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Towards a Culture of Quality Policymaking in Transition Countries. The Case of Education

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Abstract

This paper argues that neglect of the policy making process is an enduring problem of transition. In the typical South-Eastern approach, the quality of policy making is too often viewed as a technical rather than a cultural one. Based on his involvement in central government education, grassroots projects, and interviews carried out with policy makers and stakeholders in education reform in Romania and Poland, the author offers recommendations for creating a more sustainable policy process in education. At the level of teaching, these include professionalizing careers in education, and making education systems more demand rather than command driven. At the institutional level, the author cites the lack of institutional structure in Romania, and an absence of clear regulations and provisions at school, local authority and quality assurance level in Poland. Finally, at a political level, a long-term strategy and commitment to sustainable development is required, along with the structuring of central governance of education, a move towards more open and participatory policy systems, and empowering local actors to take ownership of the policy process.

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1 Setting the Scene: The "Policy" Approach to Educational Change

This paper intends to be a policy study, and it is animated by the aim of capturing the situation of policy making processes, especially in the field of education, and within in the dynamic context of transition[1]. After more than fifteen years of post-communism, slowly, but surely, a new culture has started to develop, promoting new values and emphasizing the crucial role of policy making in the public sphere with regard to its evolution and development.

The reflections made are primarily on the basis of field research done in Poland and Romania in late 2005, but are additionally based on a great deal of *transition and educational reform literature,* with a focus on the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe. Ten interviews were done in Poland, and fifteen in Romania, with key actors in policy making processes within educational management and governance, and at both central and local levels. The interview guide (see annex 1) had as its objective the obtaining of information from persons having positions related to policy making and implementation in education, the stages of development and the main characteristics of the educational policy process and also the extent to which a mature and professional approach to this process has begun to be articulated.

Nevertheless, despite the cultural, economic and social differences existing in transition areas, we shall argue that there are strong and common features inherent in such transitions regardless of geographical area or historical background. A transversal similarity can be observed, one not directly related to the pace and magnitude of the process or to the *locally-based occurrence* of such transition – but, rather, to the challenges and the transformations envisaged both at a personal and a social level.

The main aim of these interviews was not, primarily, to get descriptive information about the two educational systems and their policy characteristics but to have revealed and to be able to analyze the personal experiences of professionals involved in the process of policy making in education within "turbulent times"[2] in two countries that are struggling with different facets of such transition.

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[1] Our focus will be mainly on Central and South Eastern Europe
[2] See L.A.Pal, 2005: Beyond Policy Analysis. Public Issue Management in Turbulent Times. Thomson/Nelson.

We endeavour to assess the existing maturity of educational policy in transition contexts (based on these two cases) and to come up with a set of recommendations for the consolidation and effectiveness of policy processes in education. Maturity is a relative term, however, so is not to be taken at face value; thus, we will investigate to what extent we can identify the *professional practices* that are now in place, and which are widely used and known and accepted in the field, so that they might be considered consistent indications of the articulation of policy culture.

Our basic assumption is that policy making in education is more likely to produce high quality results if there is a **mature policy system** already in place. By a mature policy system we mean that some or most of the following conditions are now being met in the process of the development and implementation of educational policies:

- **Technical-functional conditions**: there is in place a clear *policy cycle*, with defined steps that are acknowledged and respected by those involved in the process and which have been set up as milestones to guide activities. The policy process, therefore, takes place according to an internal functional logic, one that is visible to and acknowledged by participants. The technical–functional conditions are *not* concretized in a pre-defined algorithm that has to be strictly followed – rather, it is a professionally regulated approach, as opposed to one that is unstructured and reactive, which tries to reflect the logical steps of the process.
- **Conceptual conditions**: there is a common language used in policy making, and there is the agreement of those involved regarding a common understanding of the main concepts specific to the field. In other words, a *community of discourse* is created, allowing participants to "speak the same language" in connection with educational policy. Such a community of discourse and the conceptual maturity of policy making processes can be observed in the basic/key policy documents pertaining to the educational system. This does not, of course, mean that everyone agrees on policy - only that they can at least communicate their differences effectively and intelligibly.
- **Professional conditions**: there is in place an *institutional framework* in charge of policy processes for education. There may be a wide variety of institutional arrangements: specialized units at the Ministry of Education level or at the level of regional/local educational authorities; specialized institutes or agencies subordinated to Ministries of Education; and NGOs or think tanks focusing on policy analysis, development and evaluation. Another option could be a "soft" institutionalization of policy making, i.e. policy responsibilities that are assigned to involved professionals at different levels. Thus, the degree of institutionalization can be considered a sign of maturity. To this one might also add *participation and consultation mechanisms* for use in such policy processes.
- Last, but not least, a new condition now seems to be more and more important due to the different types of crisis that the world is facing - and to which a rapid and coherent answer has been sought after. A **capacity to function under pressure** in non-linear and often chaotic conditions is a fundamental requirement when it comes to a mature policy system. Maturity doesn't mean, as previously noted, a "functional machinery" therefore - but, instead, a responsive, flexible and

adaptive process, one able to use innovation and creativity to steer processes and to bring about results.

Before meeting these structured conditions and eventually reaching a degree of maturity allowing for a systemic perspective on the whole process, the "policy" approach should be first accepted and acknowledged as a new perspective with regard to social transformation. Approaching educational reality via *policy initiatives* entails a shift towards ownership and the responsibility of the actors. "Policy" is not anymore a regulation from an impersonal "state" but an improvement initiative, based on identifiable needs, specific to a target group, and having clear expected results and implementation plans. A first sign or level of maturity would therefore be the existence of a policy approach with reference to educational reforms; next, are ones related to the external coherency and internal consistency of this approach, making the step from isolated policy initiatives to one taking on board the entire policy system functional and efficient, so that it deals with existing improvement needs and can plot the path towards future goals.

