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LIVING AND LEARNING TOGETHER

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Abstract

This article relies on a study, which investigated the impact of students' culture upon learning. In Romania, due to the socio-economic realities of the country, the way of organizing schools and formal learning is still quite impersonal and inflexible. Students find their own way of balancing this reality. They find school an important place to communicate, to socialize and to express themselves and no longer the only way to acquire knowledge. School frequently competes with other means and sources of information, which students perceive as less restricting and, therefore, more tempting. Regarding their age-specific traits, students name some of them: originality, creativity, autonomy, curiosity, adaptability, sociability. Other traits are determined by the post-modern society, in which we are living. They are resourceful, well-informed, alert, confident in using new technologies, but also sometimes stressed, nervous, shallow. These traits are recognised by their teachers, too. The latter regard them less optimistic, than students do. What students see as challenging, mobilizing and motivating experiences, teachers regard as risky and dangerous situations for young people. In this context, learning is regarded differently by both categories, too. Teachers promote more formal learning, while students prefer natural learning and informal learning experiences. They appreciate learning outside the school and e-learning. The borders between living and learning are for young people not as sharp as for their teachers. The main focus of the article is on the ways in which teachers can make use of students' culture in order to enhance learning motivation and learning as such.

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1. Introduction

In 2014 researchers from the Institute for Educational Sciences prepared a study called “*Students’ Culture and Learning*” (Cuciureanu, 2014), where they tried to identify specific elements of students’ culture, to highlight some positive aspects of this culture and to investigate how these elements can be



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used in school, in order to support school learning. The research project underlying this study started from some key questions: **What is specific for youth culture today? How can teachers use specific elements of students' culture in school and what impact would this approach have on students?**

In order to find answers to these questions, the research team designed and conducted an exploratory research, which involved 22 schools from the rural and urban areas of the country (well balanced, across seven counties – Alba, Constanța, Galați, Giurgiu, Olt, Timiș, Vrancea – and the municipality of Bucharest). In every county a rural school and one or more urban schools were selected. In every school researchers conducted interviews with school principals (23 participants), group interviews with teachers (120 participants) and students (over 150 participants). These qualitative research tools were complemented by a questionnaire for students (answered by over 480 students), giving more depth to the investigation results. Although it doesn't claim representativeness, the research provides an updated perspective on behavioural patterns, on values and preferences of the interviewed students, helping identify some aspects of students' culture, which can facilitate learning, common for teenagers from different schools and areas of the country. At the same time it reflects values, attitudes and beliefs of adults involved in this research – school principals and secondary school teachers – in relation to students' learning and their culture.

2. Conceptual Distinctions

It is necessary to start off by defining the concepts employed: **culture, students' culture, learning**. Children forge their **culture** in direct contact with their reality, with their own environment. "Conceptions about the world, understandings about the origin and the perishability of nature, social order, the norms and regulations of a correct behaviour, the organisation of life (politics, religion, economy, family, friendship, advertising, food, hygiene, education, initiation, marriage, work, struggle, death), as well as the products of human activities (dwellings, weapons, tools, coins, faith artefacts, clothing, jewellery, institutions) are considered results of cultural processes. The concept encompasses the totality of the typical forms of life of a community, including spiritual beliefs. In this sense, we can refer to the culture of a group, of a family, of a school or of an organization, to the extent that it creates specific values and modes of action." (Schaub & Zenke, 2001, p.53)

Speaking about **students' culture** we refer to the values that are specific to this category of individuals and to the modes of action they generate. Therefore, we do not refer to the "*high culture*", to the refined sense of the term: culture – as the entirety of high quality products and manifestations, originating especially (but not exclusively) from the field of liberal arts. (Barrow & Milburn, 1990)

We will use a different connotation – also known as sociological or anthropological – that refers to the way of life, to interests, customs, values and attitudes of a group. In contemporary times we witness a multiplicity of distinct realities, that cohabit and need to be respected in their own terms. In the postmodern society, that we are part of, there is a constant preoccupation to give space to the different cultures, to allow them to develop, acknowledging cultural pluralism as a key component of the wealth of the contemporary democratic societies. The value of these cultures is acknowledged; when they are known and respected, the social climate is positive and constructive.

We have focused our attention on students' culture, as it appears from the various investigated perspectives, believing that a better knowledge of the students and of everything that is specific to them, can improve the processes of education and learning.

