viability. Students are assigned to larger educational institutions, and transportation is provided via public means. However, access to such transportation can be limited, which may result in students having to walk long and often dangerous distances. The extended time required to travel to and from school leads to changes in both the student's daily routine and that of their family. Extracurricular activities become increasingly rare, and gradually, the student ceases to participate in community life, becoming detached from it.

In the first chapter, we highlighted the efforts of competent authorities to support these schools through educational programs, financial incentives, and material investments in countries such as Norway, Finland, Sweden, Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom, Turkey, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Recognizing the importance of supporting these schools within their rural communities means facilitating access to education for all children and ensuring a future for these areas. There is a growing number of studies addressing the challenges of multigrade education, particularly regarding the academic outcomes of students enrolled in such classes, compared to their peers in single-grade classes, as measured by national standardized tests. In the absence of strong educational policies supporting this type of schooling, multigrade schools remain under constant threat. This is further exacerbated by the negative attitude of many parents toward the quality of education provided in these schools. Most

parents choose to transfer their children to larger schools, without considering the potentially harmful effects on their children's health.

Multigrade education requires special attention from national, county, and local authorities, supported by detailed legislation on how such classes should be organized and function, methodological suggestions integrated into school curricula, methodological guides with examples of good practices, financial incentives for teachers, and improved material resources through grants and projects specifically targeting this form of education. A brief overview of education systems in various countries has provided insight into the organizational aspects of multigrade education, adapted to national, regional, and local contexts; the challenges faced by teachers working in multigrade classrooms; and examples of good practices that can be successfully adapted to the realities of each country. The clusters found in the UK educational system can also be organized among small schools in other countries, including Romania. Organizing pedagogical circles exclusively for teachers who work in multigrade settings represents one form of such clusters, although the number of grouped schools is usually higher. Another example of such clustering can be found in Spain, in the mountainous region of Catalonia (Hargreaves, 2017). Here, 3 or 4 small schools are grouped into *rural school zones* (*zones escoles rurals* – ZER). Each cluster has a management team, while each individual school retains its principal and distinct identity. However, they benefit from shared projects, available material resources, and human resources (particularly teachers of English, music, and science). These groupings, strengthened through the creation of *virtual networks*, contribute to the professional development of teaching staff. Through cooperation and collaboration, teachers can develop useful teaching materials – yearly planning guides, weekly schedules, thematic projects, and worksheets.

CHAPTER II. EXPECTATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF MULTIGRADE TEACHING: CURRICULUM MODELS, TEACHER TRANING, AND THE COGNITIVE AND OSYCHO-SOCIAL STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT

The second chapter provides an overview of multigrade education from a curricular point of view, of teacher training and of the cognitive and non-cognitive effects on students. In multigrade education, the same mandatory curricular documents, the curriculum and school programs are used, identical to those valid for non-multigrade classes, in the primary and secondary cycles, respectively. Their adaptation and application in the multigrade context are influenced by the didactic skills of the teacher who will shape them according to the particularities of his/her team: the way of coupling classes, selecting content, choosing teaching strategies, combining direct and indirect activity, respecting the particularities of each class of students, but also the individuality of each student. A report on multigrade education in South Asia, published in 2012, states that the difficulty of adapting the national curriculum to the specifics of the multigrade regime is a triggering factor for the negative attitude of the teachers involved. Of real use, we find in educational practice in Malaysia (Idris, 2019) the curriculum maps, drawn up by experts in the field, with concrete directions of action regarding the organization and conduct of teaching activity in multigrade conditions.

Adapting the national curriculum to the specifics of multigrade education is a difficult task, also found in Romania. The teaching staff will create their design documents in the most useful way possible, which will ensure the full coverage of the educational contents and the formation of general and specific competencies for each subject, for each student. OECD (2021) promotes four innovative characteristics regarding the approach to the school curriculum: digitalization, personalization, interdisciplinarity and flexibility. The multigrade class requires the adaptation of the school curriculum to the characteristic diversity. The entire teaching process takes on a flexible note according to the rhythm of each student, allowing a creative approach to the contents, without canceling the official provisions.

The international research program on the multigrade teaching in different countries, carried out in 1998 by the University of London, determined the outline of four models of curricular approach, identified in educational practices and in subsequent studies: *the quasi monograde* model, *an approach similar to that of the simple class*, *the differentiated curricula* model, *the multi-year curriculum* cycles or *rolling programmes* model, *flexible curricular cycles* or *rolling programmes*, and *the learner and materials-centred model, the materials-centred on the learner*. We also added contextualized learning,

corroborated with the integrated approach model, considered effective approaches that correspond to the heterogeneity of the multigrade class and the individual needs of the students.

Connecting teaching to real-life situations and involving students in contextualized learning sequences is an effective practice found in international educational systems. Montes Miranda (2021) defines contextualization as a process by which notions and elements of knowledge are placed in a certain context that gives them meaning. Following a rigorous stage of reviewing the specialized literature targeting this practice, Ambrose et al. (2013) highlight its defining elements: connecting abstract notions with lived experiences, using materials and exploring concrete situations from the real world, learning by doing, practicing critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity. The contextualization of teaching and learning includes the adaptation of concrete and digital content, methods and teaching aids to the needs and learning particularities of students in order to ensure an active and meaningful understanding in both theoretical and practical terms, emphasizing the fact that this practice does not lead to a decrease in the quality of teaching, but constitutes an adaptation to the needs of students, in a certain context (Posso-Pacheco, 2024).

