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The Necessity of a Pedagogical Reform in the Pre-university Education in Romania

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Abstract

The study analyzes the application context of the set of reforms in the pre-university education cycle in Romania, during the post-anti-communist revolution period of 1989. The paper underlines certain successful achievements but also some critical aspects which shape new development perspectives for the future. The bottom line of the paper is represented by the some coordinates of an authentic pedagogical reform. This reform is achieved in the classroom and the other components of the reform become strategic elements of a pupil-oriented range of action. There is also a need to operate a clear-cut distinction between the mission of the compulsory preuniversity education and that of the non-compulsory pre-university education.

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1. The necessity of pedagogical reforms nowadays

The modern period fostered the idea that society reformation can be done through educational reforms. Generally speaking the reform concept had been associated with those fundamental changes capable of improving the existing situation, at the accepted social level.

Particularly, the idea of reform had been received differently at different historical moments.

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Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the educational reforms had been increasingly associated with the idea of directing the educational effort for the benefit of the child. At the beginning of the XX-th century this orientation opens a wide area of preoccupations which starts with Maria Montessori's pedagogical concepts. She spoke about the social and also about the humanist goals of education: it is all about how to meet the needs of the child through education.

Nowadays, in a world which is permanently on the run and in which future becomes utterly uncertain (Barnett, R., 2004a), educational tasks multiply. Under new circumstances, politicians, economists and teachers ask themselves ; *Which is the best organizational form in education to prepare an individual for lifelong learning so that he should stay permanently integrated/adapted and the society should use his potential to the utmost?!*

The answer to these questions is not simple. The challenges in the educational system are so numerous that we run the risk of losing ourselves between the different educational alternatives and the risk of attenuating the capacity of correct assignment of priorities. Consequently, some few limit the educational reform to introducing the computer and technology in the classroom.

Such errors can be possible given the fact that- as it has already been mentioned- the reform concept itself is ambiguous and the process as such has distinct approaches in different contexts and countries.

That is why, oscillating among different interrogations, we can ask ourselves: which is the fundamental goal of any reform in the educational system in the ultimate analysis?

2. The meaning of the educational reform concept in Romania

Reforms had been implemented continuously in the Romanian educational system during the period following the anti-communist revolution from December 1989.

Each of the 19 ministers who floated at the Ministry of Education wished to operate fundamental changes in the system, considering that something essential should be still replaced or improved.

By reason of too many changes, teachers, pupils and parents complain about a general state of stress and discontent.

Despite these reactions, it is worth mentioning that for the most part, the intentions behind these reforms were creditable. Through the use of European or own funds financing, the governing units and the most important academic and administrative structures from the educational system tried to solve many real problems Romanian education confronts with.

It is obvious that the reform process itself deserves a deep and critical analysis. Such analysis does not specially apply only in case of the reforms in the Romanian educational system. Periodical revisions and optimizations under way belong to the spirit of the reform itself.

It is important to mention that Romania had further reasons to launch a serious reform process in the educational system in the postrevolutionary period when school felt an acute need of liberalization. Education sciences had been politically abused during the communist period through the eradication of the university qualifications, which explains the increased interest for the rediscovery of pedagogy and, especially, for the introduction of innovative practices in the school environment.

Many promoters of educational changes began to appear in Romania- a desirable and predictable phenomenon.

One of the most important reformers of the educational system from the post-revolutionary period – Minister Andrei Marga - launched a complex national programme named *Educational Reform Now* (1998) to advert to certain stringencies and priorities.

The main components of the reform which followed are:

- a. The reform of the educational system in Romania had been announced from the beginning as a global reform and as a pedagogical concept reform. The reform was absolutely necessary under the new circumstances, since the whole social system passed from the communist type organization to a flexible, liberal organization which advocated school adaptation to the pupil.
- b. The administrative (structures) reform had in view the creation of a flexible territorial network which was meant to ensure a convenient implementation of the new educational policies.
- c. The managerial reform – a necessary component for the professionalization of school management. The managerial reform is still in progress.
- d. The reform in the field of the teaching staff training. Started immediately after the anti-communist

revolution, this reform accentuated after 2000, having as major goal the professionalization of the didactic career. Unfortunately, after some remarkable achievements, this component of the reform is at a dead end due to the delays in adopting a clear resolution as concerns the initial training of the middle and high school teachers. The initial training process of the preschool and primary teacher is much better clarified.

- e. The curricular reform - was given a special interest. Devised to change things in the classroom essentially, this reform is still in progress, arousing most controversies in the field. As a matter of fact, it is this component of the reform programme which has the most considerable impact on pupils.
- f. The reform of didactic methodologies – targets the revision of the methods used in the teaching and learning processes, laying the emphasis on the interactions which facilitate learning and the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the pupil.
- g. The reform in the evaluation of academic results – can be considered a separate component of the above-mentioned one, since it had been the object of distinct approaches within the reform programme. On this occasion, the evaluation forms, the evaluation criteria and even the significance of the process had been revised.