This paper is strongly influenced by my personal experience in Romania, working in the central governance of education and in grassroots development projects, but also by the project work and/or consultancy activities I performed in the last few years in countries like Poland, Hungary, Serbia and Montenegro, FYR of Macedonia and Albania. Subjective experience is acknowledged, has been conceptualized in a reflective manner and used in a biographical way - as the history of transition has, in general, also been my own personal transition from adolescence to a mature professional life in the areas of educational reform and educational policy. This is why I think that the whole discussion about policy process in a transition context cannot be - and should not be - primarily put in the so-called "objective tradition" of research; rather, it takes on board a qualitative interpretation, in which one's own subjectivity and biography are revealed and assessed from the perspective of their contribution to such transition. And this is even more needed if we take into account the need for a multi/perspective, kaleidoscopic understanding of transition, in which *culture* (as unclear and "non-scientific" this concept might be) plays a major role.

2 Transition and Beyond. A New Culture of Change and Development

Using the word "transition" became *de rigueur* in public discourse when trying to explain a unique and very complex situation that arose especially in post-communist countries, as a tension between the remains of the "old regime" and the challenges of a new, postmodern world showed a completely new reality, one which was a shock for the large majority of people; for they were being asked to make dramatic identity changes in their own personal, social and professional lives.

Transition became the *panacea* concept that could explain the unexplainable; it was able to characterize an amalgamated and unstructured world, one trying to find a path out of the long night of dictatorship on into the bright light of liberty, dignity and humanism.

Beyond such overuse and abuse of the concept (which was intellectually comfortable and did not require further clarification because of its large acceptance and wide social distribution) transition then became a paradigm: a paradigm of change, which came not only with tremendous variety and dynamics of context, but also with enriching new meanings for social and personal change. A whole *transition culture* started to develop, with its benefits and shortcomings, and with a variable epistemological geometry – and also with a strong and unwavering commitment to development. The transition paradigm in the sense given by Thomas Carothers and other scholars, based on a model with a certain number of assumptions coming from ideas of transition towards democracy, is only one side of what we call here 'transition culture'. As part of a fundamental transformation and change process in Central and South-Eastern Europe, transition is much more than a structured model via which to achieve political democracy (as stipulated mainly by active donors and assistance programs): it is an intimate social-cultural and personal identity process, an active re-construction of social reality, both in terms of everyday life and the public sphere - where, by 'public sphere', we mean public space, physical and discursive, but also public services (education, health, social assistance etc.).

2.1 Transition Paradigm. Are We in or Are We out?

"The time has arrived for the groups and organizations promoting democracy to give up the transition paradigm. (…) It is difficult to give up the transition paradigm because of the conceptual order and the optimistic vision it offers. To abandon this paradigm means an important break, though not a total one. (…)[3]".

(Th. Carothers, 2002, p.182).

About a decade after the fall of communism, a kind of mutual agreement or, perhaps, movement seemed to occur between transition scholars regarding the imminent end of transition as a historical period and as an academic "discipline". As it initially started as a political rite of passage, the end of transition was somehow implied by the final consolidation of democracy, a critical evolution towards a market economy and the first signs of post-transition - such as economic growth, the stability of democratic institutions and procedures, a basic rule of law and a critical mass of consolidated public consciousness ready to resist any return to the "dark side" of the past.

Let's take a brief look, however, into the possible meanings of this concept in order to capture the characteristics of a transition context.

- **Historical meaning:** puts the emphasis on the *time* perspective, on the passage from one historical époque to another. After the breakdown of communism, the transition time started, being a period located at crossroads of two social objectives: the demise of the past and plotting a path towards the future.
- **Political meaning:** the abolition of the communist regime and the building of democracy. A whole new range of political values began to structure the public arena: freedom, democracy, well-being, competition, property, a market economy, dignity, human rights etc.
- **Economic meaning:** movement from a centralized, state-planned and -owned, command-driven economy towards a market, custom-oriented and demand-driven economy.
- **Social meaning:** the emergence of democratic citizenship, accompanied by all rights and responsibilities; the development of associative life and transformation of the institutional landscape.
- **Cultural meaning:** the emergence of cultural diversity, the acceptance and encouragement of cultural identities (different social-cultural groups); the demise of ideology in cultural life.
- **Educational meaning:** giving up the ideological ballast, modernization, the separation of politics and policy, and a change of educational message according to the values outlined above. Development of a new educational ideal and the reconstruction of schooling based on new principles, namely democracy, a diversity of learning styles and needs, quality, accountability, autonomy and competence.

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[3] Translated from Romanian into English.

After taking on board all these facets of transition, we can see that a whole *transition culture* begins to articulate itself at both individual and social-life levels, being an *inter-regnum* culture (as Cezar Birzea terms it[4]) situated between post-communism and post-modernism; it is a culture of the times "between brackets"[5].

The culture and climate of transition contexts is a reality that can be discovered and described in different ways since there is no such thing as **one** form of transition. Transitions may be different from all the perspectives emphasized beforehand, when we look at the dynamics and magnitude of transformations; though there are also contextual, historical and social variables. Nevertheless, common, transversal features appear in all such contexts:

- A *coexistence* of past and new present (future) values, in a mixed and sometimes conflicting manner;
- The *ambivalence* of a double-sided reality, apparently schizophrenic, though often comfortable for people, who tend to see it not as a *transition* to something, but as *modus vivendi*. (We will examine this further in a separate section.)
- *Precariousness,* in consequence of an accelerated, sometimes forced change, with limited time for reflection and internalization, for participation and/or a critical approach.

Uncertain times and the often unclear perspective at the end of the tunnel have produced a kind of "appetite" for transition, which tends to make it a reality *per se,* while discourses and behaviours operate in this "culture of transition". Instead of being *in transit* from one stage to another, living in a "continuous transition" now becomes an option… And this is how transition becomes, at the same time,:

- A complex process of the social, political and economic transformation of post-communist countries on their way towards becoming modern and democratic societies. The "end" of transition would mean reaching a level of development, stability and prosperity that will alter the social perceptions and representations had by people regarding the times they are living in/through. A broad social agreement that a sound democratic citizenship, market economy and social well-being have been attained would then facilitate a leap "out of transition".
- A daily life situation without an expected end, as we live in an increasingly dynamic, complex society, with a "variable geometry"[6]. Transition is the reality of our times, and is unstable, chaotic, and highly unpredictable…

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[4] C. Birzea – Education in a World in Transition: Between Post-Communism and Post-Modernism. In: Prospects (XXVI), 1996, 4.
[5] J. Naisbitt – Megatendințe. Zece noi direcții care ne transformă viața [Megatrends. Ten New Dimensions Transforming our Lives]. Bucharest: Editura Politica, 1989.
[6] G.Lipovetsky – Amurgul datoriei. Etica nedureroasă a noilor timpuri democratice. [Le Crepuscule du devoir. L'ethique indolore des nouveaux temps democratiques]. Bucharest: Babel, 1996.

