

THE STATUS OF GEOGRAPHY, OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND OF THEIR SPECIALIST DIDACTICS IN TEACHERS' INITIAL TRAINING FOR THE SPECIALIZATION OF PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

The first part of the paper is an analysis of preschool and primary school teacher's initial training within the context of EU educational policies. Further on, the specialization of Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy is analyzed with respect to the contents of the grids of NQFHE (National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education Registry and Matrix)¹. A detailed study on the status of Geography and of Environmental Education, as well as of the specific didactics of these two disciplines within the university curriculum for the Bachelor of Education programme offered by various universities in Romania is presented. In the second part of the paper, the status of these two disciplines is also analyzed for the curricula of "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca. In the last part of the paper the relationship between the curriculum for PPSP studies and the National Curriculum for Primary Education is discussed.

¹ RNCIS is the Romanian version and any search in Romanian documents and online should use only this abbreviation. We used the English translation in order to facilitate understanding for English speaking readers.

Keywords: *primary education, preschool education, national curriculum, professional competences, university curriculum, higher education*

INTRODUCTION

The initial training for future preschool and primary school teachers within the context of EU educational policies

Within the context of EU policies for higher education, *The Bologna Declaration*⁴ of 19 June 1999 establishes the objectives for the process of harmonizing and consolidating the European area of higher education as follows: constructing the European area of higher education; compatibilization of the European national education systems; reorganization of university studies and adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees obtained in various countries in order to adjust them to labour market demands; establishment of a system of credits (ECTS); promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance; promotion of free mobility for students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff.

As a result of Romania's status of signatory of this declaration, under the provisions of the Act 288 of 24 June 2004 regarding the organization of university studies programmes, the university studies programmes have been re-organized into three cycles: undergraduate, graduate (master's degree) and doctoral studies. Under section (1), provisions were made for the number of ECTSs carried by the successful completion of each cycle; thus, undergraduate studies are set a number of 180-240 credits, according to the ECTS. Under section (3), it is mentioned that the duration of full daytime university course of studies for an undergraduate programme is of 3 - 4 years and that completed coursework for an academic year corresponds to 60 ECTS.

The specialization of *Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy* in Romania

Beginning with the 2005/2006 academic year, the Faculties of Educational Sciences or the faculties which provide courses of studies in the fundamental domain of *Educational Sciences* of some universities in Romania (e.g. the *Faculty of Social Sciences* of the University of Braşov includes a specialization in the domain of *Educational Sciences*) introduced undergraduate level programmes for the specialization *Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy*. The title awarded to the graduate is "*Bachelor of Education/Licentiate in Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy*". The qualification obtained was and is named "Teacher of preschool and primary school education". The full-time study programmes duration was and still is of 3 years, consisting of 6 academic semesters. Each semester consists of 14 weeks of classwork, seminars, and practical activities.

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Upon completion of the course of studies programme for this specialisation, the potential jobs graduate students may apply for are the following, according to NOC² (National Occupational Classification): teacher for primary school education - 233101; teacher for preschool education - 233201; research assistant in Pedagogy - 235102; education - 235201; education expert - 235202; school inspector - 235203; referent educator - 235204; mentor - 235902; /school counsellor- 235903. New jobs proposed to be included in NOC, correlated with this specialization, are: visiting teacher for preschool and primary school education; learning support teacher for preschool and primary school education; resource teacher; preschool and primary school teacher for special education; methodologist teacher with Teacher Resources Centre; school principal/manager; early education programmes consultant.

Types of study programmes for Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy specialization (BEd degree) are full time studies and distance learning studies. According to *the Education Act (2011)*³ (3), authorization for temporary functioning and accreditation of university studies programmes is distinctly awarded for each type of study programme and qualification, each language of instruction and for each branch of the university where study programmes are carried out (p. 24). First cycle university studies leading to obtaining a BEd/Licence degree correspond to a minimum of 180 and a maximum of 240 ECTS, and is finalized by attaining a reference Level 6 qualification within the EQF (European Framework of Qualifications (p. 26).

