ANIMATIVE PEDAGOGY IN TEACHER EDUCATION: PREPARING FUTURE TEACHERS AND BUILDING PRACTICAL COMPETENCE FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

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Abstract: Effective teacher preparation needs to equip future primary teachers with the confidence to design learning environments in which children feel engaged, capable and respected. Such confidence is strengthened when university learning includes forms of practice that reflect the realities of primary education. In this context, animative pedagogy provides a pathway for pupils to participate actively in lessons, communicate ideas freely and see their contribution recognised. This study examines how Abner's animative pedagogy model supports the professional development of student teachers in that direction. Forty student teachers, part-time learners in the final year of their Bachelor degree in Preschool and Primary School Education at Burgas State University, took part in the research. Their professional readiness was evaluated before and after a period of structured practical training based on the model. Twenty participants, forming the experimental group, worked through its three sequential stages during coursework, while twenty others continued with the standard university programme as a control group. The evaluation focused on indicators such as confidence in organising creative classroom activities, awareness of pupils' strengths and perceived ability to support active participation. The results revealed a clear improvement among those who experienced the model directly. They reported increased assurance in planning and leading animative tasks that allow children to express their abilities and collaborate productively. Development in the control group remained limited. These findings suggest that when student teachers encounter animative pedagogy through practical experience, they gain a stronger and more realistic basis for applying such approaches in school. Including structured animative preparation in university programmes therefore supports the formation of confident and competent beginning teachers who are prepared for contemporary educational demands.

Keywords: *Animative pedagogy, teacher education, primary school, professional readiness, creative participation.*

Introduction

The preparation of future primary teachers requires close attention to the way children learn and engage in their early school years. Young learners make sense of the world through action, exploration and shared experiences rather than through abstract verbal instruction alone. Educational approaches that invite participation, creativity and collaboration are therefore more likely to sustain attention, build confidence and encourage positive attitudes toward learning. Research in creative and play based pedagogy supports this understanding and highlights its importance for cognitive, social and emotional development (Bamford, 2006; Nicholson, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). This reality places new demands on university programmes. It is not sufficient for student teachers to read about methods without experiencing how they function in practice. They must learn how to design learning environments in which children can express their abilities and see their ideas valued. Animative pedagogy responds to this expectation by positioning the learner as an active participant who shapes meaning together with others. To apply such an approach professionally, future teachers need structured guidance and

opportunities to develop pedagogical judgement while still in training. This study presents Abner's animative pedagogy model as a framework that supports these elements of teacher development. The model guides student teachers through a sequence of observation, reflection and creative implementation, enabling them to recognise individual strengths and to translate them into purposeful educational activity. The research examines how working with this structure during university training influences professional confidence and readiness to apply animative practices in primary classrooms.

Exposition

In Bulgarian educational scholarship, the concept of pedagogical animation has acquired theoretical coherence largely due to the contributions of Zlatka Dimitrova. She argues that animation represents a communicative method through which the creative impulses of pupils are activated and a distinctive form of trust emerges, indispensable for every process of upbringing within a community [1]. As Blaga Dimova points out, "the educational success of children and pupils is directly dependent on the