Since there is no single form of transition, it would be naïve to think that there is a single *truth* about transition. The crossroads of times and cultures shapes a new reality, which can end one day or which can last.

The new Romanian Government announced, via a speech of the Prime Minister, that as result of the December 2004 elections "…transition is over." Indeed, one might perceive this as being true, for the country is now a consolidated democracy, it has a functional market economy, and it has experienced a number of years of economic growth; and these might be seen as signs of the end of transition. While Poland is now a member of the European Union - and the country is considered safe and attractive for investors, the educational system has been decentralized and local governments have an important role to play in educational governance.

Yet can someone proclaim an "end of transition"? From the ten experts interviewed in Poland, eight strongly argued that Poland is still in a state of transition. Six of them associated the state of being in transition with a continuation of important changes/transformations. As a historical period or époque, transition could end today or tomorrow; though the *real* end of transition, in the deeper meaning assigned by people – i.e. as a provisional state, unstructured and with tensions from the fight between "an odious past" and "a wealthy future" – will arrive only when social perceptions declare it so. As long as people feel that transition is *not* yet over, and they locate their country and their own activities and participation in social reality that is *in transition*, then transition remains. We are still in - we are not out yet!

The "problem" of South-eastern approaches to transition is not the fact of endless transformation and structural change but a lack of vision of the future and, also, is due to the many fragmented opinions about the way ahead. Regardless of how we look at it, transition means a route or a transformation from something to something else. We know the departure point, we even know and we are able to describe the steps we have taken - but when it comes to the destination, one's imagination becomes poorer. Where are we going? What sort of society would we like to have? What education system we would like to create? These are serious questions requiring major and consistent public debate, for a consensus building. This is, let's say, the *missing link* for the transition paradigm. There is a lack of this kind of discussion which would raise the awareness of the public concerning educational matters and enable a building of a consensus on the future of education systems (for example, whether educational reforms are to be an

elite or donor-driven activity, and will it have low participation or a more widespread ownership).

There is a multitude of perspectives, though, from which we cannot talk yet about the end of transition. Maybe the transition paradigm has come to an end in political and democracy theory - yet the social reality under construction, the dynamics of change, the unpredictability and non-linearity of transformations and, finally, the spectacular identity processes at an individual level are still in transition - perhaps a new type of transition, but still a transition.

When asked the question From an educational point of view, and especially when looking at educational policy, would you say that Poland/Romania is still in transition? the majority of interviewees answered 'Yes" (eight in Poland, fourteen in Romania).

"Yes, Poland is definitely in a process of transformation... I mean, with regard to the completion of both structural changes of the education system and the content of reforms based on assessments. (…)"

(Interview 8, Poland)

"The transition goes ahead - and there are issues that need to be modified on the way. But it doesn't have the form of radical reform any more – rather, normal evolution..."

(Interview 2, Poland)

"No doubt about it! … We have a problem of coherency here because every ministerial team thinks that reforms starts with them…"

(Interview 6, Romania)

"We still have components of the reform that have been neglected, and rapid measures need to be taken: in teacher training, the management and financing of schools, and other things - though not so much…"

(Interview 12, Romania).

In Poland, people think that the time for rushing has now passed and there is a smoother evolution occurring; while, in Romania (and in spite of an expressed need for stability overall) some sectors were thought to be notably lagging behind so that there was a need for firm and complex intervention (N.B. teacher training was mentioned by eight persons, school governance by seven). Though when it comes to educational policy, there is wide agreement that Romania is still *in* transition, as there has not yet been a satisfactory level of efficiency and equity with regard to educational governance.

Another idea expressed by respondents (which is important for this part of the discussion) relates to the political over-influence on education and on educational

policies, chiefly as a result of government change and/or ministers' being changed. This situation gives priority to political legitimacy, so there is small room for *professional* legitimacy, which makes educational policy a matter of "personal will" instead of a rational and professional activity that bases itself on identified needs and problems and on a sound educational management information system.

2.2 The Construction of Transition. Biography, Myths and Social-cultural Transformation

"Going hand in hand with the global crisis of transition societies, a crisis of the transition theory has also started to configure itself: how can the shocking failures of transition be explained, while everything was supposed to meet up to expectations? How can a suitable reform strategy, supported by broad internal consensus and consistent western support produce, via its application, these kinds of negative results?!"

(C. Zamfir, 2004, p.35)

If one questions this reality called 'transition', and we try to deconstruct it, what are the foundations/pillars of this reality? We can look into at least three parts of a kaleidoscope here.

- Transition in Central and South-Eastern Europe is a **life experience**. What is neglected by many western scholars and by western institutions supporting different reforms is that transition is not only a social and political process. It is, first of all, a life experience being had by every individual. Many of the "active adults" of today are, in many ways, the "products" of communist times, persons who were schooled and disciplined under the old regime. This is not only about a changing society, therefore, but about changing identities: personal, social and professional. Personal biographies of the last 15 years are, at a micro-level, biographies of transition processes that are reflected and have been accommodated at an individual level. "Jumping" directly from communism to globalization and postmodernism might thus be seen as a risky circus performance without a safety net…Yet, it is the discontinuities, the "jumps" that create challenges... As we noted above,

"if normal policy making can be seen as incremental, with each step being more or less predictably or controllably emanating from the last, then what is non-incremental is unpredictable to a certain degree, and what is not immediately controllable has the potential to create crisis."

