

Some aspects and edifications of the PISA Assessments in Romania

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ABSTRACT:

As the frame of implementation the Romanian educational context provides both favourable and unfavourable elements for the national PISA assessments¹. These are strongly related to the basic structure of the education system, to reform processes taking place in the last years, to social expectations on school efficiency and achievements. The study — built upon the results of semi-structured interviews and content analysis — focuses on how these interconnected aspects determine the course of the national PISA assessment processes and the national perceptions developed around PISA.

KEYWORDS:

PISA, Romanian context, Public education, Perceptions on PISA.

INTRODUCTION

Romania is one of the post-socialist countries that started the EU pre-accession catching-up process with significant disadvantages. Starting from 1989 to the EU accession from 2007 Romania has undertaken profound reforms and gone through a remarkable transformation, but even so on the field of economy, social life, institutional evolution, development policies, etc. the country is in significant lag. The reason for this is clearly that in the 1980s the dictatorial communist regime gained ground and had a strong impact on the building of a democratic regime and market economy — started from the basics — after 1989.

Stepping up efforts to complete the preparation and meet EU accession, the way how the country tries to meet the expectations, is a controversial process. Particularly striking is the contradictory nature of the adaptation process in cases when a comparison is done with the results of other countries. In these cases two kind of attitude appear in the same time:

- the efforts on adaptation and compliance that also stress the formal and peripheral (almost superficial) characteristics of the adaptation,
- awareness on disadvantages, gaps and deficits, a consciousness that often causes discomfort and frustration.

We can say that all kind of comparison is a challenge at the same time. Officials, experts, represen-

tatives of the media, etc. feel that efforts on adaptation should be expressed and stressed. But they are also embarrassed because the existing disadvantages and deficits are difficult to manage.

Our research on the national PISA survey created a typical situation where the endeavor of adaptation strongly revealed but also showed up the gap and fallback very prominently. This controversial and uncomfortable situation defined the course, organization and evaluation of the research.

The present study focuses on the analysis of the above described two attitudes in the case of PISA researches. The structure of the study contains a short description on the Romanian education policy, educational research context and on the participants of PISA. After that the two dimensions are described: the analysis of the PISA products and the opinion of the Public. At the end some conclusions are formulated.

EDUCATION POLICY CONTEXT

To present theoretically the national education-policy context of the PISA researches, we have researched the works and views of different experts in the field of education policy. In this context we have some comments on the aspects of the reform processes which are characteristic of the development of the Romanian national education policy. Our first and most important comment is that the national education policy reforms are still not constructed in strict relationship with each other, and this fact, to all intents, significantly impedes the consistency of

these processes. At the same time, the reforms are characterised by the fact that they do not take the “outputs” into sufficient consideration, because it seems that they prefer to concentrate on the “inputs”. Due to this, when the education system faces unexpected challenges, its responses to them are sudden and incidental. An aggravating fact is that, at the moment, in the field of education there is no continuous monitoring, and changes related to the “culture of learning” are slow. We are aware that the society is in anxious anticipation of the fact that it is on the threshold of change. In this situation it would be very important to formulate the questions: “What is wanted?” and “What is needed?”

According to the responses made by experts, the most important considerations in the field of education policies might be as follows:

- A degree of decentralisation and liberalisation of educational policies;
- The development of interactive decision mechanisms;
- The conceptual development of policy in Education (policy-learning);
- Definitive global policy formation;
- A coherent and continuous inter-sector approach to policy formation;
- Clear forward planning in budgeting along with the moral determination to maintain the selected plans (Crişan, 2006).

Experts and education researchers agree that in the field of education policy the actual national reform processes are influenced by both internal and external events in their development (Murvai, 2006). The first one means that the evaluation and re-evaluation of the education system and the national curriculum of education is currently done on an “ad hoc” basis by responding to transitory or ephemeral influences only. On the other hand the external influences which can affect education policy making, caused by, for example, European Union deliberations, may well have the coercive effect of persuading the education authorities to make adaptations which may at best be unsuited to Romania’s needs, or worse, still may not have Romania’s best interests at heart. This is a serious situation, which could lead to a reduction in the independent status

of Romania to that of some kind of satellite country within the European Union or whatever “other” sphere of interest in which the country finds itself educationally such as the quasi-cooperative of multi country educational policies.

The endeavours on decentralisation, including the rapid take-over of western models, are characterizing the field of education policy in Romania at the present time. In this context there are areas in which the role of precursory events is important (for example: curriculum), but new challenges are also appearing now, including, as already mentioned, EU policies, in addition to the PISA researches.

