

Thematic Article

# The impact of preparatory classes on future student performance: Competency assessment experiences of Hungarian students in Covasna County

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## Abstract

This study examines the impact of the introduction of the preparatory class (reception class) in Romania as an early educational intervention within the framework of school readiness and educational inequality theories. The analysis focuses on Hungarian-speaking students in Covasna County, specifically on the first cohort of fourth-grade students who had previously attended this educational stage. The research is based on a quantitative, full-sample design, including all 1,054 fourth-grade students enrolled in Hungarian-language education. The dataset combines questionnaire data with results from the 2016–2017 national competence assessments, providing a comprehensive overview of academic performance in reading, mathematics, and natural sciences. The study investigates the relationship between participation in the preparatory year, socio-economic background, and academic achievement. The findings reveal a statistically significant association between parental educational attainment, labour market status and student performance. The results indicate that students from families with higher levels of education and more stable employment are significantly more likely to achieve above-average results. This suggests that while the institutional framework is inclusive, family background remains a decisive factor in how effectively children can capitalize on this preparatory period. Furthermore, participation is clearly associated with higher academic outcomes: students who completed the preparatory year are significantly more likely to achieve better results across all three assessed competence domains compared to those who did not. Overall, the preparatory class contributes to reducing the risk of school failure, supporting a smoother transition from preschool to primary education, and lowering early school leaving risks. It provides an extended preparatory period that helps children adapt more effectively to a performance-oriented learning environment. The study highlights the effectiveness of this universal reform while noting that, despite its mandatory nature, it cannot entirely neutralize the reproduction of social inequalities. In conclusion, the preparatory class represents a significant educational policy reform that improves student outcomes and promotes equity, particularly in minority-language and socio-economically disadvantaged contexts.

*Keywords:* preparatory class; competence assessment; socio-economic status; early education; educational inequality

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## Introduction

In Romania, the preparatory class is now a mandatory educational stage for all children, established as a universal institutional tool to provide an equal starting point for every student regardless of their socio-economic background. This structural reform aims to bridge the gap between kindergarten and primary school by fostering foundational skills in a standardized environment.

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At the time of the present research, however, the system was in a transitional phase. In the initial academic year of the reform, parents were granted the legislative flexibility to choose between enrolling their children in the newly established preparatory class or directly into the first grade. From the following academic year onward, the preparatory class became strictly mandatory for all students. This transitional period provides a unique quasi-experimental opportunity to analyze the long-term impact of this early intervention by comparing the performance of the first cohort that attended the preparatory year with those who entered primary education directly.

However, despite its current mandatory nature, international and local research suggests that family background – specifically parental education and social capital – continues to influence how effectively children can utilize early institutional resources. A critical question remains: does a uniform, mandatory system alone suffice to mitigate deeply rooted social disadvantages, or do already privileged groups derive more significant long-term benefits from it?

When examining student effectiveness, some researchers analyse students' personal characteristics, their attitudes towards learning, and the impact of motivation on academic performance (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Cohen et al., 2009; Fejes & Józsa, 2005). Others explore family backgrounds and influencing factors both within and outside of school (Bourdieu, 2002; Coleman, 1966; Bray, 1999, 2017; Bray et al., 2020; Fehérvári, 2023; Pusztai, 2015; Széll, 2018). The present study examines the relationship between preparatory classes, as an early investment in children's futures, and the results of national competence assessments in Romania.

Early human capital investments yield significant returns, as early childhood learning facilitates subsequent schooling (Heckman, 1979). The role of these classes can be understood through their effectiveness in promoting early learning and the social integration of children. Preparatory classrooms are primarily designed for young learners entering formal education for the first time and serve several essential functions that contribute to their overall development and preparedness for later educational challenges.

Firstly, preparatory classes provide a structured environment that facilitates the acquisition of fundamental skills essential for lifelong learning. During this transitional phase, children are introduced to basic literacy and numeracy concepts through age-appropriate, engaging methods. Evidence suggests that early childhood education, including preparatory classes, significantly enhances cognitive development and prepares pupils for future academic success (Daniel et al., 2013). Early exposure to structured learning fosters a positive attitude toward education and intellectual curiosity, which often correlates with higher performance in later academic careers.