(L.A.Pal, 2005, p. 333)

- Transition is a **mythical construction**. One of the characteristics of the transition process that is extremely relevant to education is what is generally called *the legacy of the past*, referring mainly to the "good old times" existing before communism. A visible nostalgia, especially among intellectuals, was registered (for instance) in Romania for the period between the two World Wars. It was a period of monarchy, with a pluralistic political arena, welfare, the right to property

and a good social image and social position for intellectuals, especially teachers. Bucharest was called *Little Paris* and the elite spoke French. It was a period of major transformation for all sectors, including education - and the reforms of this time became a reference point, an "example". Legendary characteristics were associated with ministers of education, such as Spiru Haret. Another interesting phenomenon occurred in relation to this topic. One of the negative consequences of transition was a limited commitment to and trust in education, and also a fall in the social status of teachers in the community, mainly owing to their poor economic conditions. A "saving myth" was therefore created on the basis of the old teacher's image. Teaching was proclaimed, largely by teachers themselves, a matter of vocation; it was an almost divine gift that you had or didn't have. Teachers would thus be, via this perspective, apostolic missionaries who were ready to sacrifice themselves on the altar of knowledge and for the illumination of the young generation. This myth was, however, a surrogate way of feeding the broken pride of teaching staff – i.e. who were, in reality, persons who were constantly underpaid and neglected, who had poor material and symbolic benefits from their jobs and, most painfully, felt that they were socially disgraced, having been dethroned from their position of respected community leaders.

- Transition is a broad form of **social transformation**. We use the term 'social' in the broadest possible sense here, thus including political and economic changes as seen from a social perspective. For persons living in a transition country, the post-communist period can be characterized as being very distressing; for the speed of passing to an almost completely new world would challenge the most flexible and open-minded of persons. The social project of post-communist societies was (most of the time) too ambitious and non-realistic in a time perspective, and it was over-influenced by western donor organizations and by the strong paradigms pertaining to a liberal democracy that *had* to be created. The main actors of the project have only recently begun to be empowered and to feel any sense of ownership of this social project. Deconstructing and reshaping social reality in a meaningful way - with clear development goals in mind, and with institutional and professional commitment - is a product of the late stage of transition of the last 4-5 years.

2.3 Education and Transition. A Policy Perspective

One of the papers about missing links and the meeting point between education and transition, written from the "*inside*", is *Transition in Education* by Peter Rado, a book valuing in an excellent though objective manner the personal experiences and reflections coming from a *lived in* transition; there is, additionally, an incisive analysis of systems and situations. It is an invitational type of writing that is simple and clear.

One of the conclusions is that "All characteristics of the region suggest that the "missing link" of the educational policy making process in these countries is policy analysis, planning and consultation - that is, a lack of system and a lack of capacity that might:

- connect expected and most desirable educational outcomes with strategic issues existing "in the air",

- gather different policy issues into a coherent and synergetic reform strategy,
- reveal the implications of such strategies for each component of the educational system, and
- "make proposals for the effective implementation of these strategies."

<div align="right">(P.Rado, 2001, p.38).</div>

The educational sector has experienced dramatic changes in transition countries, not with the same pace and magnitude, and not via the same timetable, but serious and profound changes nonetheless. Without aiming to lay down here historical stages of educational reform[7], especially because they are diverse and do not really overlap, we will only mention a frequently followed scenario having some obvious facets/steps:

- ***De-structuring the old system:*** de-communization, giving up the ideological ballast, a questioning of the state monopoly in education; a first wave of curriculum reform, basically focusing on content.
- ***Curriculum and textbook reform:*** conceiving a new curriculum (another new word for the educational reality of post-communist countries…) based on learning outcomes; the introduction of new and modern subjects (Information technology, Home economics) and a flexible curriculum framework, with the appearance of a school-based curriculum. Textbook reform - perhaps more difficult and also more controversial for involved persons - helped create the first steps towards a free market. Tensions and contradictions appeared because textbooks were one of the taboos of the old system and of the old professional identity of teachers. It was hard for many to understand how they would be able to give up resorting to The Textbook (read: The Bible) of their field in favour of having to refer to 3, 5 or even more "Bibles". School-based curricula and the introduction of alternative textbooks are two of the measures that served to create a niche in the mentality of teachers and parents. Experiencing freedom in education was initially painful, though it has now become a basic principle.
- ***Educational management and governance reform***: a restructuring of the institutional landscape of educational management, the development of a managerial approach to education as a public service, changes in the financing of education, and in the operation and ownership of schools. Here, the differences among countries are significant, varying from decentralization (Poland, Hungary), to half-way decentralization (Romania, Macedonia) to fragmentation (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosova).
- ***Institutional reform and restructuring the school network:*** restructuring or doing away with existing institutions (i.e. school inspectorates, teacher training institutions), the creation of new institutions, especially agencies of ministries of education, specialized curriculum development, ways of assessment and examinations, vocational education, etc. School networks were looked at again, taking into account principles of access and also efficiency. This wave of reforms is not yet completed - and some countries, Romania included, still have a long way to go.

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[7] See G. Mazurkiewicz – Strategy and Quality in Education: Poland and L. Ciolan – Strategy and Quality in education: Romania. In: P.Rado (ed.), 2004.

"In recent years the word 'reform' has been used widely, almost promiscuously, to refer to almost *any* policy initiative. The casual use of the word 'reform' runs the risk of suggesting that a great deal of change is planned or is under way, when little of real substance is changing in the system…"

(J.H. Williams; W.K. Cummings, 1995, p. I).

One of the institutions which, paradoxically, *has* managed to resist any profound or systematic change in many of the transition countries is the Ministry of Education itself. While the majority of reform projects envisaged schools and teachers, with a more or less coherent and sustainable approach, such Ministries have remained within a chrysalis of old staff and old habits. After many discussions with persons in Central and South Eastern Europe I came to realize that these Ministries have resisted most of the structural and functional changes of the last fifteen years and have become real bastions of resistance to change - and, at least in Romania, are resisting any "real" policy process for education. (This is an interesting situation, and it may deserve a separate and broader analysis.)

The supposed "brain" of the central governance of education, which has the key role to play in educational policy, gives signs of awareness; but it is not really delivering the expected services. Owing to a recent restructuring of Ministries of Education in Romania and Poland they have now set up their own policy units, which is a step – though after major debate and regulation of their place in central governance, they are both still very weak and are struggling to define their roles.

On the other hand, interview respondents broadly recognized the Ministry of Education as being main actor in the policy arena; and if the ministries of both countries hold first place in this system, one difference is that Poland seems to have a greater participation of institutions with regard to policy processes – for regional institutions, such as *Kuratoria[8]*, and also local governments were mentioned.

