

MARTOR



Title: "Reforms, reforms"

Author: Ana Pascu

How to cite this article: Pascu, Ana. 2005. "Reforms, reforms". *Martor* 10: 208-213.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-10-2005/>

Martor (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor* review is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Its aim is to provide, as widely as possible, a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for scientific, educational and (in)formational goals. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

Martor (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

Martor is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

Reforms, reforms

**Gabriel Răducan, mathematics teacher,
former general school inspector**

Interviews done by Ana Pascu

The education reform began in 1990 and it took some dramatic turns, as serious and touchy problems were approached without full knowledge of what they presupposed. First of all, thanks to a programme financed by the World Bank, they changed school textbooks. Alternative textbooks were printed by companies which had won public auctions and competitions, but the syllabus was still the same. New textbooks covered the old syllabus. At the same time as the movement for changing the textbooks, there was also a movement for changing the curricula and the syllabus. They first built the roof, and then the walls and they left the foundation to be built last: they should have changed the syllabus first, then the curriculum and textbooks should have been the last to be changed. These mistakes are the main reason for which we still observe the old syllabus which contains things that cannot be done in class using the new textbooks. This situation has triggered a frantic search for material that may easily be adapted to the new syllabi. This is how publishers who have already noticed the mistakes manage to earn an extra buck. That's how they began printing exercise books which are promoted in schools, while textbooks aren't actually used for class work anymore. And this goes for most school subjects. The first textbooks were printed in 1995 or 1996, or perhaps

as early as 1994, and the first to be published were textbooks for the 1st and the 2nd grades, then they came back on their decision, they organized other competitions, there was a parade of ministers who changed things at random, some approving of the new syllabi, others rejecting them ... And we should also mention the thousands of dollars that have been squandered on this form of education. There were some training courses for teachers, professional trainers began to appear; later, they announced that the money for these courses had been all spent and ... the ordinary tax payer is left to suffer the consequences.

Before 1990 textbooks had been written by academics or by university professors... University professors were also members in the commissions which approved the use of certain textbooks and of curricula. After the Revolution, things changed: a team was created by the National Council of the Curriculum, which included teachers, researchers, psychologists, methodists and even university professors and whose job was to create a syllabus. The National Committee was then called to approve it. This National Committee consisted solely of university professors and a handful of prestigious teachers from all over the country. In 1999 they went

back to the old situation, meaning that they got to decide on the syllabus and the National Committee was supposed to only give its approval. University professors support their own view of the matter, meaning that they require that students should acquire as much information as possible. From 1960 onwards, we have witnessed a slow transfer of university syllabus first to the 12th grade, then to the 11th grade and so on, until secondary school pupils got to learn things only university students were expected to know. That led to excessively demanding syllabi. Nowadays we are again witnessing the same phenomenon: things that should be taught in faculties are taught to pupils.

The National Council of the Curriculum must take determinate action if its real aim is to actually change the current syllabi. They are afraid of reactions from certain academics and are less mindful of the textbook being adapted to the age particularities of the pupils. Nobody seems to care that there are no reasons to include certain information in the secondary and high school textbooks. If the syllabus is demanding, the teacher will automatically supply information. Around 50 % of the time is dedicated to teaching as such, and the rest is taken up by practice. The children who grew up in the 80s had a lot of time to study because they did not have TV programmes, extracurricular activities and so on, and they were able to concentrate only on the idea that study was the key to future success. How did that saying go? "Knowledge is power". Teaching was the main activity and the child rose up to the challenge. Now, if you teach too much, the pupils won't even bother to pay attention.

Before 1990 we had had a unique set of textbooks and only one syllabus for all schools in the country. Children in Bucharest and children in Timișu-de-Sus studied the same things. There were no alternative textbooks. Now we have at least three kinds of textbooks for secondary schools and as many as 30 types of alternative textbooks on the whole. Any teacher can write

textbooks. This was my advice to teachers who complained that textbooks were not good enough: "Who's stopping you from writing a textbook of your own in collaboration with a publishing house, which will include your teaching material and will observe the syllabus?" The teacher can use his/her own textbook after it has been approved by the local authorities.

Textbooks are usually selected by the teacher. So, let's say that I want textbook 1 for 5th grade A, textbook 2 for 5th grade D and textbook 3 for 5th grade E. This decision belongs to me and it is based on my assessment of all textbooks. This is of course the ideal situation. But there are cases in which textbooks are sent from the County Inspectorate. "You are supposed to use these textbooks and keep your mouth shut".

Another aspect considered by the reform is changing the syllabus so as to change the pupil's mentality. Skills and abilities become the main focus, while the content, previously favoured, is cast in the background. This necessity has never actually been understood. Content has been the main concern for the past seven years, not the cultivation of skills and abilities. There have been published tons of books containing grading criteria and which are not consulted by teachers unless there's an inspection coming. Teachers' mentality hasn't changed at all ... That is why I am so upset ... They fail in their duties precisely because they haven't managed to adapt. Pupils become nervous, they can't stay put behind their desks, the teacher tries to punish them with low grades and this is what triggers the complete annihilation of teacher-student communication.

