

REFORMAND STRATEGY IN ROMANIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract:

In the last 26 years, Romania has been strongly affected by the changes that occurred in the political area, and even more in the social, economic, cultural, and educational conditions. The education system lies at the basis of the personal and professional training and development of all members of a community. Making the human resources responsible and involved in the organisation and management of educational activities is a premise of enhanced performance compared to the one recorded until now. The purpose of this article is to point out the lack of coherence and continuity of the educational policies in the Romanian education system and the absence of a strategic approach to education in Romania. We wish to stress the importance of the key factor– the school manager–in enhancing the quality of system processes. The used methodology is based in a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the documents that exist on the official pages of the various control bodies in Romania: MECS (the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research), ISE (the Institute for Educational Sciences), CNEE (the National Centre for Examination and Evaluation), and ARACIP (the Romanian Quality Assurance Agency in Undergraduate Education). The analysed period refers to the years between 2000 and 2015. We have focused on planning documents that prove the political decision-makers' concern with the well-functioning and development of the Romanian undergraduate educational system. We have also used data informally obtained from the current practice of undergraduate teachers. It is necessary for schools' management to become strategic and to allow increasing the quality of educational services and the performance of the educational system.

Keywords: education, strategy, strategic management, legislation, public policies

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last 26 years, Romania has been strongly affected by the changes that occurred in the political area, and even more in the social, economic, cultural, and educational context. During this period, efforts have been made to insure a democratic state, which would respect, defend, and protect the interests of its citizens. Romania's joining the European Union is still a process that cannot be considered completed. The pre-admission period has been difficult. Once completed, it was expected for things to become normal, European, after its integration. Unfortunately we can still notice significant discrepancies in all the sectors of social, economic, and political life. The population's dissatisfaction becomes ever more visible, together with the need for real and thorough change, long expected but much delayed. The education system lies at the basis of the personal and professional training and development of all members of a community and of human society. We can say that if at present society, through all its members, expresses all these claims for change, Romania's educational system has generally performed in a faulty manner. On the other hand, at a political and social level, it is unanimously proclaimed that "education is a national priority". Messages such as that of Edmund Burke: "Education is the cheapest defence of a nation" strongly suggest the way to follow with regards to the future of any nation, implicitly Romania's.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article presents a short analysis of the legislative changes that affected the undergraduate educational system in Romania, starting from 1997.

We have used data made available on the Romanian websites of MECS (the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research), ISE (the Institute of Educational Sciences), CNEE (the National Centre for Examination and Evaluation) and ARACIP (the Romanian Agency for Quality in Undergraduate Education). The period covered by this analysis was between the years 2000-2015. The study focused on planning documents that prove the concern of political decision makers with the good functioning and with the development of the Romania's undergraduate educational system. We have also used data informally obtained from the current practice of the teachers in the undergraduate education system.

The legislative changes have determined to some extent the reform of the system. They have often caused tensions and disorientation both for the direct and indirect beneficiaries, as well as for the staff involved in the system. Imposing these changes without previous consultation and acceptance of the stakeholders generates passive attitudes and a lack of motivation of the staff, a lack of trust shown by the beneficiaries, in the quality and competence of the workers in the system, and is especially reflected in the results obtained at the end of the cycle, at undergraduate level as well as at university level. Challenges are even more important since, in a globalised society, changes of paradigm can be seen in several directions and especially in education. The rush for quantity to the detriment of quality, modifications of the values accepted in modern world, uncertainty, the lack of predictability as well as the high pressure exerted by the new technologies that society must face, all require with expedience the adequacy of the educational system, its reform and modernisation. In Romania, this reform is spoken of for over 20 years. Many political decision makers of the highest level (in 25 years, the relevant ministry has had 20 ministers) have announced reforms of the educational system that would generate the much expected changes. In reality however, things occurred completely differently. Although changes of the system have been initiated, they have not been supported by thorough analyses and diagnoses. Often, the suggested modifications have been "imported" without taking into account the need to adapt them to the specificity of the Romanian context, without analysing the effects caused where they have been applied, and especially without predicting the impact that they had on the beneficiaries and on the system in general.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The creation of the SAM (art and craft schools) is an example of incoherent policy that lacks long-term vision of the responsible decision-makers of the system. These have appeared by abolishing professional schools, following an Italian model, although in Italy this system has been dropped precisely because of the lack of positive results. The students of these schools insufficient professional training, lacking the competences pompously presented in the Professional Training Standards. Many of these students have left school and fled the country in order to work as unqualified workers in

developed countries of the European Union. Those who chose to "progressively" continue their studies had the chance to graduate from a high school (level three in the professional classification) and to pass the baccalaureate exam. These are the generations which, in 2011, when cameras were installed for the written tests of the baccalaureate exam, had the lowest success percentage in the last 20 years.