For multigrade education, the contextualization of teaching and learning involves a complex process through which the contents are developed in didactic sequences adapted to both the cognitive level of each student and the level of complexity of the class, which capitalize on elements taken from the student's daily environment and promote social skills such as communication, interaction, cooperation, collaboration between students of the same age or different ages. Contextualized teaching/learning sequences are didactic activities adapted to both the cognitive level of each student and the level of complexity of the class, which capitalize on elements taken from the student's daily environment and promote social skills such as communication, interaction, cooperation, collaboration between students of the same age or different ages. As forms of organization, these didactic activities can be frontal, joint, with students of different ages, pair or group activities with students of the same age or different ages.

Contextualized learning supports the connection with concrete life situations and is often achieved through didactic sequences that capitalize on the integrated approach (Naparan & Alinsug, 2021), as this best responds to the expected complexity of the didactic approach. Boyer (1993) considers curricular integration as the connection of school subjects to avoid their isolated treatment, but also the process by which the student processes new content having as a starting point his cognitive and life experience. The integrated approach to the curriculum is preferred in the case of multigrade teaching because it corresponds to the heterogeneity of this class and the individual needs of the students

(Ronksley-Pavia, 2019). Through this approach, many contents become accessible to students as teachers teach them under umbrella themes from fields of activity familiar to children and connections with their personal interests (Hoffman, 2003) and with real life can be made much more easily (Naparan & Alinsug, 2021).

This approach aims at both the organization of the contents and their transmission and acquisition by the students. It is carried out both vertically, being appropriate to the student's developmental stages, and horizontally, ensuring the student's involvement in various learning situations, as close as possible to reality and whose resolution requires juggling notions from various fields (Cucoș, 1998). Integrated curriculum can make flexible connections between themes or between skills belonging to different study disciplines and actively involves the student by training cognitive and metacognitive processes (Ciolan, 2003).

The integrated approach to the curriculum, complemented by cross-curricular themes (Ciolan & Ciolan, 2008) manages to connect the educational outcomes with the various needs of the students, personal or social, thus contributing to increasing the significance of education. Curricular integration can be achieved at different levels, according to what we connect (knowledge, skills, values) and to what extent we connect: multidisciplinarity, is focused on content from several educational disciplines and analyzes the subject from multiple perspectives, interdisciplinarity, is focused on skills and analyzes the topic through the collaboration of several study disciplines, ultimately offering a unitary image of it, transdisciplinarity, is focused on values and attitudes and analyzes the subject through a unitary-conceptual approach of the study disciplines (Cucoș, 1998; Ciolan & Ciolan, 2008; Bocoş & Jucan, 2008). In order to be effective, this type of activity is carried out through complex teaching strategies, which include methods, techniques, teaching aids and various forms of organization, which will actively involve students in learning.

The main mission of the school is to provide the student with a safe, healthy and stimulating environment, avoiding being an obstacle to his/her training and development (Thompson & Barker, 2019). As an institution, the school is defined by the presence of five elements: adults ensure the well-being of the student, the program is diverse and adapted to the characteristics of the students, a climate of safety prevails, and the management of the educational unit is focused on the student and his/her needs and not on those of subordinates. Students spend most of their childhood and adolescence within the perimeter of the school, for this reason it is necessary for it to provide them with an intense, attractive psychological journey (Thompson & Barker, 2019). Student-centered education is legislatively supported in Romania by the National Education Law no. 198/2023, article 3 and requires ensuring the

development of students in relation to their individual characteristics, in appropriate contexts (Albulescu, 2020).

To ensure compliance with these principles, the work of teachers requires organization, efficiency, rigor, themselves requiring the possession of appropriate skills in order to fulfill this mission. Even more so in multigrade education. This type of classes requires an increased effort in order to carry out the instructional-educational process, the thorough organization of the teaching activity, the fulfillment of managerial roles in guiding students (Britchi, 2016), a more alert work pace, the careful choice of work tasks within the framework of independent activity, the efficient management of the time available (Pavelea et al., 2015). The teacher must be prepared to successfully cope with the diversity of children's particularities and needs, in different contexts: in small or large classes, in non-multigrade or multigrade classes, in rural or urban environments, in favored or disadvantaged places, with ethnic groups (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). First of all, he must demonstrate willingness to work in communities with small schools, with multigrade classes. These communities are usually isolated, difficult to access localities, and working in such conditions involves effort and sacrifice to get there daily (Taole & Mncube, 2013; Erden, 2021) and, inevitably, professional isolation (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019). In order to respond favorably to the complexity of the multigrade activity, research concludes that the teacher requires good specialized and pedagogical training (Minaz et al., 2024), to be a good organizer, to show creativity and flexibility (Erden, 2020) and to have a positive attitude towards this type of education (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007; Raggl, 2015). Since the educational environment of the multigrade classroom is an active environment, according to recent research, the teaching staff involved in such a class should have at least five years of professional experience and no more than 45 years of age (Tolu et al., 2020).

A good teacher means a teacher with multiple skills, capable of developing the necessary skills for his students (Chistol, 2021). Păun (2017) argues that, in carrying out his activity, the teacher needs two categories of skills: specialized knowledge to teach and specialized skills about teaching. In addition, Murkatik et al. (2020) delimit the professional skills of the teaching staff on two levels: academic – specialized knowledge and pedagogical – skills reflected in achieving the goals by carrying out an efficient teaching process.

