

Edu World 2016
7th International Conference

**THE DYSFUNCTIONAL PARADIGMS OF ROMANIAN
EDUCATION**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify dysfunctional paradigms that supported the explosive expansion of inefficiency, moral degradation and corruption throughout the whole Romanian education system.

Critical analysis has been used to i) relate current hypotheses about dysfunctional paradigms to other paradigms that have been mentioned in various international and domestic scientific papers, books and reports and ii) to assess and predict impact of current dysfunctional paradigms on the state of Romanian education.

Only a limited number of dysfunctional paradigms have been identified, described and assessed: The Quality Paradigm, The Abstract Thinking Superiority Paradigm, The External Locus of Control Paradigm, The Acceleration Paradigm, and The Stupid Teacher Paradigm. Just like factors that lower the immunity of organisms, dysfunctional paradigms compromise the ability of the education systems to fight off corruption, abuse and bad management, lack of empathy, solidarity and respect. Conclusions are being formulated about the need to replace the dysfunctional paradigms.

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Keywords: Education paradigms; dysfunctional paradigm; quality of education.

1. Introduction

The current state of Romanian education is extremely disappointing: School dropout and illiteracy are on the rise, success rates at national examinations collapsed, results at international tests like PISA are far below expectations, Romanian students are among the most unhappy in the world, teacher salaries are about a quarter of those of Turkish teachers, Romanian universities go down in international classifications, less than 22% of adults in the 30-34 age group are higher education graduates. On the

other hand we still read statements from prominent education gurus that Romania has too many universities and too many students.

We have for quite some time explored various alternative hypotheses about factors that may explain the lack of progress to a better state of domestic education. Finally, the dysfunctional paradigms hypothesis presented itself as the most promising.

2. Paradigms in Education: The Dysfunctional Paradigms Hypothesis

When examining the various definitions of paradigms in psychology and education, from the pioneering volume by Thomas Kuhn (1999), going through reputed dictionaries (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2016), charismatic personalities like Sir Ken Robinson, (2013), reputed experts like Robert Barr and John Tagg (1995), prestigious organizations like Gordon Commission (Gordon, Gordon, Aber and Berliner, 2013) up to domestic contributions from Claudia Rusu (2014), Maria Borsan (2014) or Violeta-Maria Caragea (2011), one finds expressed in various forms the idea of a set of implicit presuppositions that are not meant to be scrutinised. We find equivalents of this idea in other domains.

In mathematics, classical philosophy or modern logic we find *the axiom*.

In politics we find the *political correctness*, which plaid such an important role in the last US presidential campaign.

In counselling and psychotherapy we find the "*personal rules*" of Richard Nelson-Jones (Nelson-Jones, 1993, 1995) or the "*beliefs*" of Albert Ellis (Ellis, 1962).

However, there is one important difference.

Regarding the education paradigms, we identify the underlying idea that every new paradigm is either *better* than the old one (ones), or *more adequate* to the current social, professional or scientific context. The Industrial revolution paradigm was replaced by the Divergent thinking paradigm (Robinson, 2013); the Instruction paradigm is being replaced by the Learning paradigm (Bar and Tagg, 1995, Borşan, 2014), or by Intellectual competence paradigm (Gordon, Gordon, Aber and Berliner, 2013).

On the other hand, we notice that *personal rules* can be realistic or unrealistic or that *beliefs* can be rational or irrational. Also, we observe that politically correct ideas can be fiercely contested (Trump, 2016).

This prompted us to generate the *Dysfunctional paradigms hypothesis*: It is possible that one or more dysfunctional paradigms may become dominant in a particular education system and block, disrupt or derail well intended attempts to optimise it.

This indeed seems to be the case for the Romanian education system, where an endless chain of „reforms” only produced a continuous deterioration. Usually, the lack of success in reforming the system was blamed on teachers (see the interview from 2014 of ex Minister of Education Professor Miclea) or even on students (Ziare.com, 2014).

3. Dysfunctional Paradigms Identified and Explained

3.1. The Quality Paradigm

The current Law for Quality in Education was passed by Romanian Parliament in 2006 (Parlamentul României, 2006). The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) has been established within one month after the law being passed. The methodology for external evaluation, including standards, standards of reference and performance indicators was also published in 2006, in both Romanian and English (ARACIS, 2006). A similar track was followed by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education (ARACIP). ARACIS started conducting quality assessment sessions beginning with the 2006-2007 academic year. There was at the time and there still is no evidence of any scientific study to prove that meeting the standards and performance indicators was conducive to a better quality.