Graduating is not the only problem, but even sitting for the baccalaureate exam is a major difficulty for many high school graduates in Romania. The analyses performed by the Institute of Educational Sciences indicate that, starting with the academic year 2009-2010, the degree of participation of high school graduates from the current year to the baccalaureate exam recorded a constant drop. Thus, from 98.1%, in 2008-2009, the percentage dropped to 79.9% in 2012-2013, according to the data provided by INS (National Institute of Statistics) for 2009-2014. In what concerns the results of high school graduates to the baccalaureate exam, they also show a drop in the success rate, from 63.4% in 2009-2010 to 44.6% in 2012-2013 (MECS, 2015b). The baccalaureate exam is considered difficult, all the more so since control measures during written tests have intensified. A raise could be noticed for the baccalaureate exam success rate starting with the school year 2013-2014, determined by a significant reduction of the degree of difficulty of the exam subjects. The situation is apparently positive, since the success rate rose from 58.1% (2013) to 62.3% (2014), respectively from 64.3% (2013) to 71% (2014) for graduates of the current years. The analyses performed by ISE reveal that this rise is artificial, based on the high weight of the students who choose not to register for the baccalaureate exam - "self-exclusion either by delaying taking the exam or by giving up altogether" (Apostu, 2015). For 2014, data analysis shows that in almost all regions (except for five), the success rate for the baccalaureate exam increased. What is never the less alarming is the situation concerning professional and technical education. If in theoretical, respectively vocational high schools the success rate is 79.6%, respectively 73%, for technological high schools the percentage is much lower, of 41.7% or the school year 2012-2013.

Since 1995 until now, *the law of education* suffered over 60 modifications concerning the structure of national exams, admission to a higher education cycle, the length of compulsory schooling, and the organisation and functioning of educational units. In what follows, we mention the issues with the reforms implemented in undergraduate education.

3.1 Main modifications suggested within education reforms, for the period between 1997 until present

The changes suggested in school units concern the five main functional fields: *curriculum, material resources, human resources, community relations, and management*. A careful analysis of the education system points out several differences between what was initially suggested through the announced reforms and what was actually accomplished. In what follows, we detail such discrepancies.

Suggested changes: Modification of the school curricula; designing manuals and auxiliary materials. Drawing manuals and auxiliary materials (new subjects, optional subjects). Focusing the activities on the student. The teacher—from knowledge source to trainer, mentor, organiser of learning activities. Introducing interactive methods, with an accent on training. Evaluation for training purposes. Designing: performance educational standards; professional training standards; professional training standards. Diversifying the educational offer; increasing the number of professional qualifications for professional and technical education. Developing the information technology sector: introducing and using educational resources using new technologies; insuring information flow. Facilitating the access of teachers and students to educational resources. Changing the teachers' mentality and attitudes; accepting and promoting new learning paradigms. Developing a culture of quality and excellence. Involving the parents and community representatives; collaborating with non-governmental organisations. Enhancing non-formal education. Diversifying the offer of extra-curricular activities. Opportunities for partnerships at a local, county, regional, European, and international level. Strategic approaches (vision, mission, strategic targets), operational approaches (plans, procedures, resources), and administrative approaches (current functioning) of the management of the school organisation. Introducing the internal and external quality management system in the school organisation.

Actual status: 1997-the modification of the curricula starts, not finalised until now. Performance standards for the first cycle (2003) poorly used (MECT,2008). Evaluation standards date from 2003, only apply to grades 4, 8, and 12. New specialties but the educational offer is less adapted to the needs of the labour market and of the community. Lack of transparency concerning the schools' functioning. Lack of coherence between external and internal evaluations ("equipment is not a concern of school units... but almost 90% of the schools consider equipment to be "average" or "sufficient"" (only 8.4% of the schools consider that their equipment is "insufficient")(Iosifescu,2012). Restructuring of the school network(2010-2011) has not generated any increase in the quality of education. External evaluations have shown the need for schools with no raise of service quality to benefit from "additional and support resources" in order to meet the quality indicators stipulated in performance standards."The teachers' quality remains a problem for the whole educational system" (Iosifescu,2012). Lack of qualified teachers; high turn over (30-40% per year). About 25% of the teachers commute. Lack of scientific research skills."The culture of quality" is not sufficiently developed, "especially in a poor, politically confused, low-status society"(Iosifescu,2012). Parents' associations are generally visible in schools in better developed regions. They do not function in schools in areas where parents live abroad or with a low education level. Non-formal education has gained a well-delimited status. "The culture of partnerships" extended in most schools (collaboration with NGOs). European partnerships, through programmes such as LifeLongLearning, brought significant added value for the teachers and youngsters involved. Activities planned based on the IDP (institutional development plan)/SAP (school action plan), theoretically in agreement with PLAI (local action plan for the development of professional and technical education) and PRAI (local action plan for the development of professional and technical education).The educational offer of schools is mainly correlated with the human resources(teachers) and less with the real training needs. In many cases, the strategic planning documents of the school are formal, they meet generalised requests, not correlated with the analyses and diagnoses specific to the school unit (SWOT, PEST, etc.).The internal quality management system of school organisations often works in a faulty manner. We can notice "an interest for obtaining "positive papers" rather than for substantial appreciations" (Iosifescu,2012). Malfunctions also exist in relation to the Ministry of Education, which "provided no feedback to the ARACIP notification on the first series of 63 undergraduate education units that have been found not to fulfil the accreditation standards, as minimum standards for functioning" (Iosifescu,2012). Paradigm changes take place over time, depend on the human resources involved and on the available material resources; it is a process difficult to implement, not at all generalised, but rather declarative.