The *general objective* of this course of studies is to prepare teachers specializing in preschool and primary school education, in accordance with the *Bologna Declaration*, with the European Framework of Qualifications, with the process of reform of early education and the curriculum reform for primary education. The objectives and the competence profile developed in conformity with the needs identified for the labour market and with the National Qualifications Framework are presented synthetically in the *National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Romania (NQFHE)*⁴ and are detailed by the contents of each subject/course specifications included within the university curriculum.

The professional competencies, according to NQFHE⁴, are the following:
C1. Designing instructional or educational programmes adapted to various age levels/education levels and for various target groups;
C2. Implementing teaching-learning activities typical of preschool and primary school education;
C3. Evaluating teaching-learning developments, learning outcomes and assessing preschool and primary school pupils' progress with their learning;

²http://www.mmuncii.ro/j3/images/Documente/Munca/COR/2013_ISCO_08_lista_alfabetica_ocupatii_cor.pdf

³http://www.dreptonline.ro/legislatie/legea_educatiei_nationale_lege_1_2011.php

⁴www.rncis.ro/

C4. Managing preschool and primary school groups of pupils, instructional process and learning/social integration activities typical of the particular target group; C5. Counselling, providing guidance to and psycho-pedagogical assistance of a range of different categories of individuals/learning groups (preschoolers, primary school pupils, pupils' parents or families, other teachers, employees, etc.; C6. Self-assessment and continuous improvement of own professional practices and developing one's career.

Transversal key competencies are as follows, according to NQFHE matrix/ grids: CT1. Applying principles and professional code of conduct norms, based on explicit value options, typical of an Educational Sciences specialist; CT2. Effectively co-operating in interdisciplinary professional teams, specific to developing Educational Sciences projects and programmes; CT3. Using effective lifelong learning methods and strategies with a view to further on own professional training and progress with one's own career development.

Currently, the specialisation in preschool and primary school pedagogy is offered by several universities in Romania: the University of Bucharest; the "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca; the "Ovidius" University of Constanța; the "Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava; the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați; the "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad; the West University of Timișoara; the Oil and Natural Gas University of Ploiești; the University of Oradea; the University of Pitești; the "Transylvania" University of Brașov and others.

The status of Geography, of Environmental Education and of their specific didactics within the University Curriculum of various universities

We have analyzed the university curriculum for the specialization in *Preschool and Primary school Pedagogy* from several Romanian universities, in the form this document posted on their websites could be retrieved on 7th December 2013. This curriculum applies to certain academic years of the cycle, which diminishes the accuracy of the analysis. In Table 1, in the case of the universities considered, some differences can be noticed with respect to the status given to these disciplines. The discipline is called "*Geography and Methodology/ Methodology of Teaching Geography*" in the curricula of six universities; the title of the discipline is "*Geography, Methodology and Practice of Teaching the Subject*" at one university and "*Geography and the Subject Specific Didactics*" at other two universities. At two of the universities included in the sample, Geography and the Didactics of Geography is combined with *Environmental education* and with *Sciences*, a fact that diminishes the importance given to the discipline of Geography as a distinct subject. This discipline is not included in the curriculum for the pedagogical specialization for preschool and primary education teachers at the University of Pitești.

In Table 2, it can be noticed that, within the same university curricula, *Environmental Education and Its Didactics* is studied together with

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Sciences at six out of the ten universities considered. At the University of Bucharest, *The Didactics of Natural Sciences* is studied. At two universities ("Babeş-Bolyai" in Cluj-Napoca and "Dunărea de Jos" in Galaţi), Geography and the Didactics of Geography is added to the two previously mentioned disciplines; this situation shows a considerably diminished importance given to each of the three disciplines, added to the case in which the discipline totally lacks within the academic curriculum (The University of Piteşti). We should point out that both disciplines are regarded as specialist disciplines and are compulsory for future preschool and primary school teachers.

In as far as the weighting in number of credits is considered (Table 1), it can be noted that *Geography and Its Didactics/ The Methodology of Teaching Geography* is given 2 credits at one university, 3 credits at four universities, 4 credits at three universities (at one of them the discipline is combined with *Environmental Education and Sciences*), 5 credits at one university, but, similarly, for a combination of disciplines. *Environmental Education and Its Didactics* is given: 2 credits at one university; 3 credits at five universities, but in combination with *Sciences*; 4 and 5 credits at one university individually, again in combination with *Geography* and with *Sciences*. A number of 5 credits is given to the discipline of *Didactics of Natural Sciences* at one university (Bucharest).