In addition, these classes support the social integration and socio-emotional development of young learners by serving as a social space for developing communication skills and internalising social norms. The emphasis on cooperative activities encourages collaboration, which is vital for developing social competence. However, concerns persist regarding the practical implementation of the curriculum. As noted by Aubrey (2004) and Marks and Yarker (2018), many settings struggle to apply recommended pedagogical approaches due to systemic constraints, such as inadequate resources and insufficient teacher training, potentially leading to a less than optimal educational experience.

Furthermore, effective communication and language development strategies are essential within the preparatory classroom environment. Lee and Pring (2015) demonstrate that interventions targeting language skills are beneficial in these settings, with structured programmes significantly improving linguistic outcomes. During these formative years, active listening and participation lay the foundation for literacy, as children learn to decode language and enhance their vocabulary comprehension (Scînteii, 2023).

The presence of supportive, well-trained staff is equally critical. Research indicates that smaller class sizes and lower pupil-teacher ratios facilitate greater individual attention, thereby supporting both language acquisition and socio-emotional learning (Aubrey, 2004). These findings underscore the necessity of ongoing professional development for educators to ensure high-quality interactions that foster all dimensions of child development.

In Finland, preparatory education is integrated into kindergarten curricula and is specifically recommended for six-year-old children who require additional linguistic support in Finnish. This includes children of immigrant backgrounds, those returning to Finland, or those from bilingual and adoptive families. In these settings, instruction is often supported by specialists in multicultural education to ensure effective school readiness.

Similarly, Australian research in early childhood education and care (ECEC) identifies parental social networks as a vital source of social capital. At the individual level, this involves access to resources and information, while at the community level, social capital is manifested through collective action and

cooperation. Effective ECEC programmes provide significant short- and long-term social and educational benefits, with social capital – specifically trust-based relationships and social networks – acting as a key contributor to these outcomes. Consistent with the broader literature on the relational embeddedness of academic success (Pusztai, 2015), Farrell et al. (2004) highlight the role of child and family centres in strengthening these capital resources, noting that children's social capital tends to be more robust in urban than in rural communities.

European trends indicate that the typical age for commencing formal education is approximately six years. The shift toward earlier institutional intervention is evidenced by the lowering of the school-entry age and the introduction of compulsory pre-school education across various nations. Such measures aim to mitigate the impact of socio-economic disadvantages and stimulus-poor environments, seeking to compensate for unfavourable familial and regional conditions (Barabás, 2019a). Consequently, institutional education in early childhood is considered of paramount importance for subsequent academic performance (Papp Z., 2014). High-quality early childhood education, alongside supportive environments and adult interactions, plays a critical role in enhancing the school performance of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Csüllög et al., 2015).

With the introduction of preparatory classes in the 2012–2013 school year, compulsory education in Romania was extended to 11 years, marking a significant educational policy reform. This initiative, designed for disadvantage compensation, aims to address social, cultural, and educational deficiencies. Its primary goal is to facilitate school integration, a particularly vital objective given that kindergarten education is not compulsory in Romania, and approximately 20% of eligible children have never attended such programmes (Mandel, 2017; ISE, 2013). The implementation of the preparatory class and the integrated curriculum represents a shift toward a holistic approach, emphasizing socio-emotional development and the acquisition of life skills necessary for community adaptation.

The preparatory class aims to facilitate school integration, support adaptation to community life, and establish the foundational skills necessary for future success (Langa, 2015). In Romania, the prescribed curricula for these classes emphasize competency development through integrated activities, which support a more successful transition from kindergarten to primary school by fostering school-readiness skills.

The introduction of preparatory classes and the associated integrated curricula initially met with divided reactions from both educators and parents. Hungarian teachers in Romania, in particular, reported significant challenges during the implementation phase. Critical feedback highlighted that the training programmes were often perceived as rushed, insufficiently practical, and lacking linguistic and technical accessibility. Furthermore, educators noted that they were faced with excessive expectations without adequate professional support (Mandel, 2017).

