



## THE RECEPTION OF THE EDUCATIONAL DECENTRALIZATION AND CURRICULAR REFORM AMONG THE HUNGARIAN TEACHERS FROM ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** Choosing of the theme was determined by the Central-Eastern European educational reforms, the role of the educators in the process of changing in the educational system and the enlargement of the social demands towards the schools. The aim of our the research is on the connection between the educational reforms and the educators. Partly, it is due to the short term negative effects of the educational reform the fact that the Hungarian teachers from Harghita county have a negative opinion about the present situation of the educational system. Also they had a positive opinion on the changes of the curriculum, on the separateness of the curriculum, fact that assures them the possibility of optional subjects, flexible class frame, alternative course books.

**Zusammenfassung:** Die Auswahl des Themas wurde durch die mittelosteuropischen Erziehungsreformen entschieden, die Rolle der Erzieher im Änderungsprozess im Unterrichtswesen und durch die Erweiterung der gesellschaftlichen Ansprüche gegenüber den Schulen. Das Ziel unserer Untersuchung liegt auf der Verbindung zwischen den Erziehungsreformen und den Erziehern. Teils ist sie in den kurzfristigen negativen Effekten der Unterrichtsreform begründet, dass die Ungarische Lehrern und Lehrerinnen aus Hargita generell eine negative Meinung über die aktuelle Stellung des Unterrichtswesen haben. Und sie hatten eine positive Meinung über die Änderungen des Lehrplans, der Selbständigkeit des Lehrplans, (wahlfreie Lehrfächer, wählbare Stundeneinteilung, alternative Lehrbücher).

**Keywords:** educational reform, educational system

### 1. The educational reforms and teachers

The choosing of the theme was determined by a compound system of factors, thus for the proving of the delimitation and actuality of the theme we must start on three lines. According to these, *the Central-Eastern European educational reforms, the role of the educators* in the process of changing in the educational system and *the enlargement of the social demands towards the educators* delimited the direction of our research.

The Romanian education has been the scene of continuous changes in the past one and a half decades. At the change of the political system the Romanian educational system was one of the most centralized in Europe, thus it is univocal why the wish of the renewal of the education manifested itself in the pursuits for decentralization. In the process of the renewal and democratization of education the Romanian education was not alone. In other Central-Eastern European countries, too – a quicker or slower process with other accents, but similar, took place. “The decentralization always solves old problems and brings new ones.” – writes Cheng (1997,3) in his study on the decentralization of the Chinese educational system. At a great extent we agree with this statement since the several situations of the educational practice show us that the decentralization does not mean the solutions to all the problems in either countries, moreover these processes intensify the problems, the controversies of the given system. The same thing happened in Romania, too. Besides the several positive sides of the decentralization, in the course of decentralization such controversies appeared which were not perceptible before. The Central-Eastern European reforms have not left untouched even the situation of the teachers. The educator-society used to the vertical bureaucratic control had to face the new situation created by the changed social, political, economical environment.

Secondly, we cannot leave without attention the fact that in the professional circles more and more strengthened the recognition that the teachers are the planters of the reform in to practice in these processes. “...*The only serious supporter of an educational reform today, is the intellectuality - thus, first of all the educational society must be won over.*”- writes Kozma (1992, 41), and indeed it can be

considered as an evidence the fact that any intention of reform, innovation is only one possibility till the winning over of the educators is not successful. Thus the effects of the educational changes on the participants to the educational process (students, parents, and educators) are clear.

The aim of the research is the connection between the educational reforms and the educators, more concretely, the specific connection between the Romanian educational reform and the Hungarian educators from Romania. In our investigation we focused on practicing educators. Our choice for educators was not only for the fact that they are the “planters into practice” of a macro-level planned changing process, but also for the fact that we feel that in the professional literature more and more the role of the “teacher policy” in the educational policy of different countries comes to the fore. Several analysts recognize the role of the teachers in the process of the renewal, modernization of the educational system. (Kozma, 1992; Darvas, 1993; Bunescu, 1993), and in the international professional literature shows that the teachers and the schools are the main source of power in the modernization of the educational system (*Teachers Matter, 2004*). The teachers can be seen as the passive educes of the changes, of the process of the reform, since these new processes challenge them again and again, strengthen their strain. It is not negligible the problem that the situations requiring new extra activities, information and efforts are lived through as a pressure of conformity, or rather as a possibility for a higher degree of professional identity and self-realization, freedom in choice and a chance for alternativity. In this situations the opinions concerning the profession and the education, the feelings, the attitudes and the convictions get an important role, and at least as important as other objective factors (aims, content, the number of the students, auxiliary means).