The professional training of teachers for multigrade teaching means developing those skills necessary to adapt to a new context, with specific features (Britchi, 2016). The initial and continuous training programs offered by the authorized institutions must be adapted, developed and validated both at the product level, by including them in the curriculum, and at the process level, through objectives

and contents characteristic of this type of education. Through the initial training, teachers acquire both professional and social skills, skills that will guide them in adapting classroom management to the needs of children. In the teaching activity, social skills will be demonstrated by promoting strategies based on interaction, cooperation and collaboration between students. Through continuous training, teachers respond positively to the challenges and changes in society, reflect on their own professional training and adapt their teaching style in order to increase the quality and efficiency of the educational act (Britchi, 2016). The professional development of teachers is considered an essential factor in the process of improving learning processes and student performance. This process includes a set of actions through which the teacher acquires, expands and deepens knowledge and skills (Mena & Jiménez, 2024).

The multigrade class requires an increased effort in order to achieve the instructional-educational process, the thorough organization of the teaching activity, the fulfillment of managerial roles in guiding the students, a more alert work rhythm, the careful choice of work tasks within the independent activity, the efficient management of the time available. In order to successfully adapt to these conditions, the teaching activity requires organization, efficiency, rigor, themselves requiring the possession of adequate skills in order to fulfill this mission. First of all, he must demonstrate availability to work in communities with small schools, with multigrade classes, most often, disadvantaged environments in isolated, difficult-to-reach localities. Various studies have mentioned the need to have two categories of skills: specialized knowledge to teach and specialized skills about teaching. The dynamic environment of the multigrade classroom requires the teacher to be active, balanced, consistent, responsible, cooperative, positive and firm, demonstrating a series of skills such as: critical thinking, organizational sense, communication skills, adaptable to the new. Tolu et al. (2020) specify that this teacher must have at least five years of professional experience and a maximum of 45 years of age.

The professional training of teachers for multigrade education means developing those skills necessary to adapt to a new context, with specific features. Through initial training, teachers acquire both professional and social skills, skills that will guide them in adapting classroom management to the needs of children. In Romania, the initial training of teachers for the primary cycle is currently carried out through pedagogical high schools, lasting 4 years, and through the university study program Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, lasting 3 years, followed by the bachelor's program Pedagogy of Primary Education. The latter provides the teaching skills necessary for the intellectual, social, physical and emotional development of primary school students. The curricula implemented by these institutions, analyzed in this chapter, offer specialized training in the field, both theoretically and practically. During the teaching career, the teachers' skills are updated or trained and developed, as

appropriate, in accordance with the innovations in the education plan and the educational curriculum and the need to address them in the teaching process, through continuing education programs. The targeted skills fall into two fundamental categories: professional - cognitive and functional-actional and transversal - role and personal and professional development skills. We identified a small number of functional training programs in the offer of the Teaching Staff Houses in the counties of Bihor, Cluj, Covasna, Botoșani, Vaslui.

Professional, social and personal skills will help the teacher in carrying out a qualitative, student-centered teaching process. The specialized literature reveals the concern of many researchers to highlight the effects that multigrade schooling has on students cognitive effects and non-cognitive effects, while establishing whether their schooling in these conditions is beneficial or not. Studies that analyze the results obtained by students in national standardized tests - INVALSI (Italy) and international (PISA) - present different situations: in Italy there are differences between the results obtained by students from the two types of classes, to the detriment of those in multigrade education, while the results of students from multigrade classes in the Philippines, obtained in the PISA tests, do not show major differences in the subject of Mathematics. Other research claims that the presence of older classmates has a positive impact on the results of students in the younger class. In general, multigrade classes operate in underdeveloped communities that face numerous problems: children's absenteeism to participate in agricultural or household chores, parental illiteracy, inadequate school spaces, lack of student hygiene, lack of proper nutrition, limited resources made available by the family.

CHAPTER III. PARTICULARITIES OF THE TEACHING PROCESS IN MULTIGRADE EDUCATION

The third chapter proposed an image of the multigrade educational process, with an emphasis on the particularities and defining elements of the specific teaching approach, taken over and capitalized in this educational framework. Such an analysis is all the more necessary since the official curricular documents are not particularized for this type of education. For this reason, the professionalism and responsibility of teachers are manifested throughout the adaptation and implementation process for this context. Students integrated into multigrade education must enjoy the same development opportunities as children in non-multigrade classes. However, the particularities of multigrade education, along with those of the teaching staff and the educational context in which they are integrated, determine that to organization of the teaching process is a difficult mission.

Identifying the most appropriate teaching strategy involves a rational analysis of all the aforementioned characteristics and the defining elements of the targeted content. A first important aspect is the efficient design of the class schedule, by appropriately combining the subjects of study so as to ensure their unity and logical combination. Recent research data support that teaching strategies such as differentiated instruction, collaborative learning and organizing students into flexible groups best adapt to the particularities of students enrolled in multigrade education and lead to school progress. The implementation of these strategies requires intense effort from the teaching staff in organizing, conducting and evaluating activities. In his case, alternating direct and indirect activities means, in fact, direct activities with each class or group of students, as the case may be. And in the case of students involved in indirect activities there is a "silent" supervision on his part, manifested with the help of nonverbal language. It is not by chance that some theorists have associated the activity of the teaching staff with the term multitasking, and in other international educational systems, known as the jump-jump strategy, this "jump" from one class to another, from one group to another, is captured. Being always conditioned by time, the teacher imposes and imposes a more alert work rhythm.