However, in the years following the reform, professional and public perception of competence-based education in lower primary schools has become increasingly positive. According to educators in Hungarian-language schools in Covasna County, the introduction of preparatory classes has led to significant progress. The measure is largely regarded as successful, as it eases children's integration into the school community, thereby reducing the risk of academic failure and early school leaving. Nevertheless, several systemic challenges persist, such as the lack of support staff in high-enrolment classrooms, the shortage of specialists for children with speech or behavioural disorders, and the problematic practice of merging simultaneous classes (Barabás, 2019a, 2019b). Additionally, research by Langa (2015) has underscored the complexities of curriculum management and the ongoing need for specialized teacher training in these grades.

The professional preparation for the preparatory class began in September 2012, shortly before the commencement of the school year. In August 2012, 194 trainers were prepared to instruct the teachers assigned to these new classes. To enhance educational quality and modernise primary school activities, a blended learning programme entitled 'Interdisciplinary organisation of educational activities aimed at developing key competences among pupils in grades I-IV' was introduced. This programme aimed to equip teachers with the skills necessary to develop key student competences (Csorba, 2013); however, the timeframe was widely considered insufficient to adequately prepare educators for the practical challenges of the new system.

Language skills development occupies a central role in the Romanian preparatory curriculum, which includes mandatory foreign language instruction from age six. These curricular recommendations align with European educational policies while accounting for the developmental characteristics of this age group. Current educational theories emphasize language as a primary tool of communication, suggesting that foreign language acquisition is most effective when initiated between the ages of six and seven, a period characterized by heightened sensory perception and sensitivity.

According to Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), effective learning occurs when tasks are structured to lead children's development, providing challenges that can be mastered with appropriate guidance (Vygotsky, 1980). In this context, foreign language instruction is intended to serve the student's cognitive and communicative growth (Iftime & Vărășteanu, 2013). However, for native Hungarian-speaking students in Romania, this requirement entails the simultaneous introduction of two languages – Romanian and a foreign language – that differ from their mother tongue, presenting a unique set of linguistic and pedagogical challenges.

In Romania, during the 2012–2013 school year, 8,534 preparatory classes were established across 4,450 educational institutions, involving 128,218 children. This figure represented approximately 59% of the six-year-old population at the time. The remaining 41% of children either continued in kindergarten education, were enrolled directly into the first grade based on parental discretion, or were not captured by the official reporting system. Nationally, 11% of pupils in preparatory classes were educated in combined (simultaneous) classroom settings.

Despite the scale of the reform, empirical feedback regarding the long-term impact of preparatory classes remains limited. However, a study by the Institute of Educational Sciences (ISE, 2013) identified several immediate advantages based on the perspectives of parents and educators. These include a smoother transition to the school environment, increased time for school readiness through practical and concrete activities, and enhanced student self-esteem and motivation to learn.

### Methodology

The research was conducted in Covasna County, the smallest county in Romania, which is predominantly inhabited by ethnic Hungarians (Figure 1, 2). Covasna County is located in the south-eastern part of Transylvania, in the Carpathian Basin, and is the easternmost county in Transylvania.

**Figure 1.** Location of Covasna County



Source: <http://wikimapia.org/34516305/hu/Kovászna-megye>, <http://transilvania-erdely.gportal.hu>

The present study is exploratory in nature and adopts a quantitative approach, combining questionnaire-based background data with national competence assessment results. The study follows a full-sample design, encompassing all 1,054 fourth-grade students enrolled in Hungarian-language education in Covasna County. The analysis investigates student performance across three domains: mathematics, Hungarian, and Romanian, based on data from the 2016–2017 national assessments (EN).

It is important to note that the survey focused exclusively on socio-economic indicators and assessment results; therefore, data regarding the ethnic identity of the students was not collected. Consequently, the analysis of educational inequalities is conducted through the lens of parental educational attainment and labor market status, rather than ethnic categorization.

This comprehensive, full-sample design allows for valid conclusions regarding both students and schools, while accounting for regional and municipal characteristics. The research database (KOV-ET-OM-2017) was constructed by merging the results of the background questionnaire with the competence assessment data.