Due to the fact that PISA researches indirectly reflect on the national curriculum (and this relation is very much accentuated in the national context), we will summarise in short the evolution and development of the national curriculum. According to experts (Crişan, 2006; Fóris-Ferenczi, 1998; Székely, 1998) some kind of reform in this field had already started at the beginning of the 1990’s, but it was never made public and visible due to the inadequacies of mediatisation. However, reform programs which began to take place after the nadir in education in 1995 were strongly related to the development of the curriculum of pre-university education. The period between 1995 and 2000 is thought of as the period of systematic comprehensive reform in education, within which was an effective reform of the curriculum. This reform had taken place on *conceptual, institutional and strategic levels* (Crişan, 2006). This process of reform was immediately met with tergiversation² after 2001, just when the system of curriculum restructuring was in the process of being consolidated. This reaction, together with the moves to recentralise once again and coupled with further moves to eliminate local initiatives significantly affected both the curriculum and the newly established reforms at the institutional-organisational level. Regarding the development of the national curriculum, the period starting from 2005 is the period when reform began to pick up again and in which the political actors express repeatedly the need for professional analyses and evaluations in the decision-making processes on education policies. In addition there are some initiatives to re-evaluate the events which took place before 2001.

With regard to educational research, probably the most important professional reflection is that there are many more initiatives and tentative proposals in this field, by comparison with others (for example: social politics, migration), but even so educational research can be characterized with a lack of legitimacy. Critical approaches emphasize that in the international (comparative) and national educational research there is no actual model which could address the problems of how to handle the results (Vasile, 2007) or to implement any development based on the international and national evaluations. The actual system of evaluation and assessment can be characterized as passive; evaluations and assessments are summarizing and formative, and in this system there are no scales for performance which might be able to offer a complex and hierarchal solution within the national system. The curriculum-independent trans-disciplinary competencies are only lightly tested. Generally speaking, there is no authentic correlation between research, political decision making and education. The lack of real, profound interpretative analysis of the impacts of these flaws intermits the creation of that “critical mass” which would be capable of directing the national education system towards more productive changes and innovations. The active and purposeful harmonization of the two types of assessments (national and international evaluations) is also missing. In general, international evaluations are not correlated with the results of the national assessments.

A further important experience from the point of view of educational research is that experts are not preoccupied with comparative analyses between the results of different international assessments, and they are not really concerned with using the results of the international comparative studies. Generally, there exists a discontinuity between the discourse of the education policy and educational practice; experts are not engaged in the actions with reciprocal responsibility regarding the use of results. At the same time, the critical points of view may formulate some directions that might contribute to solving the problem of legitimacy.

— CO-OPERATIONS, VIEWS, INTERESTS

The main actors of the national PISA are the Government on the one hand and the Ministry on the other. These two parts established at national level the legal and regulation environment absolutely necessary to implement PISA. The Government establishes the national conditions of PISA by its decisions. At the same time, the thematic of this research enters into the high priority strategic documents as well. Within the Ministry the more important people are the minister, the under-secretaries and the decision-making body. Its tasks are the departmental regulations and the administrative organisation of PISA. It defines this task as a typical ministerial task at national level, which has to be solved in cooperation with departmental personnel. In effect, it inserts the task into its typical, everyday work.

On the other hand the implementing body also has an important role with the responsible project managers, who are helped by other experts (sociologists, researchers, etc.). Opinions on the interests and points of view of the PISA centre are strongly related to the fulfilment of the obligatory tasks, and to the fact that standards must be strictly respected, however, further details which came out of the interviews produced some bright new ideas. The chief project manager endeavoured to establish a more efficient cooperation with other project managers (coming from the international context).

Further participants in PISA include the County School Inspectorates and their representatives (new personnel are appointed from one survey to another, but they are selected for this work according to their professional domain related to the domain of the research. So, continuity from this point of view does not yet exist at this level.). It is also characteristic that from one PISA cycle to another the number of schools from a county taking part in the research is also changing. However, schools have a minimal role, which is to place the desired age-groups at the disposal of the testing process.

Further possible participants are the experts, advisors, consultative participants of the national education policy. From these participants we must underline here the institution of Central Education 2000+ and the Institute for Educational Sciences. The former is a political independent consultative body; the latter

is a national institution for research and development in the field of education. The I.E.S. has an important role in the elaboration of education policy documents — this relates to its institutional point of view. In the framework of CEDU2000+, documents related to the analysis of the education policy have also been elaborated, but their research deals mostly with the analyses of the curriculum. It has an important role in the elaboration of methodological auxiliary materials, practical guides. Its works describe in general different particular professional points of view.

During the implementation process, the Romanian PISA Centre maintains relations with the Hungarian and Moldavian PISA centres, but these are mainly related to the translation of the questionnaires necessary for the minorities. This has no larger meaning, in spite of the fact that these relations could mean real possibilities for professional cooperation and joint forward planning.