"The most important aspect of the policy chain is the school", declared a Polish specialist – though, in reflection, we can see that only five interviewees from Romania and four from Poland located the school in the policy landscape (see question 4 in the interview protocol). This demonstrates the perception that *educational policies* and *policy initiatives* are seen as being a matter of concern at a macro-level - thus, they are central government attributes. Micro-policy of school-level initiatives, ownership and participation are more considered to be a luxury in such a busy and dynamic educational environment.

3. Policy Making in a Transition Context

3.1 The Beginning of a New Culture

For a long period of time, in Central and South-Eastern European countries, there was (and to a certain extent there is still is) no distinction, not even linguistically, between *politics* and *policy*. This reflects the state of affairs of the old system, in which policy was a shadow or reflection of the political/totalitarian regime. This situation was also noted by P. Rado: "In most of the languages spoken in the region there is no separate word for policy. This is a powerful indication of the lack of distinction between action aimed at capturing or influencing power and action aimed at changing or influencing the behaviour of individuals or institutions." (P. Rado, 2001, p.35). Yet the recent and dramatic changes with regard to public issue management of recent years in transition countries has led, step by step, to a professional approach to policy making being initiated – and also to a progressive separation from politics. Separation doesn't mean break up and isolation, however, but different perceptions of the two fields as they are defined/explained in theory.

In countries like Romania this deficit was covered by an interesting improvisation: for politics, the Romanian word is the regular *politica*, while for policy we often hear the word *politici*, which from a linguistic point of view is nothing but the plural of the first, although the meaning invested in this plural is close to that of the modern concept of policy. This situation is interesting, though, as it implicitly assumes that for 'policy' a *plural* is more appropriate: a plurality of options… Thus, the whole idea of policy alternatives was captured in this old, but new word. The great majority of policy scholars used this option in their discourses, feeling the need for a palliative meaning-making of one word that was called upon to express two realities.

Nevertheless, a rapid evolution happened. Public policy became a matter of concern: the academic world started to develop specializations and to introduce disciplines, governments made efforts to undertake policy analyses as foundation for decision-making processes, and, further, to regulate the policy process at the level of central government. A commonly accepted framework for policy proposals coming from ministries was developed in Romania, this being accompanied by a manual on how to

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[8] Regional quality assurance authority of the Ministry of Education

write a policy proposal. Civil society (especially some NGOs) came with reform policies aimed at public services and began to develop policy alternatives, thereby contributing to the public debate and participation of stakeholders also.

A culture of quality policy making additionally became a target within education; and a transition is now observable moving from a *contemplative* culture - one deeply rooted in communist years, but also in the broader, more subtle social and everyday life culture of Balkan and Slavic/Slavic-influenced countries - towards an *evaluative* policy culture, one that is closer to western values and, generally, to the values of globalization. This unique policy environment offered by transition contexts and the opportunity to capture and delineate such a process as the *development of a quality policy making culture* may well enable a double danger, one that is obvious to those who have studied the realities of post-communist countries, to be avoided, namely:

- Schizophrenic evolution in the field of public policy, something generated by the two-sided reality that has been built up in recent years; and the gap between *policy discourse*, on one side, and *effective implementation practices* on the other. Public policy development is only in part self-generated as a requirement of different sectors for their improvement efforts. There was, and still is, major pressure coming due to the political and financial "dependencies" of these countries: negotiation chapters involving the European Union, structural adjustments imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund etc.
- Repetition of the same pathway and, implicitly, of the same mistakes by different countries having different development levels in their political, social and economic growths. Within the domain of public policy development the labyrinth of transition, even it does look quite different from one country to another, has many *similar* evolutionary routes – and such a fact, one should note, will make investigation of the main characteristics and trends of public policy development possible and fruitful here.

We are making reference to *a culture of quality policy making* because we strongly believe that, in a transition context, the quality of the policy making process is not primarily a **technical** problem had by those involved – it is a cultural problem, one deeply rooted in persons' capacities to link discourse and practice, to 'merge' what one says and what one actually does…

"As it is widely known, in sociological and historical terms we talk about reform only when the practical, social content of programs overlaps with a reforming of the human being in the respective époque, of his inner self, of his way of thinking and his representing of reality … "

(R. Iucu, 2004, p.145-146).

3.2 The Persistence of a Double-sided Reality

From a "socialist economy multilaterally developed" to knowledge-based and globalized economies and societies, from communism to postmodernism… The huge distance and great number of differences between these two worlds made many people in the situation unable to take a leap forwards. The short time at people's disposal and the very high aims and goals of transition (coming via the requirement to "reduce discrepancies" when set against the western world) found a lot of people and social systems unprepared for the new identity forming.

Because of this, a strange situation appeared, one that is hard for "outsiders" to understand: a double-sided reality. One side of this reality is the reality of discourse. Here, the majority of professionals made a leap: they have a new vocabulary, they have internalized the meanings of the new language, and they can use it with ease. Another clear conclusion to be made after our interviews is that, at least within the educational community, we are able to talk about a common language that is clearly understood and which is widely accepted and used. The other side, however, is the reality of daily professional practices, a tributary to the outdated, command-driven and opaque system before the '90s. This schizophrenic professional environment - in which discourse and practices do not necessarily match - is the result of multiple factors, such as:

- The incapacity of identity processes at an individual level to keep pace with the social machinery of change: new language has been assimilated, to function provisionally in the new environment - though this discourse does not express a newly created reality. It only covers over in a nice, socially desired and accepted packaging the old practices, ones that may be counter-productive and even contradictory as regards now existing systemic conditions and regulatory mechanisms.
- A lack of ownership and participation in educational reforms on a larger scale. The specialized technical approach to educational reform in general and to educational policy in particular has taken a step towards professionalization, yet it has excluded too many actors and stakeholders.
- The perceived artificiality of the new pedagogical reality and the low technical capacity and expertise at the central level of educational governance.
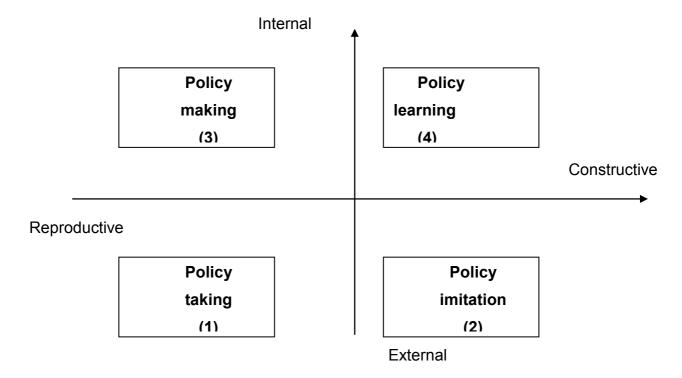
I always find it frustrating to hear teachers in the in-service trainings I give sometimes talking so positively about project methodologies, portfolios, student-centered learning, the inclusion of students with special needs, multiple intelligences, competency-based teaching and learning - and then learn about the poor educational practices they produce in their *own* classrooms.