The competence assessment results, originally recorded as codes, were converted into numerical point values to facilitate statistical analysis (Table 1). The study does not evaluate performance at the individual task level. Instead, it focuses on the socio-economic and educational factors influencing overall outcomes. The mathematics assessment consists of 20 tasks (maximum score: 80), while the Hungarian and Romanian language assessments each comprise 15 tasks (maximum score: 60).

**Table 1.** Meaning of codes in the 2017 fourth-grade competency assessments

Code	Meaning of the code	Points assigned to the code
10	Completely correct answer	4
11	Partially correct (3 correct answers)	3
12	Partially correct (2 correct answers)	2
13	Partially correct (1 correct answer)	1
79	Incorrect answer	0
99	Missing answer	0

Source: KOV-ET-OM-2017 database

The student background questionnaire comprises items on age, school life, academic situation, extracurricular activities, reading habits, and family background. To facilitate statistical analysis, the categorical codes provided by the national assessment system were converted into a numerical point scale (Table 1). This quantification enables the calculation of mean scores and the application of advanced statistical procedures to identify performance trends.

The primary data collection also involved a comprehensive student background questionnaire. This instrument was designed to capture multiple dimensions of the pupils' lives, including:

- demographics: age and gender;
- academic environment: school life and current academic standing;
- extracurricular activities: participation in organized activities and leisure-time reading habits;
- socio-economic background: family structure, parental education, and labor market status.

These variables provide the necessary context to evaluate the relationship between early educational interventions and later academic achievement.

### Research design and methods

The present study investigates the potential association between a family's socio-economic status and the likelihood of student enrolment in preparatory classes. Furthermore, it examines whether pupils who attended preparatory classes achieve above-average results in the three competence domains (mathematics, Hungarian, and Romanian) at a higher rate than those who did not participate in such programs.

The study is guided by two primary research questions, which focus on the accessibility of early childhood education and its subsequent impact on academic performance among Hungarian-speaking pupils in Covasna County:

RQ1: Is there a significant association between a family's socio-economic status (SES) and the likelihood of a child's enrolment in a preparatory class?

RQ2: To what extent does participation in a preparatory class correlate with achieving above-average results in the three core competence domains (mathematics, Hungarian, and Romanian) at the end of primary school?

Based on the relevant literature and preliminary research findings, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H1: There is a significant relationship between the socio-economic status of the family – specifically parental educational attainment and labour market status – and the student's participation in preparatory classes (Barabás, 2019c, 2019f; Bourdieu, 1999, 2002; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Fehérvári et al., 2018; Kitchen et al., 2017; Pusztai, 2015).

H2: Students who attended preparatory classes are significantly more likely to achieve above-average results in national competence assessments compared to their peers who did not attend such classes (Ball, 1994; Barabás, 2019a, 2019b; Melhuish et al., 2002, 2008; Mihály, 2001; Sylva et al., 2004, 2013).

### Results

Based on the national assessment results, 29.5% of students were classified as high achievers in Hungarian, 25.9% in Romanian, and 24.1% in mathematics. Regarding medium performance, the highest proportion was observed in mathematics (46.2%), followed by Romanian (40.2%) and Hungarian (35.0%). Notably,

approximately one-third of the surveyed population fell into the low performance category across all assessed domains: 35.5% in Hungarian (mother tongue), 33.9% in Romanian, and 29.7% in mathematics (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Distribution of student performance across competence domains (%)

Performance level	Hungarian	Romanian	Mathematics
Low performance	35.5	33.9	29.7
Medium performance	35.0	40.2	46.2
High effectiveness	29.5	25.9	24.1

Source: KOV-ET-OM-2017 database

Note: Performance levels are based on the National Competence Assessment (NCA) scores. All values are expressed as column percentages.

Regarding the demographic distribution of the sample, 56.5% of the surveyed population attends schools in rural settlements (villages), while 43.5% is enrolled in urban educational institutions.

### Parental Educational Attainment and Preparatory Class Attendance

A significant association was observed between parental educational attainment and student participation in preparatory classes for both mothers and fathers. The data reveal that higher maternal education levels are strongly linked to a greater likelihood of preparatory class enrolment.

Among pupils who attended preparatory classes, the distribution of maternal education is as follows: primary education: 23.1%, secondary education: 54.7, higher education: 22.1%.

