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**THE STUDENT-CENTRED PARADIGM AND THE
OPTIMIZATION OF THE LEARNING PROCESS**

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Abstract

The paper aims at identifying the perceptions of students in regards to the problematic and dysfunctional aspects identified by them within the learning process in Romania, as well as identifying the possible solutions that would lead to the amelioration of the educational practice, with the purpose of optimizing the schools results of pupils/students. The target group was represented by a group of students enrolled in technical faculties which were asked to elaborate on the two mentioned aspects, referencing both their experience as students, as well as that of pupils. The results obtained following the processing and analysis of the answers converge on the necessity of respecting the requirements characteristic to the paradigm of adapting school to the necessities and particularities of the pupils. We note the fact that the national educational policies support and promote the principle of adapting the school to the requirements and possibilities of the pupils, at the level of educational objectives and courses of action stated within certain documents of educational policy aimed at the pre-university and university level, through which the achievement of a high-quality education is endeavoured, particularly through: the reassessment of the role of the pupil, placing his needs, interests, and requirements at the forefront of the educational proceedings, and assuring equal opportunity throughout the entire educational process. The problematic aspects identified within the educational process remain, however, valid, representing a discrepancy between the documents of educational policy and the educational practice.

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Keywords: Adapting school to the possibilities of the students; the paradigm of education centred on the student; educational policies; optimizing the learning process; educational practice.

1. Introduction

The improvement of the instructive-educational process and the optimization of the academic results of those being educated must be based on an objective and precise identification of the causes that generate dysfunctions at this level. We consider that the identification of the perceptions of those

involved in the educational act can lead us to objective conclusions in regards to the problematic and dysfunctional aspects present in the course of the educational process. Recognizing the discrepancies between the courses of action being promoted by the educational policies documents and those actually present in educational practices constitutes a starting point in the investigation of the issues mentioned, the validity of which will be underlined by the following study.

2. The Paradigm of Adapting School to the Requirements of the Pupil

The requirements that target the adaptation of the school to the learning possibilities of the students are in accordance with the new principles specific to contemporary education and pedagogy and with the European educational policy documents that represent the foundation for the current educational systems. The current educational systems, adapted to the specific educational requirements of the varied school population, have been built according to the ideas and principles of contemporary pedagogy, an interactive pedagogy which emphasizes the importance of developing competencies, and are characterized by the following aspects: reconsidering the role of the student, who becomes the subject of education; using information technology in education (the computer, Internet, virtual classrooms) in: the design of the teaching activities, guiding the learning process, monitoring the didactic act; the transition from hierarchically organized school systems to educational systems organized according to the network model; learning through problem solving, stimulating the critical thinking; concern for developing competencies; the inclination towards exploration, anticipation, and reconstruction of learning structures; the preponderance of interactive experiences, which generate an in-depth learning: cooperative learning and teaching, lessons based on life experiences, confrontation of different views, learning by doing; the reconstruction of the school space in order to encourage interaction, cooperation, active listening, the exchange of experiences and opinions.

The paradigm of adapting school to the learning necessities and possibilities of the student, characteristic for future systems of education and for contemporary network-type educational systems (Chiș, 2005), requires a diversity of learning situations and experiences, built in accordance with the possibilities and the needs of all student categories, in order to comply with the principles of: 'inclusive education', 'education for all' and 'integrated education'. The idea of the education centred on the student – as a person with individual characteristics that need to be valued and capitalized within the educational act – is highlighted by the postmodern educational paradigm and by the constructivist approach to knowledge and education (Tăușan, 2012).

The adaptation of the school, of the educational strategies, and of the entire instructive-educational process to the individual needs of the students, to their learning abilities and particularities, is one of the dimensions of the postmodern paradigm in education. Păun (2002) outlines the following characteristics of postmodernism in education, in a study dedicated to the analysis of the theoretical developments from the perspective of the paradigm of postmodernity:

- Learner-centred education, the student being seen as a person with individual, differentiating characteristics that should be valued and capitalized to the maximum (an idea situated at the centre of the existential-humanistic paradigm, subsumed under the postmodern perspective);

- The revalorization of the subjective-affective dimension in the educational relationship, of the actions and behaviours of subjects that have a unique, situational, and contextualized character;
- Considering the educational relationship as an interaction where the teacher and student are engaged in a process of cognitive and emotional investment, and in which the teacher works alongside the students with the purpose of their development and the building of their status as students;
- Creating a balance between promoting competition and promoting cooperation in schools;
- Promoting new types of education, particularly inter-disciplinary ones;
- Outgrowing the prescriptive, normative and formalized view on curricular theory and integrating it into the classroom (cultural space), with the purpose of analysing the cultural contexts in which the curriculum is structured and of continuously developing and refining it.