We have used the concept of **learning** in a wide sense. We do not refer strictly to learning in school, but learning in different situations, and in doing so we acknowledge the importance of the environment and of the learning context for this process. Situated learning is defined as "a result of an activity that is situated in a context and in a certain culture", allowing the individual the acquisition, development and use of knowledge through practically oriented, authentic activities (Dumitrescu, 2007). It is a way that is more and more appreciated in the postmodern society, in which children and young people wish to acquire knowledge, when it is useful for them. Students then become agents of their own education, they are involved in decisions regarding their own learning process and they are motivated to become autonomous in learning. Learning doesn't take place only in classrooms, but also outside schools; formal education is supported by informal and by non-formal education. The focus is on the learning process itself, rather than on the outcome of this process. Under these circumstances, students' relationships with their teachers and the school tend to change: teachers become facilitators of knowledge, moderators of dialogues, animators of activities, while the school becomes but *one* of the sites where learning can take place.

The Romanian school tends towards this model, which is shaped as an aspiration of children, young people and some of their teachers. The model of the traditional pedagogy is still strongly represented in our school system and the informative, instructional function of the school dominates the formative, educational one, with everything this entails: teaching subjects are structured mono-disciplinary, teachers are the main transmitters of knowledge and have full authority in the classroom, they organize and control the teaching-learning-evaluation activities, leaving little autonomy to the students in the educational process.

3. Young People and Their Culture

The study *Students' Culture and Learning* has reached some interesting conclusions regarding the traits of current (pre)teenagers. The investigation has been conducted on students in secondary schools and has looked at **general and specific traits** of 12-14 years old students. As general traits, following were mentioned: "Children / young people today:

- have a great desire for autonomy, independence, freedom, originality;
- are creative, curious, adaptable, willing to learn, especially from real life situations;
- have a high level of self-confidence, self-esteem, and a very strong drive to prove themselves;
- are sociable and communicative, they particularly value interpersonal relationships with people from their own generation;
- they strongly need intimacy and space for personal development, as well as to gain some distance from adults (represented by parents and teachers);
- they are sensitive (including to influences from their environment), vulnerable, restless, still insecure, undecided, searching for values and paths to follow in their lives." (Alecui et al., 2014, p.128)

Besides these features of the preteens, the research has identified some distinguishing traits, specific to many people in the postmodern society that we live in. These features appear due to the influence of the environment on the people and are to be found – to different extents, depending on the level of exposure to these influences – not just in children and young people, but also in the majority of the active members of the society. “As to distinguishing traits, children/young people today:

- are very well informed, intelligent, grounded, resourceful;
- they are confident in using new technologies, they are clever;
- they are communicative and have more privacy than previous generations, as they escape to the virtual space, where they can easily get away from adult supervision and control;
- they have a very fast life pace, which makes them occasionally stressed, nervous, impatient, and shallow;
- the girls move away from traditional gender roles and, just like boys, are career driven and they value self-determination and self-development;
- some are also indolent (lazy), incapable of sustained effort;
- they take after other people, they imitate what they see, they emulate undiscerningly;
- they are preoccupied by image (including their own), they stay on the surface of things/relationships, they search for the sensational and extraordinary;
- they tend towards hedonism, looking for pleasure and the easy way to success.” (Alecui et al., 2014, p.129)

Both students and teachers recognize these traits, but teachers regard them less optimistic, than students do. What students see as challenging, mobilizing and motivating experiences, teachers regard as risky and dangerous situations for young people. The openness to change and the availability to react to new realities is different between generations, adults have more difficulty in facing the contemporary challenges and young people take distance from previous generations.

The influence of the environment on the young is very important. **Family** is the main factor of influence. An emotionally stable family, which offers love, attention, care and time for raising, nurturing and educating the child has – in most situations – a positive impact on the development of the child and on the values he/she will adopt (Farca & Velea, 2012).

The **group of friends** becomes more and more important once the child enters adolescence. At that point, they naturally try to get some distance from their family, to know themselves and define themselves in relation to the others. “The group of friends provides the environment where the young person feels secure (in the context of distancing from the parents), accepted (in relation to an identity they gradually discover at this age), and where the temptation to gain new experiences – including the forbidden ones! – is understood and even shared by the group. Vulnerability, described as one of the specific features of the current generation of children/youngsters is in direct relation with the group of friends, that takes on mimetically “*the latest trends*” and behavioural patterns, without the maturity to discern and to appreciate correctly the values they presuppose.” (Alecui et al., 2014, p.131)

An increasingly important influence on the children and young people today is that of the **new technologies and mass media**. Gadgets of all sorts and internet connection allow children and young people access to the virtual world, with all the advantages and dangers this implies. Access to social

networks, to information, to games and other types of entertainment – music, films, etc. – multiply almost endlessly the sources of information, communication, interrelations, allowing for complementarity (sometimes on equal terms) between the real and the virtual world. The virtual environment becomes a strong and tempting influence that has a significant impact on the time, activities, interests, but also on the values and behaviour pattern chosen by children and young people.