Teaching methods, the main elements of the teaching strategy, represent the essential ways of engaging the student in learning situations, guiding them in discovering new information and developing their intellectual processes. In the multigrade context, during direct activities, under the pressure of extremely limited time, there is a tendency for teachers to use traditional methods of oral communication, due to their ability to ensure the presentation of new and essential contents to a large number of students. In this case, there is a risk of focusing the teaching approach on the content. To

avoid it, theorists impose the active-problematizing approach, which ensures the direct involvement of students in the rediscovery of knowledge, the methodology being based on active methods such as problematization, learning by discovery, case study, and mutual learning. The didactic game proves effective in teaching due to its mobilizing character, its ability to stimulate students' interest in the activity, to stimulate team spirit and to easily involve students in solving learning tasks. For this reason, it should not be avoided in organizing and carrying out multigrade activities.

For students, the alternation of direct and indirect activities involves activities with the direct support of the teacher and in his absence. In the absence of direct coordination of the teacher, students predominantly carry out independent, individual activities. In terms of form and content, the full involvement of the student is required, the training of his thinking processes and intellectual abilities, in order to elaborate intellectual products, develop independent work skills, train and consolidate the capacities of personal reflection and self-appraisal of the effort made. The independent activity tasks are in line with the school curriculum, are presented in an attractive manner for the student and require a medium level of difficulty, in order to favor their solution by a large number of students, within the expected time. Independent study with the textbook and other curricular products is one of the most common methods, proving its efficiency in the process of information and continuous improvement, throughout life. Initiating students in how to use these methods is the responsibility of the teacher. Under his/her coordination, individual reading becomes independent reading, a necessary and useful practice for students in middle and high school. The textbooks existing in current Romanian education have a standard content and do not meet the needs of students in multigrade classes, not being perceived in these contexts as a useful resource by teachers. In relation to these considerations, teachers must reflect on the content presented and adapt it so as to facilitate learning, ensure active interaction of students with the new way of presentation, and provide tasks that exercise students' critical and creative thinking processes. Independent activity with the help of worksheets is frequently used, due to its ability to support teachers in monitoring and evaluating each student's progress. These tools can be used at any stage of the lesson, for various teaching purposes, and can be differentiated according to the targeted content and the level reached by each student in learning, in development sheets, recovery sheets, exercise sheets, etc. In order to prevent "dead" times, particularly useful are the weekly work plans, identified in the educational practice in Austria, as well as the recommendation to display a daily plan, in a visible place, in the classroom or to prepare additional tasks and display them in the area of the learning centers. Pedagogical approaches such as flipped classroom, project-based learning, inquiry-based methods, applied by organizing students into groups, are promoted due to the structural, but

flexible and directed approach, which involves the active student in learning and encourages cooperation between members, in order to solve the tasks received.

Along with methods, teaching aids are absolutely necessary in the multigrade didactic approach. Some theorists emphasize the fact that a poor material base can have negative consequences on the optimal development of educational processes, through the impossibility of creating an adequate learning environment. These considerations are supported by the conclusions of research conducted in schools with multigrade classes in Nepal and Sri Lanka, according to which the efficiency of teaching strategies is dependent on the quality of the resources used to support individual and group learning, without minimizing the role of the teacher in this type of education. A separate category of such means are those of self-instruction, identified in educational practice in South Africa, the Philippines and Greece. They support the indirect activity of the teacher or even its absence, determined by the impossibility of carrying out the school program daily, but only weekly, due to the difficult route to these localities.

In an educational environment conducive to learning, the various forms of organizing instruction, frontal, individual and group, cannot be missing, valued and combined in a balanced way, favoring both cooperative and competitive learning, in order to achieve educational goals and form the student's personality. Pair work can be organized by approaching tutoring-type cooperation, proven extremely efficient in this context.. Special attention is required to organize and carry out joint activities with all students in the classroom during a class hour. Due to the heterogeneity of the student body, this type of activity favors connecting the teaching activity with real situations that students inevitably face, beyond the school area. The themes of these activities carried out at the beginning of the day or class period can include events that occurred in the community the previous day, a meteorological phenomenon, an experience recently experienced by students, a book, a literary character, or elements that support students' preparation for the new lesson. An effective educational practice has been identified in Australia. The common moment, held at the beginning of a class, serves as a "pre-assessment" of the student's level of familiarity with the new content. Depending on this level, students will be divided into groups and involved in appropriate activities, avoiding boredom and monotony, for some, or agitation and tension, for others.

In multigrade context, formative assessment prevails. Any task assigned to students requires its verification and assessment by the teacher, in parallel with the involvement of students in their own or peer assessment. Partial failure to complete certain tasks determines the organization of remedial activities, while failure to complete them by most students implies the resumption of the respective

contents. Appreciation of the effort made by solving the tasks necessarily implies the provision of constructive, real feedback, related to the task and not to the student, and provided immediately. Otherwise, its effectiveness is lost. We emphasize the recommendation of some theorists not to award a grade, as it can distract students from the essential aspects included in the feedback message. Carefully studying official curriculum documents, responsibly preparing calendar and weekly plans, as well as designing each lesson, in accordance with the particularities of multigrade education and the student body, will ensure the optimal conduct of the teaching process in this context and the achievement of the established goals, both in the short term, at the end of a lesson, and in the long term, at the end of the school year or academic cycle.

CHAPTER IV. PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH ON THE EFFICIENT USE OF INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES IN MULTIGRADE TEACHING FROM ROMANIA

The issue of multigrade education continues to be topical, if we consider the situation existing in Romania in recent years. A significant number of students continue to be educated in this type of classes, approximately one hundred thousand, in the 2024-2025 school year and, inevitably, with the involvement of a considerable number of teachers. The challenges faced by teachers who carry out their professional activity under these conditions are numerous and are determined by political, economic, and social factors. A report published by the World Vision Foundation (Evaluation of educational problems in multigrade education in Romania, 2024) states that, although the issue of this type of education is known at the national level, in the last thirty years no solutions or alternatives have been proposed in order to support the significant number of direct beneficiaries involved.