Marks for primary classes have raised a lot of disputes because it was easier to grade pupils with marks from 1 to 10 than to assess their activity by qualificatives. With two "good" and a "very good" you could get an average of "very good" at the end of the semester. The pupil wasn't very well aware of how this average was achieved either. It's a highly subjective system. When you have two "sufficient", one "good"

and a “very good”, the correct average isn’t exactly obvious anymore. The interesting effect of these qualificatives is that children are not afraid of school anymore. I asked children about it, and they told me that they liked going to school because they were not afraid of getting a 2 or a 3 for not having learned the lesson. Things get a little more complicated for them when they reach the 5th grade and they receive proper marks. They can be flunk ...

Private lessons had been a reality before 1990 too; I remember having read in the *Sân-teia Tineretului* Daily about the case of a famous teacher who was defended by the General Secretary of the city of Sinaia himself against accusation of giving private lessons, as the respective teacher was a respected figure in the community and many of his private students went on to graduate from respected faculties.

Private lessons are usually given to children whose parents are well-off. Poor children who want to learn have to study really hard. There are also children who don’t learn because they can’t understand things. But there are parents who can afford to give their children private lessons as soon as they get a 6 or a 7 in chemistry, biology or music. The solution is getting a tutor. They decide that tutoring is necessary even from kindergarten: generally, children living in big cities are taught English or German from tender ages, and competition within the “special classes” leads to tests. The child wants to learn and he/she gets private lessons. Primary school teachers give private lessons too, precisely because no parent will accept to have their child pushed aside. If a pupil is flunk, private lessons are needed again.

And here we witness the birth of an alternative school which Western countries would never accept. They would even consider such a possibility. “Do you mean to say that you take private lessons for that?” Due to an accessible syllabus, a Western child has no difficulty adapting and responding to the teacher’s demands, even if

he/she misses school for an entire month for, let’s say, medical reasons.

Before 1990 teachers had been hired and promoted according to Party directions. Regardless of their rank, teachers who lived closer to the school building got hired. For instance, two teachers would measure the distance between their homes and school by the foot. If one of them lived 500 feet away from school, and the other 520 feet away from school, the one living closer won and he/she was hired full-time at the respective school. That was one criterion. Another criterion was the exam for titular positions, which involved a lot of studying and university knowledge. Passing the exam was pretty difficult.

There are few vacant positions in cities and a lot of them in the countryside. Before 1990 teachers were given teaching positions according to a governmental plan. Each faculty graduate received a teaching position at Urleasca-din-Vale, Ghimpați or other such places, according to their graduation mark ... They were forced to spend at least three years there, after which they took the exam for becoming full teachers, and later they participated in the national contest; this was an opportunity to move closer to home, if their marks in the exam were high enough. After 1990, the ministry sent a memo which said that all substitute teachers were to become full teachers. So, if the poor fellow had been a substitute teacher at “Mihai Viteazul” High School or at “Sfântul Sava” High School for 20 years, he was to be finally promoted to full-teacher. These positions were occupied without a proper exam. Nowadays any graduate is free to participate in the contest directly. And if the contest happens to be difficult, they don’t pass and they prefer waiting for another 2 years or so to competing for teaching positions in the countryside. Villages don’t have good teachers; they don’t have at least decent teachers, faculty graduates. Education in villages will soon become a joke, but the kind of joke that can only make you weep.

Before 1990, I used to read in the newspapers about French teachers going on strike ... They published articles like these on the last page. We were amazed because a teachers' strike seemed inconceivable to us.

After 1990, we reluctantly signed an agreement for a Japanese strike. It was only for one hour. I think it must have been back in 1992 or 1993. We didn't know what to ask for: a salary raise, a 4 % of the GDP, as other countries allotted 6 % of their GDP for education, but we didn't even know what the GDP was or what the deal with the budget for education was. What seemed really shocking to us was that they all agreed with us: both the minister of education and the school principals; I don't think that this is a normal situation. In a strike there must be two opposing sides, the owner and the employees, whilst here everybody agreed on the protest. The slogans were also strange: "We taught you then, don't harm us now". It was all about some funds which had to be allotted to education. It all culminated in eggs being thrown at the walls of the ministry buildings.

The strikers did indeed prove that they were united ... In 1993, 1994 and 1998 they came to Bucharest from all over the country by coaches. They protested in front of the Parliament building and in front of the Senate building, and there were also street meetings ... Although teachers made threats, they never actually interrupted the school year and they never meant to do that.

(Gabriel Răducan, mathematics teacher, former general school inspector)

Immediately after the Revolution pupils were confused: they had been on holiday, they still had their school uniforms and they didn't know whether to wear them or not. We are of course talking about 5th to 8th grade pupils, as the others were supposed to wear them anyway. At the first parent-teacher meetings everybody came up with suggestions on the matter. Regardless of

their financial situation, there were parents who wanted their children to be allowed to express their personality and wear different clothes at school. If you looked at them individually, they were all nice, but if you took a look at the whole class, they seemed a little too colourful. The notes they passed to each other during classes wrote, "look at her blouse; see how he looks today; she must have spent a lot to look like that". So they ended up paying a lot of attention to clothing. At the subsequent teacher-parent meetings, very few parents agreed to have the uniforms back, even if we were considering a different uniform design, one that was to be suggested by students or by parents. We had uniform competitions, a parade, and design competitions just to allow them to choose a uniform to their taste.