As regards the number of class periods per week (Fig. 1), *Geography and Its Didactics/ The Methodology of Teaching Geography*, one university allocates 1 class period, 1 class period and 1 seminar activity session are allocated at four universities, 2 class periods and 1 seminar activity period are allocated at four universities. *Environmental Education and Its Didactics* is allocated 1 class period and 1 seminar activity period at four universities, 2 class periods and 1 seminar activity session at two universities, but for a combination of *Geography* and *Sciences*, 2 class periods and 2 seminar activity periods at one university, in which *Sciences* are also studied. At one university, 1 class period and 1 seminar activity period is allocated, but the discipline, together with *Sciences*, is studied over 2 semesters.

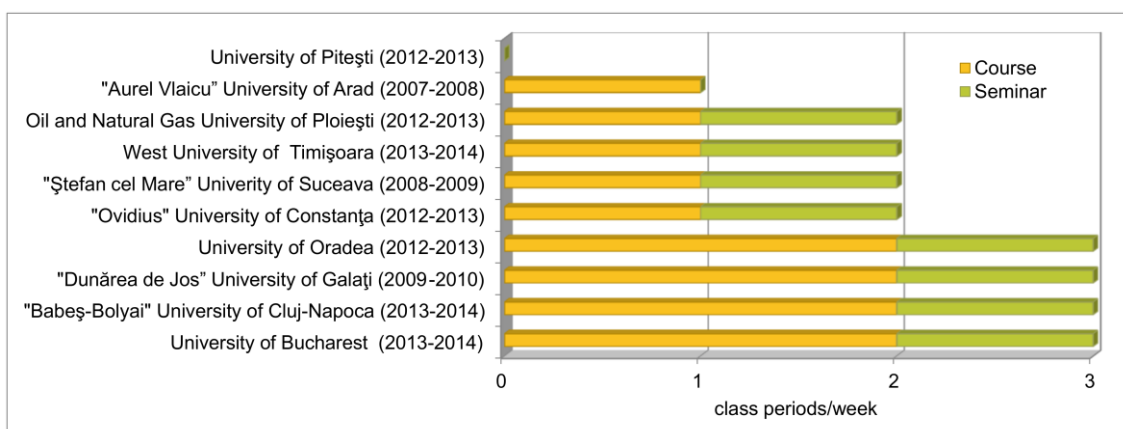


Fig. 1. Number of class periods per week for the discipline *Geography and Geography Didactics* in the curriculum of various universities from Romania

Table 1. The status of Geography and of Didactics of Geography within the curriculum of various universities

University	Curriculum for the academic year	Discipline	Number of credits	Semester	Class periods/sessions per week	Seminar activity periods/sessions per week	Type of evaluation
University of Bucharest	2013-2014	Geography and Didactics of Geography	4	5	2	1	Examination
Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca	2013-2014	Geography, Environmental Education/ Sciences and Their Didactics	4	6	2	1	Examination
Ovidius University of Constanța	2012-2013	Geography, Methodology and the Practice of Teaching the Discipline (DS)	4	5	1	1	Examination
"Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava	2008-2009	Geography and Methodology	3	4	1	1	Examination
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați	2009-2010	Geography, Environmental Education/ Sciences and Their Didactics	5	4	2	1	Examination
"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad	2007-2008	Geography and Methodology of Teaching Geography	2	5	1	-	Examination
West University of Timișoara	2013-2014	Geography and Methodology of Teaching Geography	3	6	1	1	Examination
Oil and Natural Gas University of Ploiești	2012-2013	Geography and Methodology of Teaching Geography	3	5	1	1	Examination
University of Oradea	2012-2013	Geography and Methodology of Teaching Geography	3	5	2	1	On-going evaluation
University of Pitești	2012-2013	-	-	-	-	-	-

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Table 2. The place of the discipline *Environmental Education and its Didactics* in the curriculum of various universities from Romania