In this context, we addressed through our research the issues of this type of education, with an emphasis on deepening the methodological particularities. The research *The efficient use of instructional strategies in multigrade teaching* in Romania aimed to present a current image of this type of education in the Romanian educational system and to identify solutions for a "friendly" approach to the teaching particularities it involves. The research included five stages, four of a quantitative type and one dedicated to the experimental approach, embodied in five studies.

Pedagogical research has been the focus of many theorists who have established a complex typology of them. According to the classification suggested by Bocoș et al. (2021a), viewed from the perspective of the content of education, the research carried out addresses the issue of multigrade education, as indicated by the title, and from the perspective of the general field of education, it falls particularly into the category of those relating to the methodology of instruction. At the same time, according to the same authors (Bocoș et al., 2021a), it is an action research, since the research focuses on introducing a type of activity in the development of the didactic approach and on the analysis of the effects produced. According to the classification proposed by Opriș & Opriș (2013), depending on the direction of approach, our research is of a longitudinal type, and depending on the proposed purpose it is a ascertaining research, highlighting an image of multigrade education in Romania, but also an ameliorative one, proposing solutions for organizing the didactic activity in this educational context. In relation to the type of data analysis and their number, the research represents a mixed investigative approach, based on both quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

As general objectives, the investigative approach carried out aimed to identify and analyze the opinion of teachers (primary school teachers and teachers of various school subjects) regarding the organizational and methodological particularities that this type of education involves, to investigate the perception of religion teachers on multigrade education in Romania and, in particular, on the multigrade teaching of this subject, and to highlight the impact that the contextualized organization of learning, during a religion class, has on students.

The data were collected, analyzed and interpreted using an extensive methodological system, which included: the psychopedagogical experiment method, the questionnaire-based survey method, the interview method, the document analysis method, the case study method, sociometric methods, the method of tests and other written assessment samples, the method of analyzing the products of student activity, the observation method, and methods of statistical analysis of research data.

The first three studies present the analysis of data collected through the questionnaire-based survey. It includes 24 items: 5 items with open answers and 19 with closed answers. In applying this method, the ethics of academic research were respected. The informed consent of the participants in order to obtain research data was explicitly requested, no rewards were promised or given. The guidance team within the doctoral school analyzed the validity of the questionnaire and certain items were modified in accordance with the recommendations received.

The questionnaire was administered to 733 teachers who teach in multigrade education, more precisely 539 primary school teachers (73.5%) and 194 teachers of various school subjects (26.5%), predominantly from rural areas, of different ages, levels of training and teaching degrees and having a variety of experience in the department and experience in teaching in multigrade conditions, during the period February 1, 2022 - June 15, 2022. Depending on gender, the group of subjects is presented as follows: 88.7% of the respondents are female, and 11.3% are male. Detailing the gender variable in relation to the teaching status of the respondents, of the 539 primary school teachers / teachers, 502 are female (93.1%), and 37 are male (6.9%). In the case of teachers, the number of male teachers is increasing: the number of female respondents is 148 (76.3%), and that of male respondents is 46 (23.7%). Regarding the age of the respondents, I collected data on four equal levels, the percentage distribution being the following: 16.1% between 21-20 years old, 24.6% between 31-40 years old, 38.2% between 41-50 years old, and 21.1% are over 50 years old. We note that the age category 41-50 years old predominates, followed by those 31-40 years old. The fewest, 16.1%, are the young, aged between 21 and 30 years old. Length of time in education, but also in the school unit in which they currently work, are variables with six equal intervals. Depending on the length of education, our

participants are divided as follows: 17.7% between 0-5 years, 11.9% between 6-10 years, 13.5% between 11-15 years, a percentage equal to those between 16-20 years, 16.8% between 21-25 years, and 26.6% are over 25 years, this being the highest percentage. The distribution of the sample of subjects according to the length of education in the same educational unit looks like this: 31.4% between 0-5 years, 14.7% between 6-10 years, 13.4% between 11-25 years, 12.3% between 16-20 years, 12.4% between 21-25 years, 15.8% over 25 years. Depending on the teaching degree, the group of subjects consisting of primary school teachers is made up of 11.6% novice teachers, 19.9% have obtained a final qualification, 16.8% have a teaching degree II, 51.7% have a teaching degree I, being predominant. The level of education of the respondents is expressed by the last form of education obtained. Depending on this, our participants are divided into four categories: graduates of pedagogical high school (upper secondary education), graduates of pedagogical college (non-university post-secondary education), graduates of bachelor's degree studies and graduates of master's degree studies. 86.5% of them have bachelor's and master's degrees, being predominant. At the opposite pole, there are graduates of pedagogical high school (6%) and pedagogical college (7.5%). The low percentage values of these two categories correspond to the reality in pre-university education, according to which the majority of primary school teachers are college graduates or even master's degree holders.

Most of our respondents, 47.2%, work in primary schools, affiliated structures, 27.4% in coordinating secondary schools, and 25.4% in secondary schools, affiliated structures. In our sample, 93.5% of respondents work in rural schools, and 6.5% in urban schools, from the counties of Alba, Arad, Bacău, Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Botoșani, Buzău, Caraș-Severin, Covasna, Cluj, Constanța, Dolj, Galați, Gorj, Harghita, Iași, Maramureș, Mureș, Neamț, Prahova, Satu Mare, Sălaj, Sibiu, Suceava, Timiș, Vaslui, Vrancea.