In contrast, a significant discrepancy is visible among students who did not attend preparatory classes. In this group, the majority of mothers (65.9%) have only a primary school education, while 27.1% have secondary education, and a mere 7% possess a higher education degree. These results suggest that parental educational capital is a decisive factor in the utilization of the preparatory grade within the Romanian educational system (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Association between maternal educational attainment and preparatory class attendance (%)

Mother's educational attainment	Attended preparatory class	Did not attend preparatory class
Primary school education	23.1	<u>65.9</u>
Secondary school education	<u>54.7</u>	27.1
Higher education	<u>22.1</u>	7.0

Source: KOV-ET-OM-2017 database

Note: N=1046; Chi-square test significance:  $p < 0.001$ . Underlined values indicate cells where the observed count significantly exceeds the expected count (Adjusted residual  $\geq 2.0$ ).

Among pupils who attended preparatory classes, 21.9% of fathers have a primary education, 62.6% have a secondary education, and 15.5% have a higher education degree. In contrast, the educational attainment of fathers whose children did not attend preparatory classes is distributed as follows: 65.1% have a primary education, 28.6% have a secondary education, and only 6.3% have a higher education degree (Table 4).

These findings align with the findings of Ressler et al. (2020), who emphasize the significance of maternal educational attainment and supportive parental attitudes in the utilization of early institutional education. The data indicate that the proportion of pupils not attending preparatory classes is substantially higher in families where both parents have only a primary school education.

**Table 4.** Association between paternal educational attainment and preparatory class attendance (%)

Father's educational attainment	Attended preparatory class	Did not attend preparatory class
Primary school education	21.9	<u>65.1</u>
Secondary school education	<u>62.6</u>	28.6
Higher education	15.5	6.3

Source: KOV-ET-OM-2017 database

Note: N=1034; Chi-square test significance:  $p < 0.001$ . Underlined values indicate cells where the observed count significantly exceeds the expected count (Adjusted residual  $\geq 2.0$ ).

The study further examines the potential association between parents' labour market status and student participation in preparatory classes. For the purpose of the analysis, labour market roles were recoded into three distinct categories: permanent activity, casual work, and inactive.

A significant association was observed for both mothers and fathers ( $p \leq 0.001$ ), suggesting that employment stability within the family is a relevant factor in early educational decisions. The data indicate that students whose parents have permanent employment are more likely to be enrolled in preparatory classes compared to those whose parents are inactive or engaged in casual labour.

### Labour Market Status and Preparatory Class Attendance

The study investigates the association between parental labour market status and student participation in preparatory classes. For both parents, a significant relationship has been identified ( $p \leq 0.001$ ). An analysis of maternal employment shows that 71.1% of mothers whose children attended preparatory classes have permanent employment, while 6.6% are engaged in casual work and 22.3% are inactive. In contrast, among those whose children did not attend preparatory classes, the proportion of mothers in permanent employment is significantly lower (42.7%), while the ratio of inactive mothers is substantially higher (40.3%) (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Association between maternal labour market status and preparatory class attendance (%)

Mother's labour market status	Attended preparatory class	Did not attend preparatory class
Permanent work	<u>71.1</u>	42.7
Casual work	6.6	<u>16.9</u>
Inactive	22.3	<u>40.3</u>

Source: KOV-ET-OM-2017 database

Note: N=1017; Chi-square test significance:  $p < 0.001$ . Underlined values indicate cells where the observed count significantly exceeds the expected count (Adjusted residual  $\geq 2.0$ ).

Similarly, paternal labour market roles demonstrate a strong association with preparatory class attendance. Among students in preparatory classes, 80.4% of fathers hold permanent jobs. For those not participating in these classes, this figure drops to 53.8%, while the proportions of fathers in casual work (26.9%) or inactive status (19.3%) are markedly higher (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Association between paternal labour market status and preparatory class attendance (%)

Father's labour market status	Attended preparatory class	Did not attend preparatory class
Permanent job	<u>80.4</u>	53.8
Casual work	12.9	26.9
Inactive	6.7	19.3

Source: KOV-ET-OM-2017 database

Note: N=1012; Chi-square test significance:  $p < 0.001$ . Underlined values indicate cells where the observed count significantly exceeds the expected count (Adjusted residual  $\geq 2.0$ ).

