

MARTOR



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Education

**Diana Perju, 34, English teacher
at “Grigore Moisil” High School in Bucharest
Interviews done by Carmen Mihalache**



I talked to a number of randomly-chosen teachers who were acquaintances of friends of mine. They are generally young people who entered the system after 1990, and some even graduated from faculty after the Revolution. I asked them for an honest opinion regarding the wins and losses that the Romanian education has experienced after 1990, and I also asked about the manner in which they were affected by the frequent changes in the quality of education services. My other questions regarded the existence of a crisis situation in the domain of education, the changes undergone by the student-teacher-parent relationships after the Revolution, and by the relationship all three have developed with the school as an institution; they also referred to the social status of teachers, to the way in which they are viewed and assessed by parents, students and society, to the differences between past and current generations of students, to the specific difficulties with which teachers have to cope and about the way they solve these problems. Their personal ten-year experience has allowed them to form some clear opinions and these opinions have a lot in common. I have chosen only one speaking voice because the discourse is actually a synthesis of virtually all the problems met by those who struggle to apply an education system whose effects will only become visible in time.

On the one hand, I am happy that I have the opportunity to talk about the problems we have in education which, from my point of view, is a really sore spot, and on the other, I see that everybody seems to be an expert in matters of education, as they also seem to be in matters of politics and football, and consequently, they all come up with ideas.

The frequent system changes have indeed influenced the field of education ... For starters, and this is the most serious aspect, those who were behind the changes didn't have – and still don't have – anything in common with education in general, with the teaching profession, with teaching and its problems, with the feeling which you must present to your students, and with all the other aspects that make this job so special.

Their next mistake was to treat high school education in the same way as university education. That's absurd because the two represent completely different systems, as different as the demands of either pupils or students.

What else can I say? They couldn't agree on having or not having a holiday, on having or not having a separate period of evaluation, and the change was each time supported by solid psychosocial, methodological and philosophical arguments ... and you would do your best to believe in these arguments ... Well, now we have

stopped believing in something; I mean we've stopped believing in the wisdom of decision taken at high levels.

Don't tell me that it all happened because of the general transition period! That's true but only in part because in the case of all these particular changes, there wasn't either the necessary time, or the intention to get a feedback reaction or to analyze the effects operated by the change, so that all changes could be done in all awareness of what has to be change and in what way.

On the other hand, I think we're dealing with an absurd mentality which is very common and frequently met, namely that if you become a teacher or you are elected in a senior position, you must be good at what you do ... What I mean to say is that experience is crucial in these cases. My point of view in the matter is that of somebody who has a 10-year experience and who is aware that it is absolutely necessary that one should talk to more experienced people in order to solve problems and to fellow teachers in order to better understand the mentality and needs of students of all ages. Team-work is vital. You can't know everything because you're only human ...

The situation before and after 1990 ... well, many things have changed. Most of the times, many good things have been applied in the worst possible ways. For instance, teaching focused on the student: I think that's a very good approach. The teacher is no longer the focus point of the class but the student; the student is given more freedom to notice what his/her reactions are to different stimuli, he/she becomes an active participant in the process of understanding him/herself and the transformations undertaken by the self ...

Alternative textbooks are also a very good idea, especially because you don't have to go through the whole book; it is more like an instrument. There are many good and interesting ideas to be found in different textbooks and thus you're given the possibility to use them according to the needs of your students – some students need this kind of textbook, other need a

different type. Classes are also very different. But now we get to the very delicate and thorny money problem. How can you possibly get to use all these varied and wonderful ideas when textbooks are so expensive? As a teacher, you have to become acquainted with all textbooks, and, as you don't receive them for free, unless you use them for teaching ... you would have to make photocopies, to buy auxiliary teaching material, to make more copies to avoid time-consuming dictation ... all paid for with your money.

People have made and are still making such a fuss about teachers giving private lessons ... This becomes a problem under only one condition: when the teachers give you good marks only if you take private lessons with them, but this is blackmail and theft ... The necessity of giving private lessons is brought about by many things, some of which are determined by those who rule the country. Since you need money to survive, to be able to come to school with a full stomach, with decent clothes on and in good health, and with the auxiliary material that your students need, where are you supposed to get this money from, seeing that salaries are the way they are?

Seeing that time spent at school is limited and you have many students in a class, and there is also the syllabus which ignores the reality of school competitions, when are teachers supposed to tutor students for these extracurricular activities? On their spare time? And tuitions should include one student? Two students? And where should they take place? If the timetable and the school organization force students to work with teachers whom they might not like, the system should allow students to choose another teacher and take private lessons in order to understand what the other teacher failed to make them see. Shall I go on?