3.2 Policies and strategies in the field of education

A "culture of quality implies strategic thinking and taking responsibility" (Iosifescu,2012). The Institute of Educational Sciences, analysing the public liability systems in the administration of undergraduate education, mentions: "The strategies and policies applied in the field of education have shown to lack coherence, especially the coherence between purpose and means" (Măntălușă,2007). Within the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, there functions a Unit for public strategies and policies (USPP). Some of its main objectives are: "Implementing the strategic planning system at the level of M.E.S.R.". Strategic planning is based on the analysis of previous results and on a diagnosis of the status at a certain moment. The concern to perform such analyses is visible in the "Reporting" and "Policy documents" sections of USPP, where the following documents are included, with the mention of the year of their publication on the portal (Website of the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research: www.edu.ro).

The 15 year period since the start of the educational reform until present is characterised, from the perspective of the strategic management approach at the highest level of the education system, by the uneven frequency of the strategic documents(2006,2011,2013 with 1 document per year, no issue for 2012, and 2005 is the year with the most publications). We can notice an inconsistency of the type of documents drawn. If some of them are published as activity reports on the status of the education system (2003, 2005, 2006), others refer to reforms that have been implemented into the system (2003, 2004). Most documents contain the word "strategy" in their title (2001, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2013, 2015), thus suggesting the concern of the responsible persons in the Ministry of Education with designing specific activities on the medium and long term. This is even more obvious starting from 2015, when 3 strategies are published, which aim important education fields, from life-long learning to limiting school drop-out, respectively the organisation of tertiary education in Romania. The pressure exerted by European collaboration, monitoring, and control organisms had

effects reflected in the publication of these documents, which show careful scientific support, thorough prior research, and sources in specific European documents. We can also notice the high degree of objectivity of the writers, as they prove themselves: "A consolidated collaboration between educational and youth policies is required for a more coherent approach, which would facilitate drawing efficient governmental policies in reducing SDO (early school drop-out). Also, a coordinated governmental answer is required from MECS (the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research), MMFPSPV (the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly) and MS (the Ministry of Health) in the field of Care and Early Education for Children."(Măntălușă,2007).Comparisons with other states with similar experiences are positive, since in a globalised society, the exchange of best practices and their adaptation to concrete conditions is an asset that needs to be capitalised upon. An example in this respect is "The strategy for limiting early school drop-out", which aims at cross-department collaboration and cooperation, following the Whole of Government model (WoG), "integrating governmental" approaches - already adopted in other countries, including the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and Singapore. (MECS,2015a).

4. CONCLUSIONS

At the level of the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, things are not clear-cut. A work is in progress on reforms and surface strategies, but detailed and systematic analyses are lacking, as well as transparency and a good circulation of information within the ministry, from the ministry to subordinated units (school inspectorates, school units) and, highly important, to the general public. Design and organisation documents specific to the field of education are drawn, they are often "imported" with no prior adaptation to the concrete conditions in the social, economic, and cultural environment of Romania. Their transmission throughout the country, to school inspectorates and then to schools themselves, amplifies uncertainty and incompliances. The result is just "forms with no foundation" that often benchmark the management activities in school units. ISE researchers, analysing the policies and practices in the field of Romanian school management, concluded that the performance of the present system is also low because of the direct transition from the career of teacher to director, with no prior training for this position (Blendea, 2014). This training could be insured by school directors with management experience, with good results in their management activity, and who could thus transmit knowledge and best practices in the field. They could become mentors within a mentorship programme in order to render the school director position more professional. This idea is all the most relevant since it is supported by studies performed in economically developed countries, with education systems renown for the performance obtained in the field of education, such as Great Britain and the USA. On the other hand, a recent research from 2015, performed by representatives of four great universities of the world (Stanford University, Cambridge University, Harvard University, and London School of Economics), proved that there is a tight connection between high quality management and improved educational results. This also supports and stresses the idea that autonomous schools have better management results than public or even private schools. The main difference is the fact that the school manager is the one in charge with its management and leadership (Bloom,2015).Success policies in this field were the ones that promoted autonomous schools, that activate in a decentralised system, where all actors (teachers, students, parents, community representatives) are made responsible and are together involved in decision making. Only through strategic policies and practices promoted at the highest level and then transmitted to the lower levels in school units, can the strategic targets pointed at in the 2020 European documents be achieved.

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