To sum up: the basic model for the Romanian PISA process is built on the two prominent representatives. The implementing body is strictly subordinated to the Ministry, and more lightly to professional points of view. We can see from the results that in the national implementation of the PISA, especially in the process of testing, the task-scaling is descending, the medium-level participants do not really have roles, and the lower level participants have minimal tasks. Consequently, regarding the Romanian PISA, the national and international context is of the greatest importance.

THE COMPARISON OF THE TWO AREAS OF ACTION

THE ANALYSIS OF PISA PRODUCTS (REPORTS, DOCUMENTS, BROCHURES — DISSEMINATION)

In this category we have found three types of documents: the PISA national reports (2000, 2006), the PISA program administration report (2005-2006) and the “training brochure” of the last two research cycles (2006 to 2009). More detailed information in note form about these is given as follows (in order of their appearance):

National report on the survey from 2000 (PISA — OECD International Student Assessment Program; National report; National Centre on Curriculum and

Assessment in Pre-university Education; Bucharest, 2002) was published in 2002³. Its structure is composed as follows: at the beginning it contains general information on the Romanian PISA, the introduction is about PISA with a general description, the presentation of methods — particularly the PISA scale, another chapter followed by the description of the national organization of the project and — in a considerably larger part — the description of the results within the international context.

Some remarks on the document:

- The report shows values on averages, in tables and charts, highlighting the national (below-average) results, with a little general commentary — providing only a framework for the interpretation of the results.
- The report emphasizes in a particular way how the results should be interpreted — first of all — in the national socio-economic and educational policy context, without this context the comparison is not correct (the value of the GDP devoted to education plays an important role even in the Romanian interpretation).

First chapters give precise and detailed descriptions, the review of the results, this is less specific. The report is preoccupied with all three areas (reading comprehension, mathematics, and science), only a few issues reflect on the country's results; they are largely focused on comparisons with other countries. At the end of the report we can read that the aim of PISA is not to present causal explanations (although several factors could be classified, or could explain the results). Neither do the conclusions contain such explanations, just more synthesis on the whole, based on the results of the countries.

The administration report of the PISA program (*National report of the administration of the program: 2005-2006*. National Service for Evaluation and Examination: PISA National Centre 2005-2006; Bucharest, 2006)⁴ discusses different aspects and problems of the administration, and establishes a framework for future contextual interpretations. In summary, the report is a general and detailed description about the PISA (for example: what is PISA, what are the parameters of the Romanian participation, PISA-specific context of the education policy, technical

standards and responsibilities of the national implementation body, etc.). It also describes the whole list of events within a research cycle, and contains the list of schools selected for research, the survey (test-question with examples) and (general) conclusions. It is a rich material to help in getting acquainted with PISA; it is known and used in the national context as a base manual, the manual of the administration. We know from the interviews that that document is considered to be of great importance not only in theory but also in practice. It is the result of the re-joining of PISA in 2006, it can be considered as evidence for taking PISA seriously at national level.

The report of the survey produced in 2006 (*OECD International Student Assessment Program, PISA 2006*). The report of the National Centre: Bucharest 2008) appeared as a publication in 2008. Regarding its contents, in the introduction it discusses the context and national conditions of the survey from 2006, describes briefly the actual context of the national education policy, and has a short part for the theoretical and practical framework of the survey. In comparison with the report made in 2000, it relates the results in a much larger and more detailed way. It focuses on the Romanian situation, showing tables with variables on mean values and the position of the country compared with other countries. A larger part describes in detail — with concrete examples — the test-questions and the methods of correcting. It includes a few conclusions, but only very briefly: What we can learn from this report is concerned with the testing of the interdisciplinary scientific thinking, which requires a special effort from Romanian students. This fact can be considered a distress signal, motivating the professionals from this field to rethink the curriculum, because this could indicate a possibility for achieving the desired progressions.

Test brochures of the surveys 2006 and 2009 (*OECD International Student Assessment Program, PISA 2006*. Test brochures — practicing PISA, 2006. *OECD International Student Assessment Program, PISA 2009*. Test brochures — practicing PISA, 2009).⁵ The brochures for practicing can be found on the webpage of the Ministry. The use of these brochures is mentioned neither in the interviews nor in the documents examined. Regarding their content: practical test guidance and keys of correcting are presented. These could be very useful for practice purposes.

In summary: within the national context the above mentioned documents are largely accepted as official papers, these being the signs of formal acceptance of the PISA international assessment tool. These are also the proof/evidence on the efforts of the officials towards adaptation and compliance. There was no debate or opposition in relation to the documents presented, however no more additional analysis was made on the aspects of PISA. These documents are largely for information only since they transmit the context and method of the international knowledge tool.