academic preparation of teachers. It relies on multiple factors and remains the subject of ongoing research" [2]. This statement underscores the crucial relationship between teacher competence and the effectiveness of creative pedagogical methods such as animative pedagogy. When pupils enter a space where they are encouraged to play, improvise, and search for solutions not yet known to them, they become more visible as individuals and more capable of forming authentic interpersonal connections. The idea that learning should emerge from lived experience has a strong foundation in international scholarship. Dewey's work highlights that meaning is constructed through active participation rather than passive reception of information [3]. Research on drama and artistic engagement further expands this view. Within such performative contexts, pupils find a protected terrain in which to explore identity, experiment with social roles, and collaborate with peers, demonstrating the transformative potential of aesthetic experience in education [4]. Empirical studies confirm that arts-rich environments strengthen motivation and emotional involvement in learning across diverse school cultures [5]. Developmental perspectives support these conclusions by showing that play-based activities reinforce children's self-regulation and creative problem-solving, enabling confident participation in collective learning situations [6]. This is precisely where the university preparation of future teachers becomes crucial. If a student teacher has not personally experienced pedagogical animation as part of their own learning, it becomes difficult for them to transform it into a confident and meaningful professional practice. At our university, we as teacher educators strive to ensure that students understand how children's creativity emerges and how the careful process of guiding pupils beyond their comfort zone enables the discovery of talents and abilities that often remain unnoticed within the boundaries of the traditional lesson. Research highlights that this approach represents a new form of professional culture, in which the teacher builds interactions grounded in a genuine interest in pupils' lived experiences [7]. Empirical findings further confirm that pupils engaged in animative practices demonstrate greater persistence when facing challenging tasks, as well as stronger emotional resilience in overcoming learning barriers [8]. These insights lead to a key pedagogical conclusion. Pedagogical animation cannot be left to improvisation. It requires structure, carefully considered methodological steps and an intentional professional culture. Current practice in teacher education still reveals a significant need for a clear and applicable framework that helps future teachers recognise and develop pupil strengths through animative methods. In response to this need, Abner's model has been developed as an original framework designed to guide animative pedagogical practice in a systematic way. Its purpose is to organise animative practice into a coherent pedagogical logic. Student teachers first understand why animation is necessary, then experience it themselves and only after that learn how to apply it with pedagogical sensitivity in the primary classroom. When pupils are given opportunities to participate in activities that align with their strengths, their attention becomes more sustained and an internal motivation for learning is developed [9]. This requires the teacher to be familiar with each child's individual abilities and to plan the educational process in a way that makes full use of them. Animative pedagogy supports this because it engages pupils in active, socially meaningful and emotionally involving situations. In such a context, personal abilities become more visible than in frontal instruction. Abner's model provides a structured approach to gradually revealing and utilising learner potential: first through observation, then through self-awareness and finally through application in authentic activity. The teacher plays a crucial role in supporting this process by ensuring clear conditions for participation and encouraging pupil choice. The model can be applied both within the school classroom and in informal educational settings.

Figure 1. An authorial framework
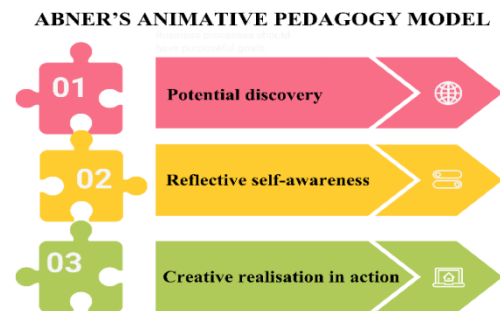
The first stage introduces the structure of the model through simulated classroom activities. The student teachers participate in play-based and creative tasks in order to experience how children respond to such situations, while the instructor observes engagement, initiative and the roles in which each participant performs successfully. The second stage emphasises professional reflection. The students analyse which tasks supported participation, recognise the abilities they displayed during the activity, and receive feedback from their peers and instructor. This develops awareness of how animative pedagogy reveals strengths in real pupils and how such strengths can guide lesson planning. The third stage shifts to practical application. The student teachers design and lead animative project tasks themselves, assigning roles according to observed abilities and guiding the process in the same way they would with schoolchildren. The instructor remains present as a methodological supervisor while students make decisions, organise the flow of activity and evaluate outcomes. Through this structure, animative pedagogy becomes a training mechanism for developing professional competence. Experiencing the method internally gives future teachers a practical understanding of how pupils gain confidence, how motivation emerges through visible achievement, and how a positive learning climate is built. For those preparing to teach in the primary stage, this form of training is crucial, as it develops readiness to support personal growth, creativity and active participation in the real classroom.