The general and distinguishing traits mentioned above, as well as the living environment, influence the culture of the students. The identified specific features – **originality and creativity, adaptation to the environment and to learning, sociability, dynamism and joy** – generate specific modes of action. They want to be active, to express themselves, to articulate their own opinions and to manifest their attitudes towards the world around them. Students often think critically, communicate a lot, search for solutions – multiple and innovative, they negotiate. They look for pleasure or usefulness in what they do, and, if they don't find them, they lose heart and often give up rather than put in effort. The virtual environment, easily accessed, enables them to choose things that can be reached easily, with no sustained effort. For many students, the most natural way to learn is through real life situations, which they live and process, or recordings of such situations from the virtual world.

4. School – One of Many Learning Environments

According to the study *Students' Culture and Learning*, school is perceived by students and by most of the teaching staff as “*difficult, stuffy, restricting, generating a low level of satisfaction.*” School is no longer the only way to acquire knowledge and it frequently competes with other means and sources of information, which students perceive as less restricting and, therefore, more tempting. A few ideas about school mentioned by teachers, principals and students need to be stressed:

There is a gap between modern school and postmodern society, as well as between “school culture” and “students’ culture”, the latter being strongly influenced by the environment outside the school and by the virtual environment. A common culture of teachers and students only rarely appears, which is to say school is rarely perceived as an educational community promoting values, principles, attitudes and behaviours accepted by all of its members. Teachers and students belong to two “*sides*” (“*us*” and “*them*”), each one critical of the other.

Teachers blame students for their lack of discipline, respect, interest in school activities, lack of perseverance and willingness to put in effort, lack of attention and motivation for learning. These naturally lead to low school performance, passivity and even hostility towards school and teachers.

Students blame teachers for being excessively authoritarian, too demanding, for not understanding students’ needs, interests, problems, work and learning pace. They are unhappy with the overloaded schedule, with the unattractive way of presenting subject matters, with the too large amount of information and their mainly theoretical nature, with the low applicability of knowledge gained in school, with the too fast pace of studying subject matters, with the homework they are assigned – too many tasks and mainly unrelated to one another. According to the students, some of the teachers are not sufficiently involved in their activity (professionally and emotionally), a fact the students notice and are upset about.

There are issues on which the opinions of teachers and students converge. All of them believe that “curricula are too difficult, the volume of information the children need to assimilate is unrealistically

large, the information itself rarely matches the real needs and interests of the students, the taught content is predominantly theoretical and students lose motivation because of the lack of relevance or delayed relevance for the real life of the knowledge they accumulate.” (Alecui et al., 2014, p.135)

5. Conclusions

How can teachers enhance learning motivation of students? A good understanding of the students, both individually and as a group, is imperative for teachers, who want to adapt the educational process to the expectations, needs, interests and level of their students. Individualization would be a good starting point for enhancing students' motivation for learning, for improving the learning process and its results.

Students demand more pleasant, interactive classes, with more playful activities. They wish that the educational system would change so that its structure should be more flexible – in terms of subject matters, number of classes, schedule. Students need to have more recreational, artistic, practical and sports activities in school, which they should access depending on their individual aptitudes and specific interests.

Teachers admit that learning in school, in a traditional manner, is not preferred by students anymore and some of them search for other solutions: situated learning, experiential learning, active learning, collaborative learning. Non-formal and informal education acquired by students outside the school is valorised more in school and extra-curricular activities extend the learning experiences outside the school, so that school and learning would become part of a larger living and learning environment. Special attention should be given to the national program “Școala altfel” (*School differently*), which offers innovative, creative, self-determined activities, adapted to the needs and interests of students, taking into consideration local opportunities and capabilities of the educational community.

Teachers aim for a better communication with students (using new technologies that students highly appreciate) and families. They try to create a positive, relaxed and pleasant environment during the classes, to make knowledge more available and up to date, to focus on the practical, applicative side of knowledge, to use more active-participatory methods, to use formative evaluation on a more intensive basis, to valorise more the group of peers in the learning process.

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