The postmodern approach corresponds largely to the constructivist approach to education, especially through the role given to the student in the construction of knowledge, through the modification of the teacher's role, and through educational strategies that possess a pronounced formative character.

The legislation in place that concerns the quality of education is aimed at optimizing the school environment in accordance with the current educational policies and with the necessity of bringing the Romanian educational system to the European standard, in order to be able to offer students an environment that is conducive to a holistic development and to the achievement of the highest results. The educational approach is now seen through a new perspective, influenced by the latest educational paradigms and the modern theories of pedagogy. The educational value of the newest technological instruments in use comes into question, as well as the possibility of effectively implementing them within the Romanian educational system. The pedagogical potential of these tools can be seen in the effect that they have concerning the students' implication, mobilization and in the way that they facilitate the construction of the students' individual knowledge (Tudor, 2015).

A series of documents from the international educational policies promote and sustain dimensions of the learner-centred paradigm and adaptation of the school to the possibilities and necessities of the pupil: The Convention on the Rights of the Child, The Framework for Action from the World Education Forum in Dakar, The Millennium Development Goals, UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy for 2008 – 2013 (Delors, 2000; Văideanu, 1996).

The requirement for the development of open, flexible educational strategies, tailored to social and individual needs, which would favour the development of each child's potential, is also formulated by the European Council, with the purpose of achieving the common objective of the future European educational policies, as it is stated in the *Declaration of the European Ministers of Education* from Krakow (2000): ensuring the development of a democratic citizenship within open and pluralist societies, where children's rights and human rights are respected (Bunescu, 2007; Codorean, 2006).

A new type of curricular culture is generated and is characterized by: transforming the school centred on the teacher into a school centred on the student, using interactive learning methods, a flexible curriculum and an inter- and cross-disciplinary approach of the curriculum. This new type of curricular culture is in accordance with the paradigm of adapting the school to the needs and possibilities of the students, ensuring that all the students have the opportunity to have their interests identified and their

aptitudes and capacities are capitalized to their fullest. Langa (2011) emphasizes that the implementation of proper knowledge management is an essential requirement for the development of high-quality study programs, due to the fact that the organizational knowledge management principles, instruments, and techniques have been shown to bring about an improvement in the case of other organizations.

The national documents of educational policies, which strive for a harmonization between the internal priorities and the European ones (*Post-accession Strategy 2007-2013, National Development Plan 2007-2013, Strategy for the Development of Pre-University Education for 2001-2010*), stipulate the following objectives and courses of action, in accordance with the paradigm of adapting the school to the possibilities and requirements of the students: ensuring equal opportunities and increasing participation in education by encouraging the participation of all young people in compulsory, post-compulsory and university education; ensuring basic education for all citizens; forming key-competencies; basing the educational process on the needs for personal and professional development of the students.

We underline the fact that the national educational policies sustain and promote the principle of school adaptation to the needs and to the abilities of the students, at the level of the objectives and courses of action contained in the aforementioned documents, trying to create a high-quality education, especially by: reassessing the role of the student, placing his needs, interests, and requirements in the foreground of the instructional process, and ensuring equal opportunity throughout the entire educational process.

3. Methodology

In a recently conducted study, we aimed at identifying the perceptions of a group of students enrolled in technical faculties with regards to the aspects they perceive as being problematic and dysfunctional within the pre-university and university level educational process in Romania. Furthermore, the students were asked to identify the possible solutions that would lead to the improvement of educational practices, with the ultimate purpose of optimizing the academic results of pupils/students.

The aim of the research: identifying educational practices seen as inadequate in what concerns the requirements and needs of the pupils/students, as well as the current particularities of the educational systems, as prerequisites for the optimization of the instructive-educational process and the amelioration of the academic results of pupils/students.

The objectives of the research:

- Identifying malfunctions and problematic aspects at the level of didactic practices within the educational system in Romania;
- Identifying possible solutions which would contribute to the improvement of the instructive-educational process;
- Evaluating the solutions proposed by the students through the perspective of the principles put forward by the paradigm of focusing the educational process on the needs and particularities of the pupils/students.

The hypothesis of the research: respecting and applying the principles of the learner-centred paradigm could constitute a solution for the improvement of educational practices and the optimization of the academic results of pupils/students.

