

## SCHOOL ADAPTATION DIFFICULTIES IN THE PREPARATORY GRADE\*

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### **Abstract**

*Through the present study we intend to demonstrate that the main function of the primary cycle is the instrumental one which is meant to form intellectual abilities in students, to "teach them how to learn". The new curriculum requires a reconsideration of the value dimension of the "informative-formative" couple and, implicitly, a reconsideration of the whole process of designing teaching activities.*

*The preparatory grade, integrated in compulsory education, established by the National Education Law no. 1/2011, proposes both a systematic educational approach, meant to train and test the school skills of preschoolers, and an educational approach that streamlines school placement, access and successful participation in education. From the perspective of the Education Law, the preparatory grade has the role of preparing a quality school debut, through institutionalized early education and by creating the educational premises for a school integration with low rates of early school leaving and with increased chances of future integration on the labor market of the current generations of preschoolers.*

*The research we conducted, on a sample of teachers (93 subjects), school managers (43), parents (215 subjects) aimed at outlining a diagnosis of the role of the preparatory grade in getting ready for the school activity, based on learning, of the young student. The research methods we used analysed the curricular documents, the products of the students' activity, the survey based on the questionnaire, the corresponding tool being presented in the Annex. The research results validated the pursued hypotheses. We have identified both the advantages and disadvantages, as well as the proposals for streamlining the situation.*

**Key words:** *Learning difficulties; Preparatory grade; The relationship kindergarten - school - family; The ability to attend school.*

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## **1. Introduction. A diagnosis of the difficulties of children's adaptation to school life**

The period of transition from the pre-primary to the primary cycle is for the students a period of intense transformations, activating considerable physical and mental energies. The school environment brings with it, in the life of the student, for the first time in this situation, a new, multiple dimensioned reality, with a specific profile, different from that of the kindergarten environment, from various perspectives. The learning activity acquires an accentuated systematic character, activating the whole personality of the young student, opening numerous possibilities of development, crystallization and affirmation of more and more complex mental processes and functions.

One of the main causes of the radical lack of adaptation to school activity is the reduced learning capacity of some students. It can be of two types: permanent or temporary. The permanently reduced capacity is innate, while the temporarily reduced capacity is due to other factors, in principle. Capacity refers to the permanently reduced learning capacity. The causes some are born with such deficiencies are of course multiple, especially of a medical and hereditary nature. However, it is not excluded that some may be the victims of alcohol abuse by their parents, especially during conception. A warning would be welcome in this regard for the parents, especially for the newly married people (Adler, 1995; Claff, 2007; Glava & Glava, 2002; Ionescu, 2010).

If in the 70's debates on school invoked the failure more, the school lack of achievement, in the sphere of the educational activity of the 21st century, the idea of school achievement and success is insistently conveyed. School success is defined by forming in students, in accordance with the requirements of the school curricula, cognitive (knowledge systems), operational (skills, abilities, capacities), psychomotor (skills), affective-motivational and socio-moral (attitudes, traits of will and character) structures.

The conclusions of the investigations carried out on children in kindergarten and first grade show that when entering school the child must have a certain volume of qualities expressed by "school maturity", "school readiness", "schooling ability". These are mainly aimed at developing language, cultivating intelligence, observation, independence in thinking and action, stimulating creativity, familiarizing children with the technical, artistic, literary language, the perceptual-motor development and enhancing the writing skills, developing the skills of integration in the activity and adaptation to the environment. On the other hand, children who do not cope with school insertion suffer from what specialists call "the shock of schooling".

What can school do for such children? We definitely believe that it is necessary for them to be kept in the sphere of the school action as much as possible, for two reasons: firstly to be free from isolation and out of control with possible influences and unsociable consequences, and then because, although they cannot keep up with the class and the syllabus, they can still assimilate some knowledge, if the teacher adopts a different work style in relation to their abilities. They can be

encouraged to make the slightest progress, and it is good to focus on practical activities, some of which are difficult to assume that they would not be interested in, especially considering that the lack of intellectual skills is usually compensated by the existence of certain practical skills. They can thus be socially recovered through the effort of the school, to which will obviously be added the collaboration of the family (Adler, 1995; Claff, 2007; Glava & Glava, 2002; Ionescu, 2010).