The analysis of paternal labour market status and its association with preparatory class attendance reveals a similarly significant relationship. Among students attending preparatory classes, 80.4% of fathers hold permanent jobs, 12.9% are engaged in casual work, and 6.7% are inactive. In contrast, among those not attending preparatory classes, only 53.8% of fathers have permanent employment, while the proportions of those in casual work (26.9%) and inactive status (19.3%) are markedly higher (Table 6). These findings suggest that parents of pupils attending preparatory classes are more likely to maintain stable employment and active labour market participation compared to parents of non-attending pupils.

### The impact of preparatory class attendance on academic performance

To evaluate the impact of early institutional intervention, the competence assessment results were recoded into binary categories: below-average and above-average performance. To ensure the reliability of the developmental analysis, students who were in the fourth grade due to grade retention (repeating a year) were excluded from the sample.

Within the final sample, 88% of the students had attended a preparatory class. Academic achievement was assessed across three core domains (mathematics, Hungarian, and Romanian). Preliminary analysis of the Romanian language competency results indicates that a higher proportion of students who attended preparatory classes achieved above-average results compared to their peers who entered the school system directly in the first grade.

The first domain of the academic impact analysis focuses on Romanian language proficiency. The data suggest a clear distinction in performance based on early institutional participation.

As shown in Table 7, a higher proportion of students who attended preparatory classes achieved above-average results compared to their peers who did not participate in the program. Specifically, nearly half of the students with preparatory education reached the above-average category, whereas this rate was significantly lower among those who entered directly into the first grade.

**Table 7.** Association between preparatory class attendance and Romanian competency results (%)

Preparatory class attendance	Results of Romanian language competency assessments	
	below average	above average
<b>Attended</b>	51.7	<u>48.3%</u>
<b>Did not attend</b>	<u>71.7%</u>	28.3

Source: KOV-ET-OM-2017 database

Note: N=1018; Chi-square significance:  $p \leq 0.001$ . The percentages represent row totals, indicating the distribution of performance levels within each group (those who attended vs. those who did not attend preparatory classes).

A significant association ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) was observed between preparatory class attendance and the results of the Romanian language proficiency test. Among students who did not attend a preparatory class, the vast majority (71.7%) fell into the below-average category, while only 28.3% achieved above-average results.

In contrast, students who attended preparatory class showed a more balanced distribution: 51.7% were classified as below average, while nearly half (48.3%) achieved above-average performance (Table 7). These results indicate that participation in the preparatory year is associated with a significantly higher probability of reaching above-average proficiency in Romanian.

We found a significant ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) association between preparatory class attendance and mathematics competence assessment results (Table 8). Children who attended preparatory class were more likely to be classified as above average than those who did not. Of those who completed the preparatory class, 57.7% fell into the above-average category, while 42.3% achieved below-average results. Of those who did not attend preparatory class, 71.3% fell into the below-average category.

**Table 8.** Association between preparatory class attendance and mathematics competency results (%)

Preparatory class attendance	Results of mathematics competency assessments	
	below average	above average
<b>Attended</b>	42.3	<u>57.7</u>
<b>Did not attend</b>	<u>71.3</u>	28.7

Source: KOV-ET-OM-2017 database

Note: N=1004; Average score = 50.18 (Min: 0, Max: 80); Chi-square significance:  $p < 0.001$ . Underlined values indicate cells where the observed count significantly exceeds the expected count (Adjusted residual  $\geq 2.0$ ).

A significant association ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) was also observed between preparatory class attendance and the results of the Hungarian competency assessment. The data indicate that students who completed the preparatory year performed markedly better than their peers who did not. Specifically, 62.1% of students who attended the preparatory class achieved above-average results, whereas only 30.8% of those who did not participate in the program reached the same performance level (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Association between preparatory class attendance and Hungarian competency results (%)

Preparatory class attendance	Results of Hungarian language competency assessments	
	below average	above average
Attended	37.9	<u>62.1</u>
Did not attend	<u>69.2</u>	30.8

Source: KOV-ET-OM-2017 database

Note: N=980. Chi-square significance:  $p \leq 0.001$ . The percentages represent row totals. Underlined values indicate cells where the observed count significantly exceeds the expected count (Adjusted residual  $\geq 2.0$ ).