University	Curriculum for the academic year	Discipline	Number of credits	Semester	Class periods/ sessions per week	Seminar activity periods/ sessions per week	Type of evaluation
University of Bucharest	2013-2014	Didactics of Environmental Sciences(DS)	5	5	2	1	Examination
Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca	2013-2014	Geography, Environmental Education/ Sciences and Their Didactics	4	6	2	1	Examination
Ovidius University of Constanța	2012-2013	Environmental Education, Sciences and Methodology	3 3	5 6	1 1	1 1	Examination
"Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava	2008-2009	Environmental Education, Sciences and Methodology	2	5	1	1	Examination
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați	2009-2010	Geography, Environmental Education/ Sciences and Their Didactics	5	4	2	1	Examination
"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad	2007-2008	Environmental Education, Sciences and Methodology	3	5	1	1	Examination
Western University of Timișoara	2013-2014	Sciences, Environmental Education and Methodology	3	3	1	1	Examination
Oil and Natural Gas University of Ploiești	2012-2013	Environmental Education, Sciences and Methodology	3	6	1	1	Examination
University of Oradea	2012-2013	Environmental Education, Sciences and Methodology	3	6	2	2	Examination
University of Pitești	2012-2013	-	-	-	-	-	-

The position of the disciplines *Geography and Environmental Education and of Their Didactics* within the academic curricula at “Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca

The specialization of *Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy* was introduced at “Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca in 2005. In the academic year 2006-2007, in the curriculum designed for this specialization, taught in Romanian by the Department of Education Sciences of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences there was no course of *Geography and the Didactics of Geography* throughout all the three years of undergraduate studies.

In the curriculum for the academic year 2009-2010, the discipline of *Geography, Methodology and the Practice of Teaching*, with a number of 3 credits, 2 class periods and 1 practice activity session in the 5th semester, 3rd year of undergraduate studies, with a final examination as a form of evaluation was introduced. Its status is that of a core course specialist subject counting for completion of an undergraduate programme of studies for a licence degree (BEd). The first series of undergraduate students who studied this discipline in the fall of 2011, in their 3rd year of university studies was the class of 2012. In the curriculum for the academic years 2010-2011, 2011-2012, this course was included in the 6th semester of undergraduate studies, with a 2 class periods allocation, 1 class period per week, 1 seminar activity per week and was given a number of 3 credits. In the curriculum for the academic year 2013-2014, *Geography, Environmental Education/Natural Sciences and Their Specialist Subject Methodology* for preschool and primary school education was included as a discipline in the 6th semester, with an allocation of 2 class periods and 1 seminar activity period, weighting 4 credits upon completion. It is the first curriculum in which the discipline of *Environmental Education* is included, but the fact that 2 class periods and 1 seminar activity period are allocated to teach three disciplines and their didactics is a disadvantage in the forming and development of the discipline specific competences of future teachers (Table 3 and Fig. 1).

Table 3. The academic years in which 3rd year undergraduates studied the discipline of *Geography, Methodology and the Practice of Teaching* the subject at “Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca

Academic year	Discipline	Credits	Semester	Class periods per week	Seminar activity periods per week	Practical activities	Type of evaluation
2011-2012	<i>Geography, Methodology and the Practice of Teaching</i>	3	5	2	-	1	Examination
2012-2013	<i>Geography, Methodology and the Practice of Teaching</i>	3	6	2	1	-	Examination

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2013-2014	<i>Geography, Methodology and the Practice of teaching</i>	3	6	2	1	-	Examination
2014-2015	<i>Geography, Methodology and the Practice of Teaching</i>	3	6	2	1	-	Examination
2015-2016	<i>Geography, Environmental Education/ Sciences and Their Teaching Methodology</i>	4	6	2	1	-	Examination

The correspondence ratio between the *Curriculum for Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy* specialization and the *National Curriculum for Primary School Level*

At the pre-university education level, changes were brought by the Ministerial Order 3371/2013 issued by the Minister of Education, regarding the approval of the *National Curricula for Primary School Education* and of the *Methodology for the Implementation of the National Curricula for Primary School Education*, issued in Monitorul Oficial (The Official Gazette of Romania), Part I, no. 192 of 5 April 2013 (M.Of. 192/2013).