"Thus, systemic changes for the transition process are not necessarily driven by the requirements of the developmental needs of individual social services. Policy issues are over-politicized, and public debate on policy issues is heavily influenced by ideological considerations. During the transition period the systemic conditions of development are the focus of educational policies, rather than pedagogical developments themselves…"

(P.Rado, 2001, p.19).

3.3 Towards a Constructive Approach to Transition. Policy Recommendations for a Sustainable Policy Process in Education

Before trying to formulate any policy recommendations, a return to the kaleidoscope's lens will bring some logic to our reflection cycle. At the beginning, we looked at steps or stages via which one might attain some maturity for a policy system, arguing that, first of all, one should seek a *policy approach perspective concerning social/educational change.* But if we look at the short and recent history of policy making in education in transition countries, a common pattern can be identified, indicating a move from *policy taking* to *policy learning* in education and also (most likely) in the larger public services domain. This process might be seen as being four waves, conceptualized on two axes: an ownership axe, going from *external* to *internal* - and a learning axe, going from *reproduction* to *active construction.* (see figure below)

Internal

| Policy making (3) | Policy learning (4) |

Constructive

Reproductive

| Policy taking (1) | Policy imitation (2) |

External

Policy process waves in a transition context

The internal – external relation with regard to ownership refers to the source of the policy (i.e. as determined by donors or external factors/institutions, versus things determined by local actors and their needs). The reproductive–constructive continuum brings to our attention the level of participation of the policy community in the entire policy process, going from very poor involvement to active construction and reflection.

- *Policy taking,* as a first wave, both historically and in terms of the logic of our model, is routed in donor-driven projects developed in transition countries - and is largely based on policy transfers from western/more experienced systems. Educational policies here are taken for granted by local actors as they reflect broad intervention needs that should be valid "anytime, anywhere". This *one size fits all* perspective of donors was accepted because of the very low capacity and poor policy competence of local actors. Educational policies at this stage are focused on *content reform* and, then, on the structure of the education system.
- *Policy imitation* or copying is still externally determined, yet it involves a higher degree of learning/input and building from local actors. Imitation is a voluntary process; and models have been carefully selected, and have sometimes even been slowly adapted to a local context. This is the outcome-driven reform phase, where the processes themselves are neglected for the sake of results; and the former are largely borrowed from what is generally called *the global orthodoxy of education*.
- *Policy making* brings local ownership and, eventually, a certain degree of institutionalization into educational policy making. Elaboration of educational policies and resultant processes are conceived in a specified policy cycle and are managed via a central governing of education. The whole process is subject to laid-down procedures and strict rules. Making policy is a professional activity, and only recognized/certified experts should have access to this. Management-driven reforms are characteristic of this stage; and there is a very technical, at times mechanistic approach coming from a "functional system" that has been made up of "functional sub-systems or components".
- *Policy learning* is a new approach, largely conceptualized and supported by institutions such as European Training Foundation[9], in relation to their leading role in vocational education and training reforms in transition countries. This stage brings to one's attention a *practice-driven*, continual improvement approach to educational reforms. After many change efforts centered on structure and on the system's heavy architecture (curriculum, evaluation and exams, certifications and qualifications, management structures, power relations, inspection and control etc.), the policy learning vision here shifts its focus towards the intimate functioning of educational processes at a micro-level, giving attention to the student and the school as the ultimate beneficiaries, and also to relevant stakeholders when it comes to educational policies.

"Policy learning emphasizes not simply the involvement but, more, the active engagement of national stakeholders in developing their own policy solutions, and it is based on the understanding that there are no universally valid models that

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[9] Especially Peter Grootings and Soren Nielsen, from results of the ETF Advisory Forum plenary meeting in 2003, when this approach was formally endorsed.

can simply be transferred or copied from one context to another. At best, there is a wealth of international, though context-specific, experience dealing with similar policy issues that are able to be shared."

<div align="right">(P.Grootings, S.Nielsen, 2005, p.11).</div>

Policy learning means the level of a sound policy culture and environment, based on accountability and the ownership of local stakeholders; it is also a reflective policy making process in which creativity and local capacities are used at a maximum, valuing also international experience and results.

If we look at the current situation of Romania and Poland from this model's perspective, we can say that there is no specific framework that has been arrived at, at the moment, in which the two countries might be located. There is, rather, an ongoing learning and development process occurring in the field of educational policies, one that is for the most part located in the first 1,2,3 quadrants. Interviews made both in Romania and Poland clearly show the following:

- Policy making steps are most of the time directly linked to the main steps made in educational reform (with an historical rather than technical perspective). There is limited knowledge of the actors of the "technicalities" of education policy as an academic discipline and steering tool. The tendency of interviewees from both countries was to consider as strong points in the process *problem identification and definition* and, to a certain extent, *policy formulation* – and, as weak points, *policy implementation and monitoring* and *evaluation.*
- In Poland, more respondents (seven out of the ten) thought that policy making in education is a professionalized job, rather than an ad-hoc, non-structured process. *Policy making should not be unstructured. You either have it - or you don't have it…* said one of the interviewees. On the other hand, in Romania, 13 respondents out of the 15 assessed policy making in education as *not* being a professionalized job.

Generally, the policy process in Romania and Poland was seen to be uneven and not mature enough. While some components are more developed or advanced, others are weak and/or neglected. Special attention was given by respondents to the capacity of policy systems to create and undertake sound monitoring procedures and an evaluation of policies, and also to use the results of different evaluations or impact studies for further improvement and development.

The policy recommendations we endeavour to formulate are to a large extent the result of interpreting the interviews made with policy makers and educational reform stakeholders in Romania and Poland, especially with regard to sections six and seven from the interview protocol. They are not, in the main, typical "policy recommendations

to support decision making", therefore - but are possible "courses of action", and vision supports for educational change and development in the region.