3. The reform of Romanian educational system – short critical analysis

Numerous studies developed during the recent years underlined a series of failures in the educational reform programme which mainly reflect in the classroom.

A part of these failures are due to the delay in applying certain important strategic orientations. As an example, although the transition from an objective-based school curriculum to a competence-based curriculum had been proposed as early as 2006, the first resolute steps were taken starting with 2009.

Professor Chiş, V., (2008) noticed the fact that: the reform process here, although divided, but substantiated in conception, is not achieved with sufficient consistency in the field, due to the lack of articulation between the educational paradigms and the practical undertakings.

Most drawbacks are created by the fact that teachers did not receive the necessary training in order to become authentic agents of change. Researches based on group- focus and classroom examination underline the difference between the teachers' declarative knowledge and their current practices (ISE, 2010, p.35).

Although teachers assimilated the new pedagogical theories, their behavior in the classroom remained – in many respects - unchanged. They know how *to recite* taxonomies and advantages of didactic strategies, they build group activities and learning units plans for demonstrative lessons and inspections, but their approach remains preponderantly traditional in the class reality" (ISE, 2010.p.33).

In recent years teachers became aware of the fact that pupils' learning success is appreciated on the basis of certain criteria which are not relevant for learning itself. There is an exaggerated preoccupation in the system for the rate of success, at the selections for the next educational level, while the indicators concerning pupils' satisfaction in learning, the learning motivations, the learning awareness process, the manner in which pupils intercept the utility of learning do not appear overly in the teacher usual working instruments.

The study carried out by The Romanian Academic Society reveals the fact that, presently, Romania does not have a system of direct connection between educational results at school level, reflected in the pupils' real competences and de facto organization of schools. Consequently, an adequate instrument which would intercept pupils' real degree of progress level in the classroom as a result of the supplied educational services is felt as ...absolutely necessary (SAR, 2013, pp 4-5).

The same study notices that many of these deficiencies are due to the fact that the system of ensuring quality in the pre-university educational system (grades 1 – 8) is tributary to centralism and meets pupils' needs remotely.

Teachers are asked to elaborate too many *papers* to demonstrate the preoccupation for the improvement of quality in education but the papers analyzed at school inspections reflect the teacher's real performance or the real results obtained in the activities with pupils unsatisfactorily.

That is why, the data should be collected directly from pupils and parents (SAR, 2013, p.4)

4. Coordinates for a pedagogical reform in the pre-university education

All critical opinions on the educational system lead to the idea that a real pedagogical reform is absolutely necessary. Definitely, such a reform is difficult to build and especially difficult to implement. The classroom should become a real learning laboratory where didactic methodologies are continuously revised, experienced and improved. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that The Institute of Education Sciences made some attempts to stimulate pedagogical reforms which led to good results.

Some of the studies elaborated by this institution did not analyze only fact finding, diagnosed aspects but were followed by training programmes where teachers could test new methods and teaching-learning-evaluation techniques (The learning style and pupils' temperament –instruments for a creative education, 2012)

However, such sequential, sporadic successes do not solve the root of the matter. *The root issues* should be re-analyzed.

If the pedagogical reform runs slow, this is due to the lack of a unitary conception on such a programme dedicated mainly to pupils which resulted sometimes in discrepancies, disagreements and inconsistencies.

We appreciate that the main coordinates of a pedagogical reform in the real sense of the concept are:

- *Restructuring the content of teacher's behaviour.* The teacher should become the promoter of psychopedagogical strategies with great impact over pupils, whose efficiency must be checked continuously. In order to reach the stage of implementing such strategies, teachers must be integrated in training programmes which should develop not in the university or other suppliers of training spaces but just in the classroom. The abilities of organizing the didactic process in a constructivist and pyramidal manner can be demonstrated only in the school environment; this will allow pupils to be aware of their own progress in learning. The so-called teacher-effect (Nye, B., Konstantopoulos, S., Hedges, V.L., 2004) represents a reality.
- *Restructuring the content of pupils' behaviour in the classroom.* Pupils should be taught not only how to learn – idea launched by the UNESCO programmes - but also how to assume learning on their's own. The indicator of authentic learning is the learning which supports itself.
- *Restructuring the content of the relation teacher-pupil, pupil-pupil and the relation of the pupil with himself.* The issue of the interpersonal relations system in the school environment, as well as of the intrapersonal ones –as a result of a specific education - continues to preoccupate the specialists. A specific reform will have to create soon a functional reality.
- *Restructuring the organizational and developmental manner of the didactic process.* Certainly, we do not refer to formal aspects. In school, sometimes, the interactive strategies are only *simulated*, and it will take time until pedagogical intervention becomes an interactionist and personalized approach concomitantly which will valorize the potential of each individual.