The role of the true teacher is to discover the cause and to apply the appropriate remedy, not to label and reproach the child what in reality he cannot be blamed of. This truth becomes more apparent when students with normal intelligence, corresponding to their real age, end up raising problems similar to those delayed for completely different reasons. These are quite numerous, which leads us to treat them separately, also indicating the procedures to follow.

The studies mentioned above refer to four categories of main causes of the incorrect adaptation of children aged 6-7 to school activity:

- reduced or temporary learning ability he/ she was born with;
- family disorganization;
- physical, medical or temporary mental blockages;
- general causes.

It is up to the family to remove an important part of these causes. First of all, the parents should be convinced that, as the relationship between them is, that is, between spouses, so will the character of the child be, with appropriate effects on learning and discipline. There is no greater misfortune for an ordinary child than for the parents to divorce. Also, if one or both parents are alcoholics, the misfortune can be even greater, even if they do not divorce.

It is no more shame for a parent than for his son to become his own victim. The school welcomes the family, but it will never be able to replace the part that the parents occupy in the child's soul. And this part must always remain a place of deep love (Claff, 2007; Glava & Glava, 2002; Ionescu, 2010).

## **2. The influence of family environment on the school integration of the young student**

The family is the one that lays the foundations of the child's education, which outlines the guidelines for his further development. The family has always had an important educational role, being the child's first school, and the parents his first educators.

One of the main functions of the family is education. The family is the starting point, the initial stage in children's education, a stage that has an impact on the entire further development of the child. In the family, the child forms his first impressions, the first representations about the world around him. Due to the fact that the child's first knowledge of life appears in an "empty place", they are very durable and are stored for a long time. This is why the parents and the adults who live with their children must be constantly careful not to pass on the wrong knowledge to their children, because this is the basis of their beliefs, habits, customs and character of the child (Claff, 2007; Glava & Glava, 2002; Ionescu, 2010).

"The upbringing and education of children", wrote A. S. Makarenko (1953), "is a very serious and very important matter, and it is self-evident that it is a very difficult task. You can't get away with a cheap trick here. Having a child means that you have engaged yourself for many years ahead in giving him the full tension of your thinking, all your attention, and all your life".

The intellectual preoccupations of the parents are the first to contribute to the creation of the premises for the formation of a positive attitude towards learning in children: if the family reads and discusses what they read, if they go to the cinema, theater and explain their actions to their children, if books, magazines, newspapers enter the house and are read and commented on, if an intellectual (cultural) ambiance is achieved in the family life, this is an important contribution to the formation of cultural interests in the child, to the creation of premises for a positive attitude towards learning.

The family atmosphere, the emotional environment in which the child lives also contribute to the creation of these premises.

Relationships between family members, between them and other people, their attitude in social relations they all influence the child. Parents must set an example, a model of an honest attitude towards work, towards social and public duties, they must be an example of sincerity and modesty - to possess the moral qualities that they seek to infuse into their children. You don't teach others what you want, you don't teach them what you know, you teach them what you are.

Lifestyle, family work atmosphere, intellectual ambiance create the premises for a positive attitude towards work and a positive attitude towards learning, when the child becomes a student.

A very early concern of the family must be the closeness of the child to the book, his acquaintance with facts, events and heroes from the world of books for young readers and listeners. It is very important to choose the time to read a book, a story. Reading or storytelling should be done in an expressive, nuanced, colorful way so that the child can "see" and "live" the facts and events, while awakening the regret of not being able to read, as well as the burning desire to learn as soon as possible (Enăchescu, 2009; Jinga & Petrescu, 1996; Şchiopu & Verza, 1997).

The family atmosphere is crucial for the way the child sets the bases of his general conception of the world and life and for the formation of his personality. The way of being of the parents, their way of thinking, of expressing their feelings, will serve as the first model for the child. If the parents are able to maintain their calm and confidence in problematic situations, the child will also be able to control himself. The communicative, affectionate, open parent will encourage the child to open up and communicate in his turn.

The approval and valorization of the parents are, for the child, confirmations of his own value and depending on these, the child will be appreciated or underappreciated.