## Discussion

The preparatory class serves as a critical transition period between kindergarten and formal schooling, providing children with the necessary time to adapt to performance-oriented academic environments. By establishing a solid foundation for future learning, the preparatory year plays a significant role in reducing school failure and fostering academic success. These observations align with previous research indicating that early school activities which stimulate interest and develop abilities have a lasting impact on long-term student performance (Mihály, 2001; Melhuish et al., 2008; Barabás, 2019a, 2019b, 2019d, 2026; Sylva et al., 2013).

The findings of this study underscore the decisive influence of family background – specifically cultural, economic, and social capital – on student outcomes. Furthermore, the analysis confirms that preparatory classes significantly support pupils' development and academic performance across all assessed domains (Barabás, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2026).

When examined alongside family background characteristics, institutional early childhood education appears to significantly enhance verbal, non-verbal, and general cognitive abilities by the onset of primary school. These cognitive improvements eventually become determining factors in long-term academic achievement (Melhuish et al., 2002). As the quality of the pre-primary period is decisive for overall student development (Sylva et al., 2004), it is essential to identify the socio-economic and structural factors that influence why certain families utilize early education opportunities while others do not (Ressler et al., 2020).

These results are consistent with international trends, such as those identified in the PIRLS study across 40 countries, which confirm a positive association between participation in early formal education and 4th-grade reading comprehension (Mullis et al., 2007).

The positive impact of early childhood learning experiences on subsequent school performance is well-documented in the international literature (Ball, 1994; Melhuish et al., 2002, 2008; Sylva et al., 2004). Research indicates that even a single year of institutional education can lead to significantly higher assessment scores (Berlinski et al., 2009). Furthermore, macro-level factors, such as educational policy decisions, influence the accumulation of social capital, as schools serve as critical venues for the transmission of social norms and behavioural rules (Coleman, 1998; Orbán & Szántó, 2005).

In alignment with these theoretical frameworks, the present research identified a significant relationship between preparatory class attendance and student performance across all three competence domains (Romanian, Hungarian, and mathematics).

The empirical results demonstrate a consistent pattern: in each assessed area, a substantially higher proportion of students who had attended preparatory classes achieved above-average results compared to those who entered the school system directly in the first grade. This suggests that the preparatory year effectively functions as a foundational phase that enhances academic readiness and long-term performance.

## Conclusion

The results of the present research demonstrate that the introduction of the preparatory year in Romania has a significant impact on students' subsequent academic performance. Beyond facilitating the transition from kindergarten to primary school, the preparatory class contributes to the systematic development of cognitive, linguistic, and social skills.

The analysis identified significant associations between parental educational attainment, labour market status, and student participation in preparatory classes. These findings confirm the decisive role of family background in the utilization of early educational opportunities. Furthermore, the data show that a higher proportion of pupils who attended preparatory classes achieved above-average results in national competence assessments, underscoring the long-term academic benefits of early institutional intervention.

These findings suggest that the preparatory class, as an educational reform, plays a key role not only in reducing school failure but also in mitigating social inequalities. By providing a standardized foundation for all students, it offers a crucial mechanism for supporting children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and promoting more equitable educational outcomes.

Since preparatory class is mandatory for all children in Romania, it serves as a universal institutional tool designed to provide an equal starting point for every student regardless of their background. The findings of the present study indicate that this educational reform is highly effective, as students who participate in this foundational year show significantly better academic outcomes in Romanian, Hungarian, and mathematics.

However, despite its mandatory nature and proven benefits, the research highlights that family background – specifically parental education and labour market stability – still significantly influences how effectively children can translate this early education into long-term academic success. To ensure that the preparatory class functions as a genuine engine for social mobility, it is essential that educational policy moves beyond formal enrollment. Future efforts should focus on providing additional, targeted pedagogical and social support for students from marginalized communities. Such measures would ensure that the mandatory preparatory year does not merely offer a uniform requirement, but a truly equitable opportunity to close the gap between different social groups.

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