The reliability of this questionnaire was analyzed by calculating the Cronbach Alpha coefficient using the SPSS program. Only closed items, which were designated in the database as scalar or ordinal variables, were included in this analysis. The value of this coefficient was 0.805, higher than the commonly accepted value of 0.7, indicating a fairly high reliability.

Study I, "Prerequisites for organizing teaching activity in multigrade education", is based on organizational particularities regarding this type of education, the need to prepare teachers for this type of teaching and the school infrastructure for multigrade classes. Five items of the questionnaire were analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 20 program, more precisely through the non-parametric tests Friedman, Kruskal-Wallis H(χ2), Mann-Whitney U, Cochran, McNemar, Crosstabulation type analyses and the calculation of basic indicators, frequency, mean, median, mode.

Starting from the responses recorded through the questionnaire-based survey, we highlighted aspects related to the familiarization of teachers with the particularities of multigrade education in the initial training stage, through professional development programs and in current teaching activity, useful information resources in professional training, material resources in the patrimony of the educational units in which they operate, criteria that decided the grouping of classes and ways of organizing the daily school program of such a class. The analysis of the collected data indicates the absence of forms of theoretical and practical training regarding multigrade education, in the initial training stage, respectively in the continuous training stage, and of truly useful information resources. In the absence of this support in order to carry out an effective teaching activity, the participating teachers use the professional experiences shared by the chancellery colleagues and self-training as forms of professional development. Another aspect highlighted is the training and development of digital capabilities, both for teachers and students, absolutely indispensable in a world of information and technology. With their support, the characteristic geographical isolation of these areas can be diminished, while the educational and cultural isolation can be avoided, an aspect also identified in international educational systems (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019). Along with professional skills, in order to carry out a qualitative teaching approach, the need to ensure modern and relevant material bases, electronic and digital devices, modern furniture, school minibuses, which facilitate access to educational institutions for students residing at long distances, was highlighted. Most educational institutions benefit from an Internet connection, but not to the same extent from the provision of computers. Only 39.15% of them declared that they have a computer in their classroom or under their own management. As a useful resource in fulfilling teaching, administrative and management responsibilities, we find the computer especially (43.1%) in primary schools with affiliated structures, in urban areas. Certainly, other digital means are used. The results obtained correspond to the findings of the Save the Children organization, contained in the report published in 2019, regarding the use of the Internet by children. According to this study, 96.1% of them access the Internet from a mobile phone and 73% of them claim to use it at school. The interest of local authorities in these educational institutions is also found in the provision of schools with furniture. Over 50% of participants stated that they benefit from modern, mobile furniture, which is an important aspect for the efficient multigrade classes, as it frequently requires being arranged differently, depending on the type of activity. However, in few classrooms we find learning centers and relaxation areas, aspects justified by the lack of financial resources, the lack of space, the conception of their uselessness, often considered as a fad. Regarding the grouping of classes, the data indicate that the main

criterion is the number of students, to the detriment of pedagogical ones, such as ensuring the continuity of teaching staff, the legislation in force, the preferences received from parents.

Study II, "Aspects regarding the use of teaching strategies in multigrade education, from the perspective of primary school teachers and teachers of different school subjects", aimed to highlight the effective benchmarks of designing and carrying out direct activity in multigrade conditions, the methodological aspects used in direct and indirect activities, the particularities of didactic evaluation carried out in multigrade conditions, as well as the ways of organizing and regulating indirect activity, by analyzing the responses recorded following the application of the questionnaire-based survey. Sixteen items of the questionnaire were analyzed, using the IBM SPSS Statistics 20 analysis program and the following types of non-parametric tests: Friedman, Kruskal-Wallis H ($\chi 2$), Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Cochran, Wilcoxon, McNemar, Crosstabulation type analyses, calculation of basic indicators, frequency, mean, median, mode and Spearman ρ correlation coefficient.

Along with the mandatory didactic design documents, calendar planning and design by learning units, in multigrade education, weekly planning is also prepared. The data collected suggest that our respondents do not constantly prepare this document, although it has proven its efficiency for the activity in such conditions. The most well-known way of organizing and conducting classes by alternating direct and indirect activity is most often addressed by our respondents. The factors that influence the way of designing and conducting didactic activity in multigrade mode are, mainly, the available material resources and the particularities of the students – psychophysical characteristics, learning styles, types of intelligence. The choice of didactic methodology is influenced by the content to be taught, the time available, the students' learning styles, the available teaching aids. During activities carried out directly with students, as classical methods, interrogative methods, such as conversation, expository methods, such as explanation and demonstration, action-based methods, such as exercise, are frequently used. Among the modern methods, brainstorming, circuses, starbursts are used. In the conditions of simultaneity, with an extremely limited time available, the respondents' preference for traditional methods is, to some extent, justified. During the activities carried out indirectly, action-based methods are preferred, such as exercise, interrogative methods, such as problematization, written communication methods, such as explanatory reading and work with the textbook, among the classical methods, and among the modern ones, the quadrant method and clusters. During indirect activities, the main forms of organizing the activity are individual and, to a lesser extent, activities in pairs and groups.

In the evaluation stage, traditional methods prevail, such as student knowledge exposure, teacher-student dialogue, student-student dialogue, announced written works. As a preferred moment for

carrying out this stage of the lesson, we noted that teachers prefer evaluation during direct activity, and teachers, evaluation through written works in both classes, at the same time. Students enrolled in multigrade classes are often involved in self-evaluation activities. The analyses of the data obtained illustrate the following aspects: the frequent involvement of students in self-evaluation is frequently used by teachers, by performing self-scoring, based on the scale, following a written evaluation by respondents from rural areas and by those with teaching degree I, especially compared to beginners, by completing self-evaluation sheets at the end of the teaching activity by teachers and by beginners respondents, compared to those with teaching degree II and I.