In conclusion, the family constellation, through its network of relationships and the value system, influences the school adaptation, so be very careful how you

behave with your child/ children because, in fact, you are determining their evolution in life.

### **3. The research design**

#### ***The purpose and objectives of the research***

*The purpose* of the research was to make an x-ray of the way schools in Romania (South-West Oltenia region) ensured the development in good conditions of the didactic activity specific to the preparatory grade. As a result, the research focused on drawing an overview of the conditions and the way in which the measure of introducing the preparatory grade as a year of compulsory schooling in pre-university education was implemented, with details regarding:

- characteristics of the educational unit where the preparatory grade functions;
- the profile of the teachers who teach in the preparatory grade, in relation to the educational factors (professional training, classes assigned, teaching experience) or personal (gender, age);
- characteristics of the educational space (the building where the classroom is located, utilities);
- endowing the preparatory grades with the furniture and the didactic means specified by OMECTS 4310/ 01.06.2012, respectively GD 564/ 30.05.2012;
- the frequency and the way of organizing the integrated activities;
- facilities and obstacles encountered in organizing the activity in the preparatory grade;
- accommodating children with the school environment and the program of activities.

The research aimed at the following specific **objectives**:

- the analysis of the way the preparatory grade was implemented: ensuring the necessary conditions, difficulties encountered;
- examining the coverage of the preparatory grades with qualified teaching staff, including the ways of integrating the preparatory grade in the simultaneous education system;
- exploring the representations of the actors involved in education in relation to the place of the preparatory class in the educational path of the child;
- investigating the opinions regarding the impact of the preparatory grade program, both on the preparation of the child for school life, and on the management of his/ her free time, in the first months of school;
- investigating the opinions regarding the organization and efficiency of the training program for the teachers who teach in the preparatory grade.

#### ***Research methods and tools***

The main used methods and tools were:

- a) *The analysis of official curricular documents* (curriculum, school syllabus, calendar planning, the schedule of students in the preparatory grade, class attendance sheets conducted by school principals/ heads of departments)

- b) *The analysis of the students' activity products* (worksheets, notebooks, homework, questionnaires, drawings, paintings, interpretation of the results of some extracurricular activities: celebrations, visits, excursions, etc.).
- c) *Questionnaire survey.*

The questionnaire survey aimed to gather information on the situation of the preparatory grade from the perspective of the main educational actors: teachers for the preparatory grade, school principals, school inspectors for primary education, parents. For teachers and students we developed a questionnaire, consisting of 20 items, 17 with closed questions, for a statistical-quantitative interpretation and 3 with open questions, for a qualitative interpretation.

#### ***The research hypotheses***

The research was based on a general hypothesis and two specific hypotheses:

*The general hypothesis of the research:* The inclusion of the child in the preparatory grade, after the completion of the upper kindergarten group, implies a better psychosomatic development of his personality, as a guarantee of a good accommodation/ integration in the primary school.

*Specific hypothesis no. 1:* Conducting thematic lectures with the parents leads to an increased appreciation on their part, regarding the inclusion of the children in the preparatory grade.

*Specific hypothesis no. 2:* The organization of special training courses for primary school teachers has positive effects on their better relationship with the students of the preparatory grades.

#### ***The place and duration of the research***

The research (action) lasted two years (2019 - 2021) and covered the counties in the Oltenia region: Vâlcea, Dolj, Mehedinți, Gorj, Olt.

#### ***The description of the investigated population***

Considering the objective of the first stage of the study, regarding the evaluation of the ways of organizing and implementing the preparatory grade, the degree of coverage with the resources necessary for their functioning in good conditions, the study proposed a research of representative school units for the mentioned counties. Thus, the research aimed, as a priority, to provide a more accurate picture of the situation in the system and not an estimated situation.

The research through questionnaire was addressed to some school units that organized preparatory grades in the school years 2019 - 2020, 2020 - 2021.

In total, the following were surveyed:

- 40 principals of school institutions
- 93 teachers who teach in primary education, in the preparatory grade
- 215 parents.