The description of the research instruments: in order to identify the perceptions of students in regards to the problematic and dysfunctional aspects present within the instructive-educational process in Romania, as well as the possible solutions that could lead to the amelioration of the educational practices, we have used two open-ended items from a questionnaire in which the students were asked to elaborate on the two issues mentioned, with reference to both their experience as pupils, as well as their experience as students.

Target group: the questionnaire was administered to a group of 100 students enrolled in technical faculties in Cluj-Napoca.

4. Results and Discussion

Following the administration of the questionnaire, for the item „Specify the dysfunctional and problematic aspects you have noticed during your experience as a pupil and student at the level of the educational practices present within the instructive-educational process” we have identified the following categories of answers that constitute problematic aspects that are specific to the didactic practices within the educational system: the contents are mandatory and not adapted to the requirements of each pupil or their individual potential; the focus is on the content being transmitted and the correctitude of the acquired information; the rigidity of the content that is transmitted and prescribed by the various course syllabi; theoretical and abstract information is predominant, with its practical application being insufficient; the informative function of the content is emphasized, by expressing it in terms of knowledge, in the detriment of capabilities, abilities, skills, attitudes, competencies; through the teaching-learning methods, the activity of the teacher is emphasized, rather than the activity of the pupil/student and the acquirement of techniques for individual studying and learning; frontal-instruction is predominant; the flow of information is unidirectional; teacher-centred, expository methods are predominant; memorizing, retaining, and the accurate reproduction of information are stressed and valued; the role of the pupil is merely to listen to the lecture of the teacher and retain it; the practical character of the methods used is minimal; the tendency of standardizing the activity and rate of learning of those being educated is present; summative assessment is prevalent, which does not allow for the correction or amelioration of learning gaps or difficulties; the evaluation is focused on reproducing the information as accurately as possible; the manifestation of subjectivity in the evaluation process; the presence of an authoritarian hierarchy structure, of an authoritarian leadership style which encourages conformity in the detriment of expressing individual ideas, opinions, or collective proposals; the main role of the teacher is that of a source of information, a transmitter of knowledge.

Analysing the answers from a qualitative perspective, we have observed that the majority of the identified problematic aspects can be subsumed in one of the following categories:

- Problematic aspects at the level of the contents of the instructive-educational process;
- Problematic aspects at the level of the teaching-learning strategies employed;
- Problematic aspects at the level of the assessment of the academic results of pupils/students;
- Other problematic aspects (the authoritarian relationship between teacher and pupils; insufficient material facilities).

By summarizing the results of the aforementioned categories, we have obtained the following frequency of answers:

Table 1. Problematic aspects within the instructive-educational process

Problematic aspects within the instructive-educational process	Frequencies %
Problematic aspects at the level of the contents of the instructive-educational process;	92%
Problematic aspects at the level of teaching-learning strategies employed;	75%
Problematic aspects at the level of the assessment of the academic results of pupils/students;	48%
Other problematic aspects (the authoritarian relationship between teacher and pupils; insufficient material facilities).	35%

The solutions provided by the students as part of their answers to the second item of the questionnaire, ‘Suggest solutions for the amelioration of the problematic aspects previously identified’, have been summarized and grouped into the following courses of action that would contribute to the improvement of the instructive-educational process:

- Courses of action with regards to the content of the instructive-educational process: adapting the content to the potential of those being educated; granting greater weight to the school-based curriculum, which offers flexibility in the organization of the content; respecting the individual rate of learning of the pupils; promoting the capitalization of their personal experience and the development of each pupil’s imagination and creativity; combining the abstract, theoretical knowledge with experiments realized during and outside of the class;
- Courses of action with regards to the teaching-learning strategies employed: using a methodology that offers the maximum of diversity and flexibility, one that will be able to manage the variety of situations that can arise during the instructive-educational process; adapting the teaching and learning methods to the real requirements of the pupils; emphasizing the use of methods that are focused on the involvement and the active participation of the pupils, making them co-participants in their own formation, with the purpose of stimulating the pupils’ knowledge and mental operation structures; emphasizing the formative character of the instructional methods (aiming at the development of the capacity for applying the information and knowledge acquired, the ability to operate with it, to formulate and verify hypothesis, to solve problems, etc.); promoting methods based on action, on exploration, on experimentation, on research; the frequent use of methods that require work to be done in pairs or teams, promoting cooperation; expanding the use of methods that involve the relational component of the didactic activity (teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil communication); the use of methods that contribute to the development of the abilities and skills of those being educated; the use of methods that focus on the acquirement of individual studying and learning techniques; promoting methods that cultivate the practical and experimental character of the information; using methods that promote democratic relationships between teacher and pupil, based on cooperation and on the support of the teacher in the evolutionary

process of the pupil; promoting methods that accentuate the role of the teacher as an organizer, coordinator, facilitator; capitalizing, at the level of methodology, on the new technologies for information and communication; the optimal employment of the methodology, through the integration of appropriate teaching aids (Bocoș, & Ionescu, 2009; Tăușan, 2016);