Discussion

The experimental group consisted of fourth year students in the programme Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy, part-time form of study. They were selected because they are approaching entry into the teaching profession, where they will be required to apply animative pedagogy in real classroom settings. As part of their professional preparation, the student teachers experienced the three stages of Abner's animative pedagogy model from the perspective of pupils, not because they were children, but so they could understand how the method feels in practice and how to guide pupils through it effectively in future teaching. This approach carries important methodological value. A teacher is better able to master a pedagogical method when they have first experienced it themselves and understood its impact, emotional

dynamics and educational significance. Engaging with the model provided the students with a deeper understanding of how animative practice supports the identification of pupils' potential and the development of intrinsic motivation. The scenario they worked on involved presenting Bulgarian folk traditions, addressing the current educational concern that many primary school pupils have limited familiarity with national customs and cultural symbolism. After applying the model, the student teachers independently identified ways to use animative techniques so that cultural traditions could be understood, felt and meaningfully experienced by children. A particularly significant outcome was that the student teachers succeeded in animating the whole audience. Observers did not remain passive; they entered into the activity, contributed ideas and participated with visible energy and enjoyment. The session became a shared learning space, which confirmed that a well-developed and professionally led animative task can draw people into the process and inspire collective engagement with educational content. This demonstrated in practice that a well-designed and professionally implemented animative idea has the capacity to engage an entire community around educational content.

Figure 2. Practical application of animative pedagogy

Results

The obtained data demonstrate a clearly pronounced positive effect of training based on Abner's Model on the professional readiness of future teachers to apply animative pedagogy in their educational practice. The experimental group, consisting of 20 participants, recorded a substantial increase in its mean score from 3.10 to 4.42 on a five point scale. This represents an improvement of 42 percent relative to the initial level of confidence and competence. The control group was likewise composed of 20 participants with comparable baseline values, yet the increase in its score was minimal. The mean value rose only from 3.09 to 3.28, equivalent to a 6 percent change, which cannot be interpreted as educationally significant.

Figure 3. Comparative results for control and experimental groups
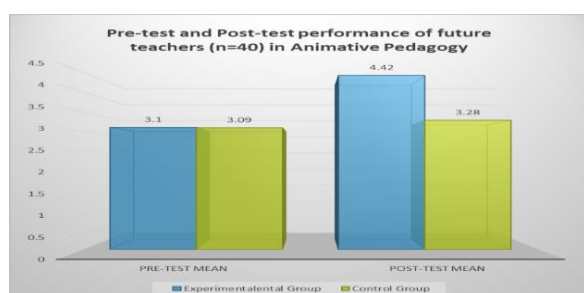
The values reveal a distinct differentiation between the comparative outcomes of the two groups. The experimental group exhibits a statistically confident improvement and a tangible shift in attitudes and readiness to implement animative methods in real pedagogical contexts. The development within the control group remains modest and does not meet the criteria for effective preparation in a contemporary school environment. These results confirm that Abner's model exerts a substantial influence on future teachers' capacity to recognise the strengths of their pupils and to create conditions that allow these strengths to be expressed and developed through animative educational activities. Participants in the experimental group demonstrated higher professional readiness and confidence in the use of innovative pedagogical methods compared to those in the control group.

Conclusion

The conducted study confirms the importance of integrating animative pedagogy into the preparation of future teachers. The student teachers who took part in the training based on Abner's Model demonstrated a noticeable increase in their confidence and ability to plan and conduct creative educational activities. The comparison between the experimental and control groups provides clear evidence that experiencing this pedagogical approach during university education supports a stronger professional identity and readiness for practical work in the school environment. The implementation of the model helped participants understand how to identify the strengths of each pupil and how to organise learning situations in which these strengths can be expressed. By progressing through the three structured stages, the students developed the ability to observe, to reflect and to choose appropriate methods for encouraging creativity and communication in the classroom. This practical experience gave them a realistic sense of responsibility and improved their decision making in educational situations that require flexibility and pedagogical tact. The results further indicate that animative pedagogy contributes to a positive learning climate. When teachers provide space for initiative and a sense of authorship, pupils show greater perseverance, emotional stability and willingness to take part in collaborative tasks. These findings correspond with contemporary expectations for teaching that values participation, autonomy and meaningful engagement in primary education. Abner's model offers clear guidance for teacher educators who seek to prepare competent and motivated professionals.

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