In time, parent committees decided that the general aspect of students should be regulated by the introduction of standard uniforms. At the beginning these uniforms differed from one class to another, making each class unique. Parents were the ones who bought the cloth, and had the uniforms sewn, as they had to suit each student. Students were initially proud of their uniforms, of their class having a distinctive mark, and they were thrilled that the other students were envious, called them "nerds" and even punched them in the street ... The following year they began experimenting with secondary school uniforms. There had been similar experiments before but they had failed. It wasn't until 2000 that they finally introduced a school uniform, and the first step was unique vests and coats. Uniforms had been designed by private firms, and one major problem appeared in September and October, when uniform money had to be collected, although not all people could raise that money. Primary school teachers even began to raise money from 4th grade pupils in order to get their uniforms done for the 5th grade in advance. Primary school teachers have more authority after having taught a class for four years.

There aren't many cases of eccentric students in our school. They are somehow forced not to be eccentric, as they have to sign an admission form which also stipulates that wearing a uniform is compulsory. Only 3 or 4 other schools in the neighbourhood have uniforms for their students; in the rest of them, students wear black skirts or trousers and white blouses or shirts. Blue jeans are very fashionable, and children also wear T-shirts instead of shirts or blouses, and sports shoes instead of street shoes.

Most pupils think that they must wear only what is fashionable at the time, and they wear the same kind of clothes at home and at the cinema too. They wear blue jeans and T-shirts all day long no matter where they are. This is not exactly healthy. But if a child smells bad or something of the sort, the others reject him/her and that is good.

(Adriana Răducan, mathematics teacher)

I was in the 2nd grade when the Revolution broke out and then I witnessed all the changes that followed: we wouldn't address our teacher with "comrade" but with "Miss" but I remember that when she entered and we stood up to greet her, we still called her "comrade". She would give us all sort of small punishments in order to make us cope better with the changes ...

School uniforms were a major discussion topic and we even had to write compositions expressing our opinion on the matter, as well as our preferences regarding a future new uniform prior to its introduction ... The fact that we didn't have uniforms anymore was felt as a burden because you always ended up not knowing what to wear ...

We kept wearing our old uniforms until we got in the 5th grade when uniforms changed, so we had had two years to become accustomed with the idea that we wouldn't wear uniforms anymore. As 5th grade pupils, we already considered ourselves young ladies and the standards we imposed on ourselves and on our female colleagues were also higher. The next demand was

that we should wear white blouses and black or navy-blue trousers ... Trousers for boys, and trousers or skirts for girls.

I got to high school and discovered that each high school has its own uniform: "So, high school X has blue uniforms" or "You're in cherry-coloured uniforms so you must be from "Creangă" High School". You represented the high school because you wore its uniform. And you ended up in funny situations, such as seeing an old lady wearing cherry-coloured clothes in the street and automatically thinking, "Oh, she must have studied at "Creangă" High School". It was obvious though that the students at that high school must have worn a different kind of uniform back then. There was a strict association between uniform and a certain high school.

I felt comfortable in my uniform and I was grateful that I did have to worry what I would wear the next day. But still I had some trouble choosing my coat, skirt and trousers. Each of us adopted a certain style according to personal tastes and the only thing that mattered was the colour. People from the school board had said, "It must be a shade ranging between red and dark red." So, the choice of colours and of designs was really broad and we chose anything that would suit us. I became a high school student in 1996 and for a while we had to wear uniforms too.

We were granted a lot of freedom, but there were still some limits which in time began to disappear. A simple cherry-coloured vest or a hair ribbon was enough. I could tell the difference because in my spare time I could wear clothes as colourful as I pleased.

Just think of how fashion changed for school children ... Pupils in secondary school have the mentality that we used to have in high school or something of the sort ... They grow up faster. Now they're wearing low-waist trousers, short blouses, which can be larger or tighter function of physical characteristics ... Colours are a big issue now, pink and light blue are highly fashionable, but it used to be orange and green, al-

though uniforms were blue or green ... Young people usually go shopping for clothes together. The one who wants to buy something usually takes along someone older or more popular, someone who's the centre of everybody's attention. They think that advice from a more popular school mate will make them more popular too. And that's how they got to wear white sports shoes that are knee high with colourful laces, which I personally don't like. I even asked the girls why they wear them: "Do you really like them?" At first they said, "Yes, I do; they're fashionable, everybody's wearing them". "Do you really like the way they look on you? Would you still wear them if they weren't fashionable?", I insisted. They said "no". So, they don't like

those shoes and they only wear them because they are fashionable.

(Irina Răducan, university student)

Pupils realized that they have some power, and that they have enough to even replace the teachers whom they do not like. There were small protests against unpopular teachers on school hallways or in front of the school back in 1990 – 1991; they even wrote their demands on walls and ... they were usually successful. The power to replace teachers created a certain feeling of freedom and empowerment among pupils.

Translated by Alina Popescu