- Courses of action regarding the assessment of the academic results of pupils/students: granting a greater weight to the formative assessment; ensuring that the pupils have knowledge of the requirements and criteria of assessment, as a basis for the formation of the ability to self-evaluate; diversifying the assessment techniques and adapting them to the concrete didactical situations; transferring the focus in assessment from cognitive acquisition to intellectual development, to the ability to apply their knowledge in a practical manner, to the behaviour, the attitudes of the pupils, to the degree of assimilation of certain values (Jucan, 2011);
- Other courses of action: promoting anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian principles, encouraging individual, diverse thinking; taking into consideration the community's proposals; using information technologies (computer, Internet, virtual classrooms); taking into consideration multiculturalism (Todor, 2015).

The results obtained, following the processing of the questionnaire and the analysis of the answers received, converge on the necessity to comply with the demands of the student-centred paradigm, the need to adapt school to the requirements and particularities of the pupils, and to overcome certain mentalities and educational practices specific to the traditional paradigm, all seen as conditions for the improvement of the instructive-educational process and the optimization of the academic results of pupils.

5. Conclusions

The majority of the aspects identified by the students as being problematic within the instructive-educational process are educational practices specific to the traditional teaching paradigm, while the solutions proposed by those interviewed are in accordance with the directions encouraged by the learner-centred paradigm. The comparative presentation in Table 2 illustrates this observation:

Table 2. A comparative presentation: the traditional paradigm/ the constructivist paradigm (according to Chiș, 2005)

The traditional paradigm	The learner-centred paradigm (the constructivist paradigm)
Teacher-centred education;	Learner-centred education;
The pupil has to adapt to the characteristics of the educational environment;	The school has to adapt to the characteristics of the pupil;
School activities organized in classes, groups (predominant form of organization: frontal);	Individualized, personalized instructive-educational activities;
Standardized learning rate;	Varied learning rates and styles;
Learning through memorization and reproduction (the pupils simply receive and assimilate the information offered);	Learning through solving tasks, discovery, research, construction, individual processing of the information, critical thinking (the pupils seek the information, they process it, they cooperate, exchange ideas, express points of view, discuss, raise questions);
Learning through memorization and reproduction (the pupils simply receive and assimilate the information offered);	Learning through solving tasks, discovery, research, construction, individual processing of the information, critical thinking (the pupils seek the information, they process it, they cooperate, exchange ideas, express points of view, discuss, raise

	questions);
Learning is a result of the transmission of knowledge, of reflections and data structured by the teacher;	Learning is a result of interpreting reality, of constructing individual meanings, of experiences, reflections, trials, all structured in an individual or group manner;
Emphasis on subjects, themes (the strict adherence to the curriculum is highly appreciated);	Emphasis on the learning process, on competencies, learning abilities (following the students' interests and questions is valued);
Knowledge is achieved through a rigid transmission, which is decontextualized from the learner;	Knowledge is achieved through construction, as a direct consequence of the pupils' personal actions and experiences;
The assessment aims at hierarchizing the pupils; it is achieved through measuring and assessing their knowledge, with emphasis on the quantitative aspect (how much the pupil knows);	Priority is given to the formative assessment, in order to observe the learning mechanisms, processes, and difficulties of the students and be able to intervene with the appropriate support; the emphasis is not placed on the final results, but on the performances in solving the tasks individually and then in a group; measuring and assessing the abilities, the competencies;

We note the fact that the national educational policies support and promote the principle of adapting the school to the requirements and possibilities of the pupils, at the level of educational objectives and courses of action stated within certain documents of educational policy aimed at the pre-university and university level, through which the achievement of a high-quality education is endeavoured, particularly through: the reassessment of the role of the pupil, placing his needs, interests, and requirements at the forefront of the educational proceedings, and assuring equal opportunity throughout the entire educational process. The problematic aspects identified within the educational process remain, however, valid, representing a discrepancy between the documents of educational policy and the educational practice.

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