Under Section 3 ,it is mentioned that in the designing of the national curriculum, the authors had in view "the achievement of the desirable educational profile characteristics of a child who finalizes primary education stage, a profile outlined by the key competencies domains stipulated under Section 68 of the *National Education Act no. 1/2011*, with its further changes and additions". The competences aimed at being formed and developed by children throughout this stage of education are enumerated. These competencies, derived from the key competencies domains, we consider are part of the category of transversal competencies. The national curriculum for primary education level does not mention the competency level to be attained during this education cycle, an aspect that might influence a decrease in the rigor with which planning and implementing curricular documents and instructional activities are carried out.

In this document, we note that one class period is allocated to Environmental Sciences for each grade and one class period is allocated to Geography in grade 4 (see Table 4 and Fig. 2). Under the umbrella concept of *Natural Sciences*, in general, Biology, Physics, Chemistry, and Astronomy are grouped. Geography is part of the category of *Earth Sciences*, together with Environmental Science and Geology, while other classifications include it under the *Humanities*. It is not our intention to analyze these classifications, but we would like to make a note on the fact that General

Physical Geography and Physical Geography, which include the following sub-branches: Geomorphology, Climatology, Pedogeography, Hydrology, Biogeography, Paleogeography, have as their object of study the natural components of the earth's spheres. The exclusion from the national curriculum of the discipline Environmental Education and its replacement with *Natural Sciences* limits the children's domain of study by the fact that the human factors and their relationship with the natural environment are ignored. At the same time, in this document, it is mentioned that in the Foundation Grade, 1st Grade and 2nd Grade an integrated discipline called "Mathematics and Environment Exploration" is studied – a fact that reveals the aim of pupils' gaining knowledge about the environment. This contradiction between the name of the discipline (*Natural Sciences*) and the general objective aimed at (and content) shows a lack of knowledge about the concepts and scientific domain(s) each of these sciences deals with.

Table 4. An extract from the National Curriculum for Primary School Education (Ministerial Order no. 3371/2013 issued by the Minister of Education)

	Number of classes per week				
	Foundation Grade	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade
Discipline <i>Natural Sciences</i>	1	1	1	1	1
Discipline <i>Geography</i>	-	-	-	-	1
Total number of classes in the core curriculum	19	20	20	20	21
School-based curriculum (optional/elective classes)	0-1	0-1	0-1	0-1	0-1
Minimum number of classes per week	19	20	20	20	21
Maximum number of classes per week	20	21	21	21	22

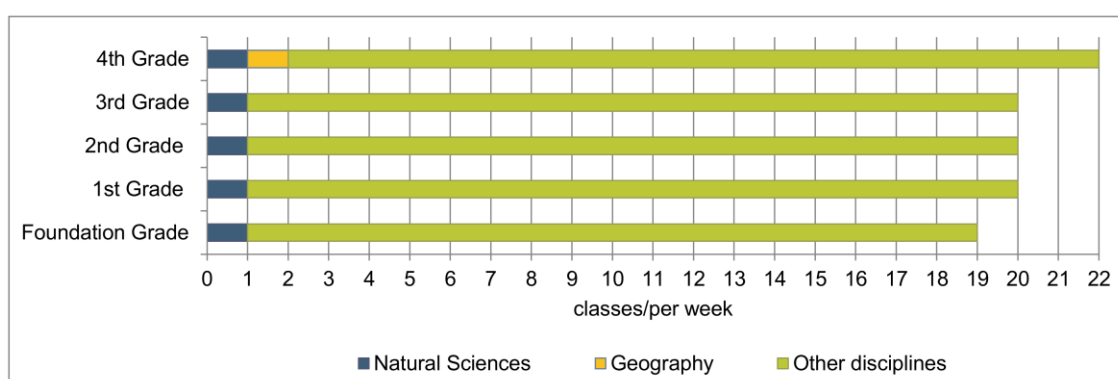


Fig. 2. Number of classes per week in the National Curriculum for *Natural Sciences*, *Geography* and other disciplines studied at primary school level