Starting from this last appreciation, we propose some reflections on the significance of the pre-university education. We consider that, even if the scope of the pre-university education is unitary and assumed by the profile institutions, it is useful to distinguish between the mission of the compulsory and non-compulsory educational types:

Table 1. Comparison between the mission of compulsory and non-compulsory education

Compulsory education	Non-compulsory education
Promotion of specific methodologies for a strongly differentiated education (arguments: compulsory education is <i>an education for all</i> ; school population is not selected)	Prominent emphasis on performance aspects of learning
Special emphasis on the quality of interpersonal relations interpersonale	Main emphasis on specialized contents of learning
Emphasis on pupils' personal development	Increased preoccupation for pupils' educational and professional orientation

The differences between the mission of the two strategic components of the pre-university education lead to the necessity of a relatively distinct pedagogical approaches. Basically, certain priorities should be pointed out:

- a. The compulsory education should lay the emphasis on the personal development of the pupil/young person; this base will further “build” his personality as a conscious individual, capable of acting efficiently and independently;
- b. The non-compulsory education (high school, post high-school, vocational) should lay the emphasis on the pupil’s training for the active life, without neglecting the aspects connected to personal development

The two components are successive and complementary sequences of a unitary process which trains the pupil/child for long-life learning.

Conclusions

The reforms in the educational systems constitute a world concern within the current context in which the learning results are subject to comparability (TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS evaluations).

Such contexts show the authentic results of academic education which are as a matter of fact the results of the pedagogical reform.

Other educators spoke about the necessity of such a reform, too. Ronald Barnett, for example, called for an ‘ontological turn’ in curriculum and pedagogy away from a primary focus on knowledge and skills to ‘pedagogy for human being’ (2004a).

It is the reason for which we consider that any educational system needs relevant pedagogical indicators to analyze the efficiency of the system, efficiency understood from the perspective of pupils’ individual development ensured through education. When the educable develop individually, they can adapt later to face some qualification needs required by society at a certain moment.

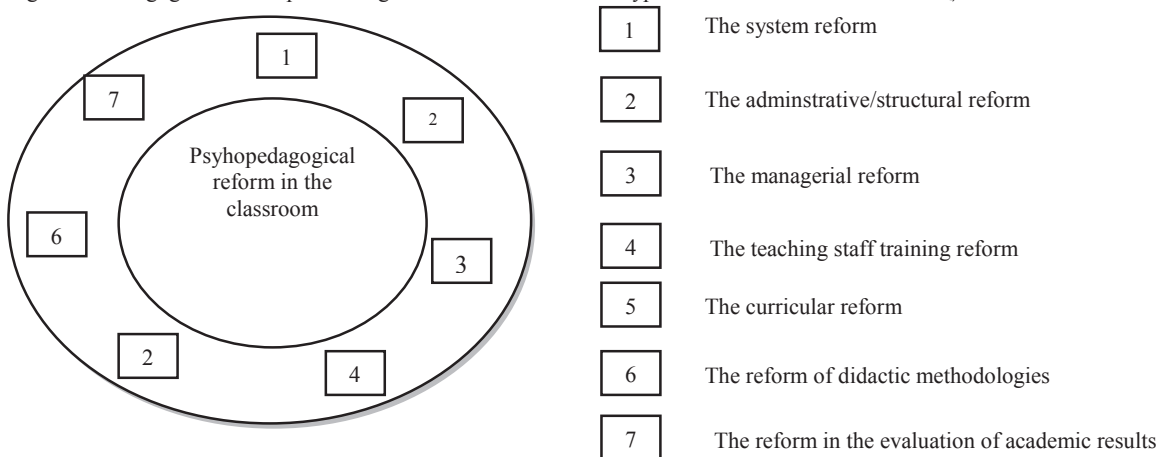
Generally speaking, the usual practices which analyze the efficiency of the educational system operate with statistical information, in terms of entries (resources) and exits (results) – as economic indicators which can and have to justify the investment in education.

On the other side, school uses as an indicator of pupils’ success in learning *the admission rate to the superior levels of education* or *the absorption index on the labour market*.

Certainly, these are relevant indicators for the efficiency of the educational system. What we all want to underline is the necessity of integrating truly significant indicators for the pupils’ real learning success within these systems of analyzing educational quality and efficiency. In this regard, a real educational reform is the reform which modifies consciences and, correlatively, modifies the behaviours of those involved in the educational process: teachers and pupils.

Within these reasonable arguments, the pedagogical reform should be both the premise and the final target of any other types of reforms:

Figure 1. Pedagogical reform positioning in relation with the other types of reform in the educational system:



If determinations do not function in this formula, the other types of reforms become form without content. They propose simple changes for the sake of change.

Certainly, it is recommendable that after graduation, young people should enter the labour market. But, other problems appear along with their integration in the professional environment: did they get the competences the society needs during the academic years? Are they capable of assuming self-learning in order to cope with a professional dynamics which manifest ceaselessly?

Taking into account these questions, the education system must clarify some issues: Who are the real winners of the extensive reform movement and who are the losers? In the context of so many new paradigms of change, where is the student placed?! *Do we need, really, an educational reform or not?!*

It is certain that reforms are necessary and we all want a quality in education for our children and youngsters. We should start from them and return to them anytime.

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