Finally, we must not forget about that fact that independently from the changes in education, the social expectations and demand from education are enlarged greatly in our days, the role of school in the training for social life has changed (Husén, 1997). According to Nagy (1993), the efficiency of school appears in a more complex way, and thus the teachers’ professional challenges are more. This situation confronts the educators with such tasks, which were not prepared before in our studies, because – they were not trained so, fact given by the characteristics of the situation. Therefore, the redefinition of the professional requirements of the teacher profession, the demand for the accommodation to the new situation is not a question any longer. In the document entitled *The Teacher Today*, OECD, we can read the following: “ *The teachers cannot flee from the modern constraint of the changes, the society expects from them the highest level of competence and commitment.*” (1993, 717).

## 2. The aims, the process and the methods of the empirical research

The starting point of our empirical research is constituted by the changes in the Romanian educational system in the past one and a half decades. The Romanian educational reform influenced in several points the work of the teachers. The movements having the character of decentralization of the controlling of education, the curricular reforms, the transformation of the responsibility system inside education, the modifications of the school structure and exam system have all had an effect on the formation of the educators.

The positive effects of the educational reform are longer; the negative ones affect mainly those in the given system. More and more often it is formulated in the professional circles the fact that the involvement of the educators in the educational changes can not be realized without the appearance of the “owner” feeling, of essential changes. (*Teachers matter, 2004*). Starting from this assumption the *primordial question of our research* presents itself, question which searches the answer concerning the *effects of the changes in the Romanian educational system on a part of the Hungarian teachers from Romania working in the elementary training in the past one and a half decades.*

Darvas (1993) lets us know that in the relationship between teachers and educational reforms usually two questions emerge. On one hand, which are the effects of the reform on the teachers, and on the other hand, how the teachers as individuals and corporative members take part in the realization of the reform process.

Starting from this investigation paradigm, in our research we were led by a compound aim. On the one hand, we were curious, which were the effects of the educational changes on the situation of the teachers (professional possibilities, school possibilities, professional self-image, social appreciation), and on the other hand, we investigated the teachers' opinions concerning the process of changes; i.e. at what extent the educational policy could win the teachers in the process of the changes. Thus at the beginning of our investigation the following *questions* emerged:

- On the basis of which characteristics can be described the changes of the Romanian educational system in the one and a half decades: which are the stages of the reform process, which are the areas affected by the changes?
- At what extent could the Romanian educational policy “win” the practicing teachers: which are the opinions of the teachers about the educational reform and about the present situation of the Romanian education?
- What is the opinion of the teachers concerning the changes and possibilities related to the decentralization of the control of education and delimitation of the curriculum?

In the presentation of the effects of the changes in the educational system on the teachers from the Harghita County, as well as their opinions, conviction, appreciation, we supposed that their opinion is influenced at a great extent by those parameters on the basis of which the given educator-population can be described. Thus we assumed that the opinion of the teachers concerning their professional self-image, professional evaluation and the social appreciation of the profession as well as the reactions to the challenges of the reform processes might be made specific by the investigated person's age, sex, professional experience, attended schools. The stratification of the research sample according to sociodemographic points of view (*sex, age, attended schools, professional experience*) can be considered basic variables and at the same time independent variables, too. In the choosing of the independent variables we had in view that theoretical observations (Darvas, 1993), according to which the more active, flexible, innovative teachers can adapt more easier to the challenges of the educational reforms than their colleagues. According to this we used the *participation of the teachers to vocational courses*, as well as *the extra activities performed* besides their regular work activities also as independent variables. We also assumed the fact that concerning the investigated questions the *type of the schooling location* also can influence the opinions of the teachers, their capacity of evaluation. We categorized the schools according to the operating administrative points of view from Romania. Besides all these we also studied the so-called “soft” factors (thoughts concerning the profession and education, feelings, opinions, attitudes, convictions) Due to the subjective character of these factors a part of our suppositions is a hypothesis without an alternative direction.