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We note that in the total minimum number of classes per week, the percentage of Natural Sciences is of 5.26% for the Foundation Grade, of 5% for 1st to 3rd Grades and of 4.76% for the 4th Grade. The share of *Geography* in the minimum number of classes per week is of 4.76% for the 4th Grade. Across the five school years for primary school cycle, according to the structure of the school year which consists of 36 course weeks⁵ (<http://www.isjmm.ro/download/structura/Ordin%20structura%20an%20scolar%202013%202014.pdf>), a child is involved in school in a number of 180 classes of instructional activities based on *Natural Sciences* contents, 36 classes of instructional activities based on *Geography contents* out of total number of 3,770 hours of classwork activities.

Table 5. The share of *Natural Sciences* and *Geography* classes in the national curriculum for primary school

	Foundation Grade	1 st Grade	2 nd Grade	3 rd Grade	4 th Grade	Foundation Grade – 4 th Grade	%
Total number of classes	720	756	756	756	792	3770	100
<i>Natural Sciences</i>						180	4.77
<i>Geography</i>						36	0.95

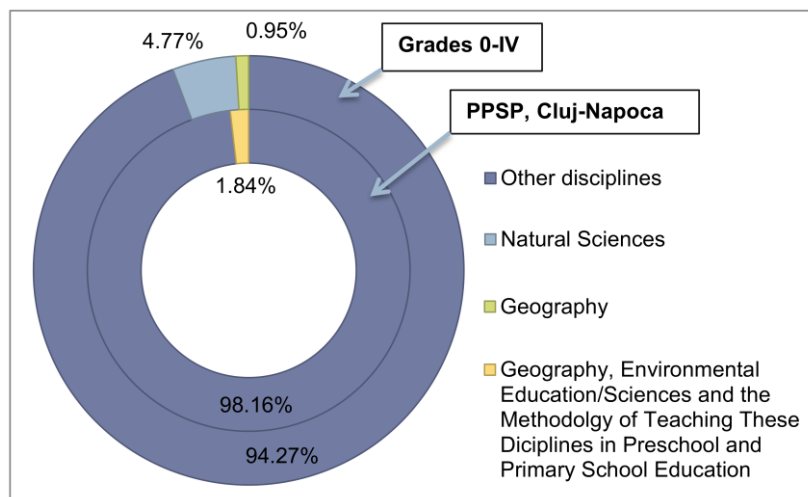


Fig 3. The share of *Natural Sciences* and *Geography* classes at primary school level, compared to the share of the discipline *Geography, Environmental Education/Sciences and their didactics for preschool and primary school education* at "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

⁵<http://www.isjmm.ro/download/structura/Ordin%20structura%20an%20scolar%202013%202014.pdf>

In order to form and develop the necessary competencies to teach pupils *Natural Sciences* and *Geography*, for example, according to the academic curriculum for the Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy specialization at “Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca, an undergraduate student will allocate 2 class periods and 1 seminar activity period per week, amounting to a total of 36 class periods in the 6th semester of university studies for face-to-face instructional activities, for the discipline *Geography, Environmental Education/Sciences and their didactics for preschool and primary school education*. Taking into account the fact that students were not evaluated for their knowledge of Geography and Natural Sciences in the admission exam for university studies, and that they have various levels of competencies in these disciplines, it is difficult for them to develop over the periods allocated to this course within the academic curriculum all the necessary competences for designing, planning and running good quality instructional activities for primary school pupils in the disciplines of *Natural Sciences* and *Geography*, especially for a lack in mastering thorough scientific knowledge of the two disciplines. A student at the University of Bucharest has the opportunity to approach the contents of the *Didactics of Natural Sciences* over 42 class periods, together with his professor, and the contents of *Geography and the Didactics of Geography* over a period of 42 class sessions.

From the academic curriculum for the Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy specialization at “Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca, we learn that a 1st year undergraduate has a number of 20 hours per week face-to face classes (lectures), seminars and practical activities, in the 2nd year, fall semester, 21 hours, in the spring semester, 23 hours, and in the 3rd year, he/she has 28 hours per week, so, all in all, 1,960 hours. Out of this total number, 36 hours are allocated to the discipline of *Geography, Environmental Education/Sciences and the Methodology of teaching these subjects in preschool and primary school education*, therefore, a share of 2.12% of the total number of hours over the three years of university studies (Fig. 4).