#### **4. Results and discussions**

The quantitative data obtained from the applied questionnaire (see Annex) are presented below:

**Table 1. The results of the opinion questionnaire**

No. item	Categories / Responses	Teachers (93)	Parents (215)
1	Yes	80	190
	No	10	15
	Don't know	3	10
2	Yes	85	176
	No	7	20
	Don't know	1	19
3	Yes	84	169
	No	7	25
	Don't know	2	19
4	Kindergarten/ School	92 1	150 65
5	Yes	84	156
	No	8	25
	Don't know	1	33
6	Monodisciplinary	1	33
	Integrated	84	25
	Combined	8	156
7	Yes	80	201
	No	10	10
	Don't know	3	4
8	Yes	30	151
	No	60	43
	Don't know	3	11
9	Yes	52	43
	No	40	151
	Don't know	1	11
10	8 in the morning	1	150
	As in kindergarten	92	65
11	Yes	52	151
	No	40	42
	Don't know	1	22
12	Yes	70	163
	No	20	20
	Don't know	3	32
13	Yes	81	163
	No	9	15
	Don't know	3	37
14	Yes	92	211
	No	1	2
	Don't know	0	2
15	Yes	83	176
	No	9	30
	Don't know	1	9
16	Yes	61	120
	No	32	55
	Don't know	0	40

One of the items in the questionnaire was open-ended (item 17). He asked respondents to mention the benefits of the preparatory class.

Among the answers (principals, teachers, parents): Provides a support bridge for the transition to first grade; Easier transition from kindergarten to school; Early inclusion of children in a form of education; Reducing the gaps between children in terms of preparation for schooling; Getting the child used to school, the school environment and practicing aptitude for schooling, in a child-friendly manner; easy work schedule; absence of grades; absence of textbooks (factors that lead to easy accommodation of children); better preparation for school: practical, concrete activities, important for acquiring fundamental acquisitions; increasing self-esteem and motivation for learning - children feel "important" that they are "schoolchildren", gain in autonomy, responsibility, communication and relationships with others; For teachers, the preparatory grade provides time and a suitable framework for a very good knowledge of the children; Teachers have a flexible curriculum, they are free from the "stress of assessing children" and a pleasant space for activities; Many parents of the children in the preparatory grade pointed out that they had changed their mind in favor of the preparatory grade, after the beginning of the school year, even though previously they had a negative position in relation to its introduction in primary education; The positive attitude towards the preparatory class must be strengthened by granting the freedom and the right of parents to enroll the child in the school they want; They do not have a large volume of homework, although homework for children in the preparatory grade is not recommended, possibly as tasks to complete what they have not solved in class; In the case of the "school after school" program, parents have the opportunity to go to work, without having to bring other people (grandparents, friends, etc.) to take care of the children; The parents participating in the group-focused discussions expressed their opinions in terms of satisfaction with the preparatory grade: they adapted perfectly, they go to school with pleasure, with joy, on the weekend it is boring, they want to come to school, in conclusion they integrated very well in the preparatory grade group; The unanimous opinion is that all children have adapted without problems to the requirements of the preparatory grade and they are proud to be in school. Most parents see the introduction of the preparatory grade as an advantage; For the children who had an older sister or brother who were already in school, the adjustment was easier because the children were eager to go to school like them. Children are interested in the schoolwork they enjoy doing. The transition to school was easy, natural, and the children came home satisfied. The parents are satisfied with the way their children have adapted to school, but in order to obtain qualitative results they want to continue the primary cycle with the same teachers, whom the children have become attached to.

As disadvantages, requested by another item with open answer (18), the subjects mentioned: It delays by one year the child's progress; There are extra expenses for both schools and parents; There is no conclusive assessment; The teacher's possibility to work with the student is sometimes preferential, optional; There is no conclusive feedback on student acquisitions; teachers who have not taken specialized courses have the possibility teach; There are not enough classrooms;

There are no adequate learning conditions (heat, teaching materials, etc.); There are problems with public transport in rural areas; There are serious problems with granting the minimum learning conditions to simultaneous and double simultaneous classes; There are financial problems in schools that are dependent on the budget of town halls/ local councils; In rural areas, there are problems with the settlement of the commute/ transport; In rural areas, there are no support staff; In rural areas, there are unqualified or inexperienced teachers in the field; There is pressure, especially from parents, to go beyond the schedule and do more than the requirements; The use of two foreign languages is encouraged, while the child sometimes does not speak the mother tongue well enough (bilingualism and trilingualism); Preliminary psychosomatic evaluation, performed by CJRAE (County Center for Resources and Educational Assistance); Inclusion/ evaluation of children with SEN.