According to our theme Hungarian teachers from Harghita County form the basic majority of our investigated persons. From this majority a more staged cluster-sample taking of 316 Hungarian primary-school teachers formed the sample. We used an expert sample taking as the first stage of the sample taking. We used primary-school teachers and not teachers from higher stage because we considered that in the given stage of the educational changes (2003) the primary-school teachers have more relevant information concerning our theme. The justification of our choice has two directions. First of all the starting with the primary school, the ascendant system of the educational reform, on the other hand, with the concrete modifications due to the processes of the reform (curricular decentralization, alternative course books, optional subjects, evaluation system, and others) affected first of all the teaching-studying process in the elementary school. In the second stage of the sample taking we identified all the methodological sectors than from all the sectors in proportion to the number of the sectors we *took the sample*. Persons from towns of Harghita County (Odorheiu Secuiesc, Miercurea Ciuc, Gheorgheni, Toplița and Cristur) and from their areas were taken at random as investigated samples.

In the course of the research the used *method combination* is the specific combination of the theoretical analysis and the questionnaire survey. We used the *theoretical analysis method* in the reading of the professional literature concerning the theme from Hungary, Romania and from other countries, as well as of the official documents referring to the educational reform (operative laws, orders of the ministry, decisions of the Government, plans of the reform and curriculum). Since the

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strategy of our research is basically deductive and it is connected to more areas (educational reform, the situation of the Romanian education, the conditions of the work in schools, professional self-image, professional evaluation and social appreciation) we needed a greater number of data, thus we used as data gathering method the *survey based on questionnaire*. We did not use standardized questionnaire, used in other surveys, but one that was personally elaborated. After we had consulted some surveys concerning the opinion of the teachers (Bognár – Kozma, 1985; Lázár, 1992; Marián, 1998) we decided on the elaboration of a personal questionnaire. Though there may be similar situations in the renewal of different educational systems, each reform process can become unique due to the character of the given educational system and to the given time.

Here we present the antecedents of the research; in the starting point we formulate the research problem and show the characteristics of the hypotheses. Our hypotheses – given by the complex character of our theme – are paraphrased along the interpretation of the results of the examined areas. In this phase of the survey we considered important the delimitation of the size and of the concepts concerning the theme. On the basis of conceptualization we specified with what connotations we used some concepts in our research. Further we delineated the number of the investigation, the sampling technique and we present the sociodemographic particularities of the sample. We ended the part concerned with the description of the research with the presentation of the investigation methods and of the survey.

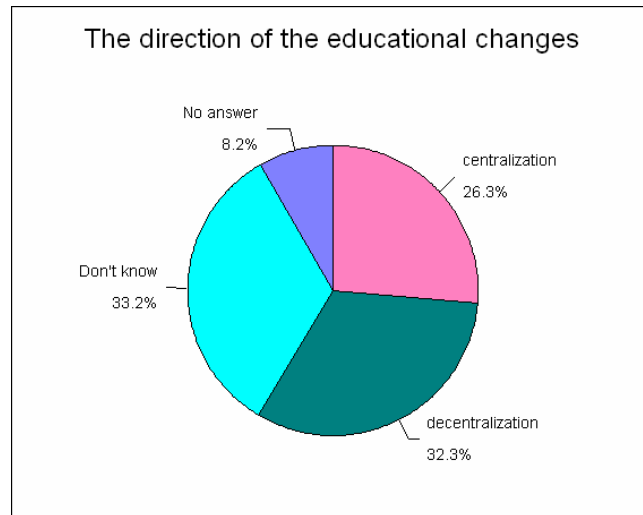
### 3. The results

On the basis of the analysis of the Romanian educational system in the past one and a half decades and of the results of our research on the teachers we conclude the following:

The *need for the decentralization of the Romanian education* fitting in the line of the reforms that started after the change of the political system in the Eastern European countries was indisputable, and it was the result of external and internal causes of a particular interplay. This can be connected to the fast social, economical and political changes in the former socialist countries (Riddell, 1997; Heyneman, 1998), on the other hand to the lagging behind, rigidity, inner anomalies and critical situation (Bîrzea et al, 1993; Cristea, 1993, Miroiu, 1998).