Providing transparent and constructive feedback to students, to support them in self-evaluation, is frequently used by novice respondents, compared to the other categories, with a degree or with teaching degrees II and I. We appreciated the practice of novice respondents to provide feedback, considered the most appropriate tool for improving learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), therefore a real support for students, but also for teachers, to review and adjust the teaching process (Taole, 2021). The analyzed data highlighted the fact that pedagogical high school graduates, with teaching degree I, organize indirect activities in a differentiated way, depending on certain factors, and the independent tasks assigned to students are checked immediately after they have been solved. The errors identified following the evaluation stage are remedied by performing similar exercises and by repeating the related explanations.

Study III, "Challenges and opportunities in organizing teaching activity in multigrade education" was based on the premise that the particularities of teaching approaches in multigrade education in Romania are identifiable especially through the data provided by teachers directly involved in this type of activity. Thus, the answers provided by the participants in the questionnaire-based survey conducted provide a real picture of this type of education, by highlighting the advantages and disadvantages noted, the difficulties encountered in carrying out the teaching activity, the need for adapted curricular documents, the optimal way of coupling classes, as well as the implications of organizing indirect activities and the need to implement direct, common activities with all students in the classroom. The respondents' answers to the eight items targeted in the applied questionnaire were collected through the online form, imported into the IBM SPSS Statistics 20 analysis program and analyzed by calculating the basic indicators, frequency, mean, median, mode, by Crosstabulation type analyses, using the following non-parametric tests: Cochran, Wilcoxon, Friedman, Kruskal-Wallis H ($\chi2$), Mann-Whitney U and the KH Coder program.

The advantages and disadvantages of this type of education were established following a pilot study. Based on the recorded responses, we selected a list of nine advantages and nine disadvantages that was introduced in the questionnaire administered to the entire sample of subjects. The data obtained illustrate a detachment of the advantages regarding the cognitive acquisitions of students compared to the others. Thus, a significant percentage considers the main advantage of multigrade education to be the thorough development of independent work skills by students. Other advantages are the opportunity for students to learn from each other and the development of their self-control and self-direction in learning skills. The cognitive effects on students are complemented by the non-cognitive ones, namely the development of social skills. The differences in age and training make the interaction closer to real situations, students being thus much better prepared for social integration in the community. The small number of students favors the interaction between the teaching staff and students. Negative aspects highlighted were the considerable reduction in the time allocated to a class of students, the inability of the teacher to intervene in correcting students' errors at the right time, as well as the insufficient time allocated to systematizing knowledge. The tenured teachers also highlighted the increase in the effort and time spent in and for the school by the teachers, in the case of simultaneous activity, an aspect that can cause stress, anxiety and, ultimately, the onset of burnout syndrome.

Qualitative data analysis using the KH Coder program illustrates that, viewed as a whole, the multigrade teaching process is negatively influenced by the insufficient time required to carry out the four stages, design, implementation, evaluation, regulation, and to fulfill all tasks, in optimal conditions, but also by the lack of necessary resources. In the design stage, it is essential to respect the alternation of direct and indirect activity, the central structure being "combination" - "direct" - "indirect", with strong links between terms. The alternation of the two types of activities is also found in the implementation stage, a central structure with strong links between terms, but influenced by time resources. The evaluation stage involves the application of both oral and written tests, and the identified deficiencies will be improved and remedied through additional activities in the regulation stage. The multigrade teaching process involves approaching its specifics with pedagogical mastery, materialized by combining the direct activity of the teacher with the indirect activity of the students.

Study IV, "Particularities and challenges regarding the organization of multigrade education in Romania, from the perspective of Religion teachers", aimed to investigate the opinions of religion teachers about the organizational and methodological particularities of multigrade education in Romania. As a data collection instrument, we used the semi-structured interview, based on the use of a previously established interview guide, addressed to religion teachers who multigrade teach this subject.

The interview guide used included a number of seven questions that constituted an indicative plan, approached in a flexible manner, depending on the person interviewed, but also taking into account the fact that the teaching process carried out in multigrade education is difficult, its success being influenced by numerous factors. The interview was conducted individually, through direct dialogue, between the researcher and the interviewee. In the preliminary stage, the participants were informed of details regarding the use of data, ensuring confidentiality, as well as the right to withdraw at any time, each participant was asked informed consent for participation in the research, no rewards were promised or offered for participation in the research.

Participants were selected through the intentional staging technique, based on the following criteria: religion teachers who have at least two hours of multigrade classes and a professional experience of at least five years. The ten selected teachers, six male and four female, taught the Religion subject in the 2022-2023 school year in rural schools in Suceava County, had a teaching experience ranging from 5 to 29 years, six of them had a first-degree teaching degree, six of them had bachelor's degrees, three of them had master's degrees and one was a doctoral graduate. One of them also holds the position of methodologist teacher for the Religion subject, within the Suceava County School Inspectorate. The responses obtained from each participant were transcribed in Word. The interviewees received a numerical code, from 1 to 10, in the order in which the interviews were conducted. The responses received were grouped according to questions. The KH Coder program helped us interpret this data in a more precise and suggestive manner.