Items 19 and 20 consisted of formulating *recommendations for the preparatory grade teachers*, respectively *for the parents of the children in the preparatory grade*.

**Recommendations *for the teachers*:**

- The use of interactive, attractive methods and strategies;
- The morning meeting should be seen as the time to bring the same denominator, which gives both children and adults the opportunity to connect optimally to the requirements of the group, space and activities planned for that day. At this point, a first emotional contact is established between the members of the group, who know each other, learn to communicate with each other, respecting certain rules established together.
- Therefore, at least at the beginning and at the end of the week (it would be optimal every day), the teacher can gather the children in a specially arranged area, allowing either the chairs to be placed next to each other or they can sit on a carpet and carry out the following activities:
- Individual greeting/ group greeting: Good morning!
- Ice-breakers: How Do You Feel Today?
- Identifying the day: Today is ... marking the day verbally and practically in a row with the other 7 days;
- Specifying the date: The date today is ... marking the date verbally and practically, within the current month (with the help of the magnetic calendar or in another form);
- Weather: completing the nature calendar (description of the day from a meteorological point of view, marking with icons, making predictions);
- Presence: number of girls, boys, total number, absentees (known reasons);
- Responsibilities: materials from work centers (Library, Arts, Sciences, Toy Library, etc.);
- News: of the children (reporting the significant events in their life, which happened the day before), of the teacher (announcing some guests, visits, excursions, events, etc.);
- Schedule of the day: announcing the topic of the day and the activities;

- Class rules: explicit and implicit rules;
- Message of the day: short story, news from a newspaper, radio news, game, which can introduce children to the topic unit, etc.
- Just as each day can start with the meeting in a circle, so the end of the day can bring the children into the same formation;
- Therefore, at the end of the day they return to the activities initially announced.

Each student is asked about their favorite activity of the day, using formulations such as *What activity did you enjoy most today?* or *What did you learn today?* or *How did you feel today?* They insist on providing specific answers and do not accept expressions like *Today I enjoyed all the activities.*

- An important aspect is the teacher's attitude at this time of day. No matter how busy or difficult the day may be, he/ she must find the strength to appreciate positively and to encourage all the members of the group.

#### Recommendations *for the parents:*

- Better involvement in the life and work of the school and the community;
- Better receptivity to messages received from teachers and principals;
- Availability when requested;
- Openness to problems and offering solutions;
- Communication with the school and teachers through different communication channels;
- Accepting and acknowledging one's own defects/ correcting them;
- Accepting assisted support, when appropriate;
- Communicating the child's problems;
- Attracting local community actors;
- Positive communication at the level of the parents' committee;
- "School after school" or "A Different School" initiatives;
- Attracting funds through the involvement of NGOs.

## 5. Conclusions

From the data presented above, we can draw some conclusions. Most teachers who teach in the preparatory grade have significant teaching experience, with two-thirds having at least 10 years teaching experience. Most of the teachers who teach in the preparatory grade are women, whether we are talking about rural or urban areas. About two-thirds of the teachers who teach in the preparatory grade live in the same location as the school. In rural areas, almost half of the teachers live in a place other than the one where they teach.

The teachers appreciate as very good the presented materials, the level of the trainers, their involvement and the examples of good practice discussed during the course. Some issues related to the use of the learning platform (ICOS: <http://www.icos-edu.ro/>) related to the limited access of rural teachers to the Internet (an aspect that was felt during the Covid-19 pandemic) were also reported. A suggestion regarding the improvement of the training program is the elaboration of

didactic guides/ supports for the application of the curriculum to the preparatory grade, in parallel with the documents posted on the platform.

School counselors, psychologists, school mediators and other categories of school support are still insufficient, although they play an important role in adapting children to the school environment. Some of the interviewed parents showed their willingness to help the support staff from their own resources, thus providing help to the teacher who teaches in the preparatory grade. A similar situation was observed for auxiliary personnel, especially the staff in charge of security.