I have already told you that perceiving private lessons only in respect to the money teachers earn – this is an income the state does not control, which is not shared – will lead to a disregard of the essential idea. We need a legisla-

tion regulating this issue, but this legislation should take into consideration the opportunity and necessity of private lessons and the moral aspects of the process and of the relations which led to this necessity; it should not be focused on the economic aspect. Teachers need money in order to become better professionals and ultimately to help their students get better results. Maybe the goal is to prevent students from getting that good, or to favour only a handful of students. Equality of chances is not an issue simply because it is an impossible task: nobody can conceivably guarantee that. There will always be losers and winners, and all we can do is make sure we get fewer losers.

The money problem is far more serious than meets the eye because it affects both teacher-student relationship, and teacher-parent relationship. The teacher begins to be perceived as a sort of slave who must obey the student's family. Don't get me wrong here: a teacher should act in the student's best interest since they know so many things about child psychology, about the psycho-social needs a child has and so on. I can tell you from my own experience that parents are by far the greatest problem. I'm not talking about those who make some time for their children but about those who are busy all day long, who often have a lot of money – some of that money is given to the child as proof of the fact that they love him/her and all sacrifices are made for him/her – , who think that they know their children although they only see them once a day, in the evening when they come back from work and who are very frustrated, angry and reproachful when teachers give poor grades and fail to educate their precious babies - that's what teachers are supposed to do! Apart from the family model which influences the student's behaviour, there is also the need to survey the student in order to make sure that he/she is not neglected or abandoned and so on. Some children will turn into problem-kids only to attract their parents' attention.

On the other hand, parents themselves need

counseling. They themselves have become confused after 1990, and they too need to understand the changes that have taken place and to find a personal and effective way of coping with them because they have to be able to educate their children to do the same. Being a parent is not an easy job, but being a caring and responsible parent is even more difficult: you care what happens to your children and what will become of them. School is often sanctioned for children's misbehaviour, but how are teachers supposed to be able to teach children a set of values and attitudes which they don't also find at home, in the street and on TV? Since the media only promotes false values, since success is presented as having been achieved thanks solely to fake values – and children are very mindful of such aspects – , how can school still influence their education? This is how we reach a level where education is limited to a mere transfer of information.

I haven't the slightest intention to give a pessimistic tone to my discourse because I have faith in children, in their commonsense; I trust them more than I trust their parents or grandparents. I've witnessed arguments between older persons and teenagers on buses or in the streets, and I must say that the elders' behaviour was worse than that of the youngsters'. I saw children struggling to pull away from their parents' behaviour. This is not the general rule, but there are others like these children and this awareness is what still motivates me to keep teaching. The fact that you still have a reason to fight poverty, bureaucracy, ignorance and stress keeps you going. The awareness that you're not alone in this battle makes you want to continue. Your students notice that you're on their side, that you care and then they start helping you help them change. Many positive changes in students are achieved out of love and respect for one teacher or another. And then it all becomes worth it. In fact, this is the only thing that actually matters.

At this point, I would also like to add that I can still hear teachers say that they used to get a

lot more respect before 1990. On the other hand, I think there are a lot of people who now work as journalists or occupy high positions and who once were trouble-makers at school or frustrated pupils ... and I do not believe that they are the most entitled to judge the process of education and its goals. But, and this is a very important “but”, respect is something that you earn. It doesn't come for free, and this is the second big problem. I'm not very sure whether it was respect or fear that students felt before 1990. I think that it was fear that people felt. I'm saying this because I can still get respect nowadays but you have to fight tooth and nail for it. Your student will respect you for what he/she sees in you. They won't respect you for your university diploma (as far as they're concerned and from what they've heard, university diplomas may well be questionable), for the difficult exams that you had to pass or for the hard work that you've put in. They want to see the results of that hard work, how that hard work has turned you into a better teacher and human being. And there is

also the problem of reciprocity. If you don't respect them, why do you still hope for their respect? Are we all talking about equality, human rights and reciprocity? And aren't all these meant also for those in less privileged positions?

There are still many things that I could add. Each child is a poem ... some poems are Romantic; some are postmodern ... Once I heard a British teacher expressing the problem of education in a very eloquent way. It happened at a training course. By the way, these training courses are compulsory and they are paid for by the teachers themselves ... how do you like that? So, as I was saying, that British teacher told us never to forget that, “A teacher touches a student forever”. This is something that must be cast in stone. We all should remember that. But parents, the media and those who make the decisions should also remember these words.

Translated by Alina Popescu