The *Quality paradigm* has been gradually forced upon the system under the assumption that quality is essentially about standardisation and uniformity, rather than about creativity and diversity. Quality of educations means meeting the standards and performance indicators formulated by the external evaluation agencies. The education institution is the sole responsible for providing quality (ARACIS, 2006). The funding of education or the legislative framework provided by the government are not taken into account. Written documentation is the main type of evidence of quality that is expected from education institutions. Apart from preparing documents for external quality assurance agencies, institutions may develop parallel documentation systems (Universitatea Spiru Haret, 2015).

We have already shown a long list of issues associated the Quality paradigm (Lisievici, 2009; Lisievici, 2011; Lisievici, 2013; Lisievici, 2014). The quality assurance system was designed using faulty constructs for both education and quality of education. It favours control versus support, uniformity versus diversity, centralization versus academic freedom. It diverts large financial, human and time resources from teaching, scientific activity and research. Instead of promoting an "evaluation culture", it generated a culture of preparing documentations and reports and rigging procedures for better scoring. It does not provide support that would be instrumental in meeting the demands it formulates. It diminishes capability of education institutions to respond to identified training and research needs.

The content of teaching activity changed, an ever larger proportion of time being allocated to writing documentations and reports for quality assessment agencies. There are indications that such components may occupy up to 60% of job related time (Lisievici&Ticușan&Todor, 2013). This situation has also been pointed out by international experts that visited Romania, like the Counsellor for Education of the Finnish President (Kangaslahti, 2016). He noted that Romanian teachers, instead of facilitating student learning, have to write reports and accomplish other various bureaucratic tasks. Activity content changes led to a diminished attractiveness of teaching profession (Lisievici&Ticușan&Todor, 2013).

We have also pointed out that the current quality paradigm contributed to the degradation of academic climate, by allowing conflicting interests of competing institutions or individuals to influence assessment judgements, by restricting capability of managers to function as models for younger members of faculty, by encouraging dishonest strategies to boost scientific productivity or by discouraging cooperation and communication between competing universities, departments or faculty members.

Finally, the quality paradigm completely disregards the needs of education providers ("the forgotten side of quality", Lisievici, 2014).

The quality paradigm ended up in justifying the continuity of existence for bureaucratic structures and also, in providing a solid source of power and income for a group of education "elites".

3.2. The Abstract Thinking Superiority Paradigm

In April 2016 we ran an internet search, in Romanian, for "fabrica de genii (genius factory)". We got 13,600 hits. A typical hit was about an "excellence" centre, club, system or foundation for *gifted students*, that has been recently established or has been successfully working for some time. Another typical hit was about an individual teacher, usually called "trainer" or "manufacturer" of geniuses.

In both cases, the institutional or individual focus was on *mathematics or informatics*. The search results were consistent with public discourse promoted by mainstream media.

It is interesting to note that a similar search carried out in English returned a much smaller number of hits, a typical hit being about recruiting Nobel Prize winners or other remarkable individuals as donors for a sperm bank.

Putting together the information provided by the internet search we conclude that in Romania, the public discourse on education claims that genius can be manufactured or trained, that the genius production technology consists of studying Mathematics and/or Informatics up to an excellence level, that the main quality of a genius is a very high level of development of abstract thinking.

We have therefore compiled the *Abstract thinking superiority paradigm*: Out of all the possible types of thinking or intelligence (see for example the nine types of intelligence identified by Garner - Gardner, 1993), the abstract thinking or the logical-mathematical intelligence is superior to any other. Mathematics and Informatics are the main curriculum components instrumental in developing abstract thinking. The highest priority of Romanian education is to develop abstract thinking beginning with preschool and primary cycles.

The consequences of this paradigm being used are multiple and easily observable: The special status of Mathematics and Informatics subject matters among the rest; the special status of teachers for these two subject matters; the curriculum time allocation for the two subject matters; the "enormous" volume of homework that students have to prepare, that was noted even by the current Minister of Education, Professor Mircea Dumitru (Minister of Education, 2016); the ever-growing volume of private tuition needed for students to cope with learning tasks and homework volume; the "theory oriented education", that generates not only continuous complains from employers, but also criticism from foreign experts (Hinkley, 2016).