Looking at the working space, in the years of investigation progress has been made in this regard. As soon as the preparatory grade worked, the locations were diverse: kindergartens, schools, laboratories, teachers' rooms, gymnasiums or other spaces offered by the school/ inspectorate.

Regarding the endowment and the teaching material, many classes are still subordinated, especially those from rural areas, the teachers being often obliged (by the deontology of the profession) to allocate important sums of money to make up the deficit of didactic material.

However, the study shows that the approach and teaching activities are well adapted to the needs and preferences of the students in the preparatory grade. The support provided to the teachers who teach in the preparatory grade through the specific training course also contributed to this state of affairs.

In general, most parents are satisfied with the diversity of daily activities: children play, draw, learn, read, solve worksheets, experiment, etc. In their opinion, the specifics of the activity are placed between the specific activity of the kindergarten and the specific activity of the school. At the same time, the parents recommend (opinion, not shared by all) to make more foreign languages, ICT and sports, to keep the "Apple" program, to cancel the "Milk and horn" program.

The teachers participating in the group-focused discussions state that there are no homework assignments, but rather non-compulsory assignments. Tasks and homework started in class can be continued at home, teachers say, but they are not required (worksheets, work in special workbooks). Some teachers, however, say that, under pressure from parents and students, they assign homework. These consist of completing worksheets started in class or homework for children, depending on the topic of the day.

Regarding the location of the preparatory grade, most respondents believe that it should remain in school, while about a quarter of principals and parents are in favor of organizing it in kindergarten (a situation that is still found in 13% of the cases). Regardless of the place of development, the preparatory grade can achieve its pedagogical functions, if two basic conditions are met: it is part of the compulsory education and it has the same curriculum.

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- \*\*\*ICOS: <http://www.icos-edu.ro>

## Annex

### **Questionnaire to survey the opinion of parents, teachers on the usefulness/ necessity of setting up the preparatory class**

1. Do you consider it important/ necessary to introduce the preparatory grade in the national education system?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Don't know
2. Do you think that the transition from kindergarten to school will be greatly facilitated by the activities carried out for a year in the preparatory grade?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Don't know
3. Do you think that a child who has passed the upper group in kindergarten can go directly to the first grade without going to the preparatory grade?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Don't know
4. In terms of location, should the preparatory grade be held on the premises of the (primary) school or kindergarten?
  - a) Kindergarten
  - b) School
5. Should the activities carried out in the preparatory grade take place predominantly in the form of a game?
  - a) Yes

- b) No
  - c) Don't know
6. Should the way of teaching for each discipline be individual (monodisciplinary, intradisciplinary), integrated (interdisciplinary) or combined?
- a) Monodisciplinary
  - b) Integrated
  - c) Combined
7. Should teachers who teach in the preparatory grade have prior training in the field?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Don't know
8. Do you consider homework mandatory/ necessary?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Don't know
9. Should PE, ICT, Religion, and Foreign Language Classes be taught by specialized teachers or by the class teacher?
- a) Specialized teacher
  - b) Primary school teacher
  - c) Don't know
10. Should the start of the daily program be for everyone at 8 in the morning or optionally, as in kindergarten, until 9 o'clock?
- a) 8 in the morning
  - b) As in kindergarten
11. Do you consider a uniform is needed for the preparatory grade?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Don't know
12. Do you find the "School After School" program useful in the preparatory grade?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Don't know
13. Do you find the Internet connection of at least one computer in the classroom useful?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Don't know
14. Is there a need for specific classroom equipment (video, audio equipment, benches, toys, etc.)?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Don't know

15. Is the presence of frequent support staff (psychologist, counselor, speech therapist, etc.) necessary in the preparatory grade?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Don't know

16. Should parents participate in the activities carried out by the teacher in the preparatory grade?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Don't know

17. What advantages do you think the preparatory grade has?

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18. What disadvantages do you think the preparatory grade has?

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19. What recommendations would you make to the teacher in the preparatory grade?

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20. What recommendations would you make for the parents of the pupils in preparatory grade?

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