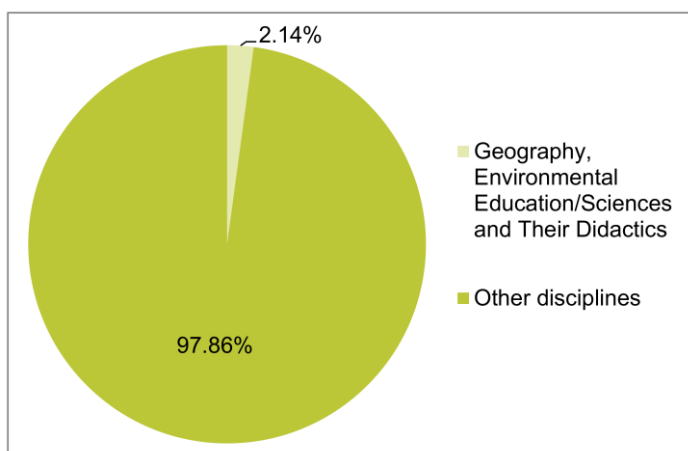


Fig. 4. The share of the number of hours allocated in the academic curriculum to the discipline *Geography, Environmental Education/Sciences and the Methodology of teaching these subjects in preschool and primary school education* at “Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca

CONCLUSIONS

Based on studying the academic curricula of several universities in Romania, accessed online on 7th December 2013, we noted that Geography, Environmental Education and their Didactics are not included as disciplines of study for the Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy specialization at some of the universities (for example, at the University of Pitești).

At some universities, *Geography* and its specialist Didactics are studied together with Environmental Education/ Sciences (for example, at "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, "Dunărea de Jos" University in Galați).

Analyzing the *National Curricula for Primary School Education*, accessed online on 7th December 2013, we noted that across the five school years for primary school cycle, according to the structure of the school year which consists of 36 course weeks, a child is involved in school in a number of 180 classes of instructional activities based on *Natural Sciences* contents, 36 classes of instructional activities based on *Geography contents* out of total number of 3,770 hours of classwork activities. In order to teach knowledge of these disciplines, an undergraduate in the 3rd year of studies enrolled for Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy specialization at "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca will participate in a total of 36 class periods in the 6th semester of university studies for face-to-face instructional activities in the discipline *Geography, Environmental Education/Sciences and their didactics for preschool and primary school education*.

Considering the fact that the students were not evaluated for their knowledge of Geography and Natural Sciences in the admission exam for university studies and that they have various levels of competencies in these disciplines, we suggest that the total of 36 class periods is not enough to equip students with the knowledge and develop all the competencies they need in order to plan, develop and manage good instructional activities for the children in primary school education in the subjects of *Natural Sciences and Geography*.

We also appreciate that placing the study of the disciplines *Geography, Environmental Education/Sciences and the Methodology of Teaching these disciplines and of other sciences* in the curriculum for the 5th or the 6th semester of undergraduate studies may involve a risk factor for the quality of students' training, since the very limited time budget should accommodate a large number of other courses and seminars, their initial school and kindergarten-based pre-service teaching practice and also their preparation for their licentiate paper.

In the view of the findings of our present paper and in order to meet the real professional training needs required on the labour market, we are in favour of the idea that a curricular reviewing is necessary for the

curriculum offered for the undergraduate studies in the specialization of Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy in all universities in Romania. The board in charge with conducting the curriculum review would certainly benefit from a consultation with students, with the faculty members in charge of teaching these disciplines, with teachers involved in preschool and primary school education.

The further studies we intend to do will focus on a detailed analysis of the syllabi of the disciplines approaching the study of Geography and Didactics of Geography, to compare them against the content of the National Curriculum for Primary School Education and primary school syllabi. The aim of such analyses is to highlight the degree in which undergraduates in the Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy specialization develop the necessary competencies to approach the teaching of contents of Geography to preschool and primary school pupils professionally.

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