Last but not least, the parents became fascinated by the paradigm and instead of associating to protect the mental health of their children, are asking for more mathematics and informatics.

3.3. The External Locus of Control Paradigm

We have found a very relevant quote from a highly reputed Romanian education expert: "Since universities depended on ARACIS for their legal survival, they formally complied with external requirements for quality assurance without necessarily developing systems of their own" (Vlăsceanu et al. 2011, p. 25, translation in Geven et al., 2015, p. 45). Thus, the legal survival of a university does not depend on the satisfaction of the students, the reputation of the faculty members, ability to identify and diversify funding sources, academic climate etc.

The *External locus of control paradigm* states that neither universities nor any other education institution or education staff member should entertain the idea that they are autonomous. Instead, external entities should have the final say on what programs of study they are allowed to offer, what people should they hire, what academic titles they should distribute and to whom, how many students they should enrol, what is the value of the diplomas and how many they are allowed to issue, how much money they are supposed to spend and on what. In order to stress the position of the locus of control, the external entities will frequently request reports, statistics and various other documentations. These will be used as means to generate culpability and submission, as the complicate and ambiguous requests will create opportunities to express criticism or to reject reports and ask for new versions.

The external locus of control paradigm will also act as a subtle incentive for corruption: Sooner or later, the idea to appease the external controllers will appear and generate expected and interesting consequences.

3.4. The Acceleration Paradigm

Back in 2001, a friend of mine published a book (Negreț-Dobridor, 2001) that rationalized a paradigm already incognito roaming the Romanian education system. The *Acceleration paradigm* suggests that the cognitive development of humans can be accelerated to such an extent that first graders can be exposed to learning situations involving abstract thinking, and also, that learning results involving abstract thinking can be expected from all students, years before the traditional limits of the "formal thinking stage" as defined by Piaget.

There are a couple of arguments currently used to rationalize the *Acceleration paradigm*: a) the "children of our friends" argument ("I have friends whose children can cope with learning tasks involving abstract thinking"); b) the "my students" argument ("I have second grade students who can cope with learning tasks involving abstract thinking"); the "performance argument" ("The future of the country needs an education designed for gifted students or elites, abstract thinking and high performance oriented").

The consequences of the paradigm acceptance and propagation include a) *Cognitive overload* (volume and complexity of learning tasks and assignments is frequently above the level of cognitive development of students); *Negative emotions overload* (frequent exposure of students to anxiety, culpability and frustration as a result of cognitive overload); *Protective inhibition* (students disengage from trying to meet the school requirements and drastically reduce the value they attach to school and learning); *Students rejecting the values promoted by the adult world*. The final result seems to have been stated by the Director of one elite college from Bucharest: "(...) students do not want to learn" (Ziare.com, 2014).

On the other hand, the paradigm supports the expansion of the education market share for the creators, producers and distributors of abstract thinking development materials, like collections of problems, textbooks, etc. It also raises the probability for students to request afterschool paid private tuition from their teachers.

3.5. The Stupid Teacher Paradigm

The *Stupid teacher paradigm* suggests that teachers are not able to make the best decisions for the problems of their students and consequently, they need to be provided written documentation with procedures to follow in specific situations. In order to demonstrate compliance with the procedures they are supposed to observe, teachers have to produce written documentation like "didactic" plans or scenarios, detailing how they should go about applying recommended actions and/or procedures.

The gradual expansion of paradigm circulation is supported by the centralized examination system that grants access to a teaching positions and then tenure. The written examinations are "national" and focused on theoretical knowledge, rather than learning facilitation skills. The rate of success may be under 50% (Ziare.com, 2014a). Results of the "national examination" are being shown and commented by media and then used to generate culpability, low self-esteem and ultimately compliance to the diagnostics and solutions from system management.

4. Conclusions

The endemic corruption in the Romanian society did not spare the education system. Practically, every attempt to optimize education ended up as a lucrative business for a small group of "education establishment people".

All education reforms were ultimately about commissions for IT software or hardware, construction or rehabilitation contracts, textbooks printing contracts, study visits abroad prior to borrowing millions from World Bank, accessing European funding, keeping alive parasite bureaucratic structures or maintaining control on the education system.

The dysfunctional paradigms are being used to control perceptions of teachers, parents and students on the current state of education.

Identifying, exposing and countering the dysfunctional paradigms are critical steps to be taken towards a healthier education system.

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