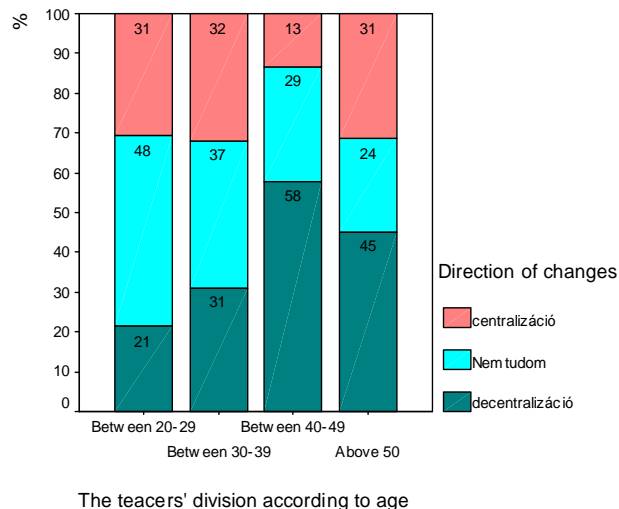
The decentralization in Romania does not appear as a uniform process, having a straight direction, and only starting with 1997 we can speak about an overall change. Besides the fact that it was characterized by continuous recoiling and “back camber”, in some areas the process of the reform was faster (content delimitation, course books, educational conceptions), in others was slower (laws, institutional background).

The changes in the Romanian education in the past one and a half decades appeared in the official documents of the reform (law of education, operative decisions and orders, reform plans, the National Curriculum) as decentralization, structural and joinable to the European directive process. In spite of the official rhetoric decentralization enunciation, the processes reached only a deconcentration (Halász – Altrichter, 2000). Thus it is not a coincidence that the views of the Hungarian teachers from Harghita County concerning the educational reform are not coherent with the theoretical enunciation concerning the reform and which appeared in the official documents.



1. Figure. The direction of the educational changes in teachers' opinion (N=209)

Only 32,3% of teachers feels that the changes are part of the decentralization process. In what concerns *the joining to the European directives* and the *decentralization* of the educational system it is an important state of *disorientation* and *wobbliness* among the teachers. These opinions are only partly influenced by the background variables, which were analyzed by us, for instance it is significant the relationship between the opinions concerning the direction of the changes and the teachers' age, sex, and professional experience.



2. Figure. The opinion about the direction of educational changes and the relations to the teachers' ages distribution (N=290)

The older, with more experience women teachers see the changes as a decentralization process. At one question the inquired persons agree totally: they do not see the reasonableness of the frequent and inconsequent changes.

Partly, it is due to the *short term negative effects of the educational reform* the fact that the Hungarian teachers from Harghita county have a *negative opinion* about the present situation of the educational system, they are pessimistic in what concerns the lining up of education to the European requirements. Only 1/3 of the questioned teachers can see the intention of orientation to the European trends, and there is a connection between the *participation of the teachers to vocational courses* and their opinion about the orientation of the educational changes to the European trends.

They can see this lining up through the improvement of the situation of the educational system, through a better endowment with auxiliary means, through more consequent modifications, through

better professional conditions and through a greater stability. These opinions are not surprising since they are “consonant” with the specific situation of the Romanian education from the past one and a half decades. According to some analysts the Romanian reform processes have been characterized after their starting point for a long time by wobbliness, transition and instability (Codiță – Pasti, 1998; Miroiu, M. 1998; Ivan, 1998), according to others this fact has been since then (Ivan, S., 2005). After all these we cannot leave out the fact that Heyneman (1998) indicated the *need for stability* as an impediment in the mentality of the Central-Eastern European reform processes.

The Romanian education can declare the area of the *curricular reforms* the one with the most positive and most important changes, as the new Romanian curriculum having complex function (*Curriculum National, 1998*) suits to the European directives. The former traditional, content centered curriculum is replaced by the National Curriculum, which is characterized by the mutual cultural base and by the strengthening of the local planning (Szabó, L.T., 1991). We are convinced that the effects of the Romanian curricular reform on the teachers are straightaway and significant.

The Hungarian teachers from Harghita County had a positive opinion on the *changes of the curriculum, on the separateness of the curriculum*, fact that assures them the possibility of optional subjects, flexible class frame, alternative course books, and they accept the changes more readily than the Romanian teachers in general. (*Școala la răscruce, 2001*).

#### 4. Conclusion

All these lead us to the conclusion that Hungarian teachers from Harghita county do not retreat in front of the professional challenges in the development of the curriculum and of the extra activities. The steps made in the area of the curricular reform can be driven into a good direction by a proper educational policy and practical solutions. In the area of the curricular development we see the necessity of three tasks. These are the following: the assurance of the conditions for the teachers’ necessary curricular separateness, the extension of the proportion of the local planning, the elimination of the macro- and micro-level problems concerning the course books and the auxiliary means.

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