THE OPINION OF THE PUBLIC:

COMMENTS, DEBATES ON THE INTERNET

General characteristics from public opinion (online comments on newspaper articles): there are also just a small number of comments, remarks; it seems that for the Romanian society it is difficult to express views, especially in public, as they would not have the time, energy or the motivation for this. There are hardly any ongoing debates responding to each others' opinions. If there are some commentaries in the context of an article, they are mostly monologues. Remarks related to the reforms are absent, as individual, parental opinions assuming responsibility in these questions are missing. This situation is very understandable in a society still emerging from the totally repressive atmosphere of socialistic communism where personal opinion was not only discouraged but could also be severely punished. However, has not yet the time come for a more courageous stand to be taken, and for those in authority, especially parents to take the initiative and accept their responsibility in dealing with their own children's education? (Thence also because almost all the expenses related to education are in the charge of parents/families and the state undertakes only minimal of these). Full debate should be encouraged wherever possible and in whatever way possible if Romania is to make real progress and take its rightful place among the international community.

The results of the Romanian PISA surveys are shocking by all means, or at least they should be. In commentaries we can meet the following shock-dissolving mechanisms:

The counter of the shock: (in most cases) — meaning that PISA results did not really cause shock at all!

- The Romanian is born wise; he/she does not need to be compared with the inhabitants of other countries.
- The PISA results are not relevant. The Romanians are much smarter than those who were in first place in the PISA survey.
- The PISA is a great lie, and therefore should not be taken seriously.
- The PISA results are manipulated, depending on the more influential a given country is. The fact that Romania is in such a poor place, is due to the manipulations of the influencing countries and data falsification.
- The Romanian PISA results are bad, because they do not test students from good schools, where “studies go on blood”.
- Romania’s results are low, because schools are teaching ‘other’ things, not those asked by PISA tests. The PISA test has no relevance in the country.

Scapegoat searching:

- Teachers are the only people in fault for the bad results. They are not paid enough, not motivated enough, and not controlled enough.

Lethargy

- If Romania is the last in all areas, is it not surprising that the PISA survey has shown this up?
- At last there is something that shows the real place of the country, because otherwise everyone in Romania is very economical with the real truth.
- In Romania it is not worth learning because you will never be able to succeed with your knowledge.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS

Our research and study is concentrated on the analysis of a controversial attitude (strong motivation for adaptation to new and/or international contexts and consciousness on national disadvantages, difficulties). Based on the results and our experiences, the following are the most important research results summarized to this topic:

- Of first and foremost importance, we must point out the unfavourable context of the education

policy described at the beginning of the study, which, consequently, brought out a negative response to the national PISA.

- In the national model of PISA two prominent representatives from the Centre formulate and undertake the task: namely the Government and the Ministry. These two institutions establish in their course the necessary legal regulatory environment (or statutory conditions) for carrying out the process. The Government generally makes the decision, and accordingly, the PISA is given a position (in the form of references) among the key strategic documents. The Ministry is the executor of the sectoral legislation for which the Government is responsible; its task is the administrative organization of the tool. The task is defined as a typical ministerial task; it has to be solved in joint cooperation with the regional actors. So, according to the rules laid down by the Government and delegated to the Ministry, the process is launched, and its implementation starts to evolve. This seems to be a simplified operational group of tasks.
- Based on the research in the national implementation of the PISA (especially in the process of testing) the scaling of the tasks is descending, the medium and local level actors have minimal roles and minimal tasks. Consequently, regarding the Romanian PISA, a much greater emphasis has the national context, followed by the international one.
- From the process described above (between Government and Ministry), a wider dissemination, the preparation of the content, the arrangements for future public and professional discourses, information and general dissemination is usually missing. Thus, the PISA can become neither a public nor a professional concern.
- The way of handling PISA at national level shows that changes related to implementation are still not sufficiently far-reaching, and additionally the use of this tool of assessment is only partial.
- The research results also indicate that basically there is no detectable relationship between the PISA results and the developing reform processes, either in the meaning of content, or in reference.

ENDNOTES

1. The study is a shortened and edited version of the national report on PISA prepared by the Romanian team within the framework of the KNOWandPOL research project (retrieved August 2009 from www.knowandpol.eu).

2. Tergiversation here is defined as a reactionary attitude to the reforms already made involving a change of heart about them and an evasive or ambiguous desire to return to the old methods and systems.

3. <http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/8961> (retrieved December 2008).

4. <http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/9159> (retrieved November 2008).

5. http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/search?articles_fields%5btittle%5d=1&q=pisa (retrieved february 2009).

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DOCUMENTS AND OTHER SOURCES