- **Making teachers and trainers professionals and reform stakeholders. The professionalization of an educational career.**

Wider participation for - and consultations with - teachers and trainers in the policy *development* process (i.e. and not only in policy implementation) and in educational reform is greatly required in general. This is a condition for a long-term, reflective policy learning commitment. The empowerment of teachers will transform them from being objects into active subjects of reform, into persons being actively engaged in building the new context of educational policy and practice. This should go in parallel with raising the social and economic status of teachers, though, i.e. as an important motivation tool.

In addition, a professional approach to teaching and educational management will end the mythic orientations and unavoidable improvisations. Proximity with the idea of being an artist and as somehow gifted would not appear to offer us nowadays the desired perspective on the teaching profession. As for school managers, as long as they are managers by chance and not by competence, educational governance and administration at a micro-level will not get a healthy breadth of efficiency and quality.

One of the studies emphasizing the situation of teacher education reform in Romania clearly shows:

"Reform of the teacher training system is a priority. In fact, it is an urgent matter for at least two reasons: i) the need for a consolidated consciousness, according to which teacher education is a vital factor as regards the success of reform. It doesn't matter how complex and elaborate the reform is as a project - if it is not accompanied by a change of mentality, attitudes and behaviour very little will change. ii) The system of teacher training has registered slower development, a certain discrepancy of rhythm and efficiency - as compared with other elements of the reform, particularly curriculum and instruction, evaluation and management..."

(D.Potolea; L.Ciolan, 2003)

- **Building a new vision of learning**

The first step is to really move from teaching to learning, from command- to demand-driven education systems, from knowledge transmittal to the personal and social development of students. The challenges of today's society calls for a new vision on learning, but one that needs to be developed and freely taken on board by teachers, and not imposed at all. This new perspective on what learning means for students

needs to be created by teachers, as professionals; and it should be tested in their practice communities.

- **Establishing quality assurance mechanisms**

Many transition systems are far from being based on trust, confidence and quality assurance. Control still prevails, and this is maybe another factor producing a schizophrenic educational environment. Teachers and managers produce oral and written discourses ("papers") according to the official rules and requirements, but make manifest professional practices according to their own rules (based on the myths of "experience", "past successes, i.e. the Olympiad etc.)

The Romanian Senate, the upper chamber in Parliament, recently rejected the Law on the Quality of Education project – for the President decided, according to his constitutional right, to send the law back to the Senate for reconsideration. While Poland has an institutional structure dealing with quality assurance, though there are unclear regulations and provisions both with regard to schools, local authorities and the Kuratorium (quality assurance agencies). Standards have been approved (in a regulation from April 2004), though the legislative document is opaque and its implementation methodologies are unclear. The result is that, instead of applying all of the quality standards, authorities are selecting just some of them for the current school year - and have left out others for later application.

- **Reaching a long-term, trans-political commitment for educational development**

Political in-fighting and a strange kind of pride has made many of the active ministers of recent years think that educational reform begins with them. Putting their name to "real" educational reform has been on the agenda of some such ministers. Reaching a long-term, trans-political commitment as regards educational development and concerning the country's own development via education is a must. After 15 years of experimenting and new beginnings, the system needs a *continuity* of approach, as well as a sustainable and coherent form of development focusing on quality assurance. A recent example of what is required here is from Romania, where the minister of education who was appointed in December 2004, after the elections had a very short mandate, of about 10 months. This was in spite of a seemingly ground-breaking policy agenda that tries to match local needs with priorities coming from the EU integration process. During the electoral campaign I was glad to see – again for the first time in

Romania – the consistent presence of educational discourse. After appointing the Cabinet, the Government promised, as stated in the Governing program, a significant increase in educational financing supporting the big project launched by the new ministerial team on education and research: implementation of the Bologna process in higher education, quality assurance regulations, mechanisms and procedures for both university and pre-university education, a decentralization of pre-university education, revision of the financing mechanisms of education, etc. Though in November 2005 the government approved a budget for education in 2006 that was *lower*, in real figures, than in the budget of last year. The minister and part of his team decided to resign, though this would not have been a problem if some notable progress had subsequently been made in the education sector.

- **Encouraging transversal and horizontal learning: exchange networks, process consultancy, communities of practice, etc.**

The time of "big weddings" - huge donor projects, national conferences and seminars, teams of national trainers, educational Gurus brought from abroad – has now passed. It is now time for learning from one's peers, learning from not necessarily the best but from the most relevant practices. School networking and professional associations within communities of practice need to be encouraged. An interesting initiative occurred recently in Serbia with the so-called Innovation Fund for vocational schools - a fund from which schools can get financing for grassroots innovation projects, setting agendas themselves and for development planning at both institutional and community levels. Regional networking is another important aspect that should also be encouraged. There is a great deal of transition knowledge and expertise that it makes sense to share. One of the missing links for EU policy in the region is clearly the fact that regional exchange and networking, process consultancy among peer countries/sectors has not been encouraged; the whole region was somehow kept in a fishbowl, and was fed through Phare, CARDS, Tacis or other types of funds. The non-reimbursable funds really made a very significant contribution to the development of these respective sectors, yet they generally failed to *make any difference*; for the same existing patterns of culture, of learning from "Bibles" (prescribed, unique recipes) or from "experts", or just doing what you were told by decision makers was preserved via such types of assistance.

- **Restructuring the central governance of education, especially Ministries of Education. The professionalization of policy-making.**

As mentioned above, Ministries managed to resist very well the successive changes and reform waves happening in transition countries. Serious attention thus has to be given to the reform of central governance of education, with this being based on sound functional reviews and competence mappings. An unscientific estimation, though one based on ten months of working 'on the inside', allows me to postulate that from among approximately 350 employees of the Ministry of Education in Romania, a maximum of 30 deliver *fully* according to their position and responsibilities.

Ministries and, now and then, agencies involved in central governance dramatically lack any capacity for policy making, i.e. they do not know exactly what they are supposed to do. The professionalization of policy making thereby means training, professional development, clear responsibilities in the policy process, and special institutions/departments to ensure strategic planning and transversal coordination.