The multigrade teaching activity is complex and demanding. In this context, teachers face numerous challenges, determined both by the particularities of the student body and by those of the contents of the subject taught. For our participants, the challenges are highlighted from the planning stage of the teaching activity: the correct distribution of the time budget, the provision of the necessary teaching resources, the adaptation of the content. In the implementation stage, the challenges are determined by the differences in the pace of work and between the levels of understanding of the students, their religious diversity, the lack of experience of the teachers for this type of teaching, the way of grouping the classes. There are also a number of factors with a beneficial effect on the teaching activity in such conditions. The optimal conduct of the teaching process in the Religion subject is directly influenced by the activity of the teacher in that class, the way in which he relates to the multigrade activity, the type of classroom management he promotes, the rules he imposes. In an organized and disciplined team, the religion teacher can carry out his proposed activity taking into account, in addition, the following factors: efficient time management, the use of various resources,

adapting the contents and teaching strategies to the students' level of understanding, providing feedback at the appropriate time. The analysis of the data collected through an interview guide supported us in outlining the teacher portrait in multigrade education who require professional and personal skills such as adaptability, flexibility, perseverance, empathy, management skills, communication skills. At the same time, we found that the educational environment of the multigrade class has the merit of developing high social skills in students. This consideration is influenced by the responsibility of older students in supporting younger ones and by the fact that there are degrees of kinship between most students, through their membership in small communities.

Study V, "Cognitive and non-cognitive effects of multigrade classroom education of primary school students", presents the investigation that aimed to highlight the cognitive and non-cognitive effects of using a flexible approach to religion class, under multigrade conditions, by identifying solutions in order to involve all students in the classroom in common teaching activities and to capitalize on the formative nature of the subject involved. The multigrade teaching activity is based on alternating direct activities, under the coordination of the teacher, with indirect ones, without his support. Through the experimental approach undertaken, we wanted to overcome the limits of a rigid approach and offer an original and useful perspective on the conduct of teaching activity in this educational context. The study aimed to verify to what extent the involvement of students in education in contextualized learning sequences in the Religion subject, grade 3, has a positive impact on the level of cognitive acquisitions, on the social relations between students and on the level self-esteem. The first secondary hypothesis formulated concerned the cognitive level of the students and was confirmed by means of the non-parametric Mann-Whitey U test for two independent samples and the sign test, statistical analyses imposed by the small number of students, under 10, of the experimental classes, multigrade classes. The second hypothesis concerned the level of self-esteem of the students and for its testing data obtained from the application of the LAWSEQ questionnaire of school self-esteem were used. During the experiment, no student benefited from specialized psychological support, which could have influenced the research data. At the group level, the data obtained indicate positive influences following the formative intervention on the level of self-esteem of the students in the experimental classes, which confirms secondary hypothesis number 2. The third hypothesis was tested using sociometric methods, highlighting the number of choices and rejections at the beginning and end of the experiment and comparing these data. The sociometric tests applied targeted three activity contexts: school, extracurricular and free time. Data analysis highlights the fact that the dynamics of each class changes in favor of the multigrade class. In general, the number of rejections issued decreases, at the level of the

entire collective. For all three types of activities, frequent involvement of students in joint activities is required, in order to improve these relationships and increase group cohesion. For the fourth secondary hypothesis, data obtained from monitoring the students included in the case studies were analyzed. A favorable evolution was found, materialized by improving school performance, by improving learning behavior manifested during class hours and by positive changes in the way of relating to classmates. Based on the fact that the four secondary hypotheses were confirmed by the analyses of data obtained from the experimental research conducted, we can state that contextualized learning sequences have a significant positive influence on the development of students, both in terms of cognitive acquisitions and non-cognitive levels.

CHAPTER V. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

This thesis addresses the issues of multigrade teaching as its main theme. It is based on the professional competence and qualities of the author who works in a school with multigrade classes, has professional experience teaching such classes and has benefited from initial training in this type of education, and on the in-depth study of literature focused on the topic addressed. The theoretical foundation, supported by the study of specialized literature, constituted an essential stage of the research, in order to deepen the subject addressed, identify the defining elements and draw an overview of it. At the same time, the literature consultation revealed aspects less addressed previously to our research topic. The documentary research was based on a rich literature, predominantly international and, to a lesser extent, national, an aspect influenced by the deficit of works dealing with this field.

At the same time, the thesis falls within the series of research undertaken internationally and covers a gap in national research with the aim of contributing to the improvement of multigrade teaching activity through flexible curricular approaches to the contents and the elimination of rigidity. The merit of the thesis is to offer such models of adaptations of the contents, based on the contextualization of teaching and learning and in accordance with the individual and group particularities of the students and multigrade classes and with the specifics of the community in which the school operates. We consider these flexible approaches absolutely necessary for the multigrade activity, thus ensuring the respect of the specific heterogeneity. Without referring to the characteristic diversity, multigrade education would lose its purpose, an aspect supported by the specification that reflecting in the training the practices and values characteristic of a single group of students implies the refusal to ensure equal opportunities to learn for the other students (Richards et al., 2006). From an educational point of view, education provides equal opportunities for students from disadvantaged areas to learn and develop, and from a social point of view, it contributes to maintaining the viability of the communities in which it is integrated and the sustainability of the rural world (Boix et al., 2015). Although the research focused on collecting data and highlighting eloquent conclusions, both theoretical and practical, we do not omit the existence of some limitations. The teachers participating in the investigations carried out do not cover all counties in Romania and we admit a subjectivity of the answers provided, influenced by the attitude towards this type of education. Study IV, based on the opinions of religion teachers collected by applying an interview guide, constitutes a phenomenological study, the interpretation of the results being able to be influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher.

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