In using the inventories of policy tools at their disposal, responsible institutions at the central level focus too often on issuing regulations and establishing commissions or working groups. The more sophisticated policy tools are not known well enough - and, in consequence, are rarely used. A weak ability to competently steer educational processes comes from such a situation in what concerns institutions for the central governance of education. Policy is still an unknown science and practice for the large majority of staff in ministries of education; while an "attenuating circumstance" for ministries is a specialist's low payment and the difficulties of hiring high-level professional staff. (A personal advisor to the minister of education in Romania is paid approximately 300 EUR per month…)

- **Creating real platforms for consultation and public debate.**

Technocratic approaches, being supported by high-class experts, should move towards more open and participatory policy systems. Consultation and public debate are crucial for getting the public informed and supportive, especially when it comes to major changes such as decentralization, teachers' status and workload, examinations and national testing etc. The habit of public debate is not overly embedded in the culture of transition countries, however, though institutions involved in policy development, implementation and evaluation should make their contributions in this respect.

In the decentralized system of education in Poland, consultation is closer to what it *should* be, since many decisions are made at the local level and actors can find each other and cooperate more easily.

In Romania, consultation is still formal and lacking in consistency, due to there being a lack of trust in the authorities, primary procedures and the reluctance of stakeholders to act; processes are not taken seriously, and are often transformed in a time-consuming ritual based on the conviction that, regardless of what is said or done, the concerned Ministry will do *anyway* what they had initially planned. Also, teachers' trade unions are over-politicized and de-professionalized – and their activity is focused almost exclusively upon salaries and attacking radical reform measures. So is not an easy task to break with this counterproductive tradition and create real platforms for professional debate.

- **Empowering local actors to take over ownership of the policy process.**

This means going from policy taking or policy copying to real policy *learning*, to a sound policy process for which local stakeholders should take responsibility and take over ownership, having the necessary motivation and competencies to do so.

Epilogue: If I were to take a Socratic attitude here as regards this, my own paper, I would say that there is still a noteworthy difference between *my* reflections on the issue what I have actually managed to put down on paper. There is still place to make more use of interviews as means of gaining support for ideas and for the conclusions presented here. But I am no more that a professional product of transition... I would probably change this paper until it was unrecognizable to me … or I would miss the starting point. While being non-perfect in structure and subjective in nature, this tentative policy study tries to capture an important "variable", one that is not easy to capture: the real joy of writing on an exciting but extremely difficult topic, and the idea that analyzing transition is one thing, while reflecting on a "lived through transition" is something else may well bring in some added value. I think that basing my reflections and conclusions not only on "scientific methods" but also on my own experiences and subjectivity makes them, in this specific case, stronger - not weaker; as strong as something *can* be when talking about policy, education and transition…

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Appendix

Interview guidelines

The broader aim of the research is to capture elements / characteristics of the process of articulation of a policymaking culture in transition contexts. The main aim of this interview is to gather data from different education experts on the status and prospects of the policymaking environment in education, to assess the maturity of the policymaking system.

1. *Would you be so kind to shortly introduce yourself? (name, profession, job, specialization & expertise)*

2. *From educational point of view, especially when looking to educational policy, would you say that Poland / Romania is still in transition?*

   a. What are the characteristics still situating educational policies in transition? / What makes educational policy a mature system, out of transition? (*ask the right question according to the answer to main question*)
   b. If you would name 3 features of the educational policy process in Poland, what would you say?
       i.   ….
       ii. ….
       iii. ….

3. *In mature policymaking systems a clear policy cycle is followed.*

   a. How would you place policymaking in education in comparison with policymaking in other public domains (i.e. health, public administration, social assistance)? Better? Worse?
   b. Can you observe / are there visible steps in the policy process in the educational system?

c. If you look to the traditional steps in the policy process,

      i. Problem identification & definition

      ii. Policy formulation / development of alternatives

      iii. Choice of solution / selection of preferred policy option

      iv. Policy design

      v. Policy implementation and monitoring

      vi. Evaluation

4. *Where are the strong points and where are the weak points of the polish system? Circle strong points and label with "S" and cross weak points and label with "W" Explain! (bring arguments). Re-launch the question if the case in order to obtain arguments (why a specific step is considered strong or weak?).*

5. *If you would make an assessment of the maturity of these steps, how would you rate them on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is mature, strong and 5 is not mature, weak, unstructured?*

1.	Problem identification & definition	
2.	Policy formulation / development of alternatives	
3.	Choice of solution / selection of preferred policy option	
4.	Policy design	
5.	Policy implementation and monitoring	
6.	Evaluation	

6. *How would you characterize the language of educational policies?*

a. Is the language clear and transparent, easy to follow and understand by those involved?

    b. Is the language too technical? Too complicated? Why?

    c. Do you think that educational policy language is mature, is there in place a *community of discourse?* (common language understood and accepted by all involved?)

    d. What are the words that you hear very / too often in the policy discourse? Give at least three examples. Why these words?

        i. …

        ii. …

        iii. …

7. *What are the institutions in charge with educational policy in Poland, starting with identification of problems and formulation, and ending with evaluation and feedback?*

8. *Is policymaking in education a professionalized job, or is rather ad-hoc, unstructured process?*

    a. How would you characterize the **institutional** arrangement of educational policymaking in Poland? (circle on the paper all options of the interviewee)

        iv. Functional

        v. Mature

        vi. Unstructured

        vii. Transparent

        viii. Diffuse

        ix. Strongly institutionalized

        x. Clear distribution of roles and responsibilities

        xi. Vague

        xii. Ideologized

        xiii. Softly institutionalized

        xiv. Contradictory

        xv. Uneven

    b. Is the policymaking process an open one? Are there in place clear consultation and participation mechanisms? (of stakeholders, of beneficiaries, of civil society etc.)

c. Is policymaking process rather technical – professional job of the experts in the field, or is it also a matter of public debate and consultation?

9. *What are the tools preferred by the policymakers to ensure strategic steering and good governance of educational system? (circle the options of the respondent)*

> Issuing regulations, legislation,
> Financial incentives and disincentives
> Professional development and training
> Setting standards and benchmarks
> Targeted / problem oriented projects
> Creating institutions, commissions, working groups
> Consultation and public debate
> Others, namely……..

10. *If you would be in the position to improve the policymaking process in education what would you do? (2-3 fundamental measures).*