DEFICIENCIES IN THE CURRENT PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AND FIELDS OF EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FUTURE TEACHERS*

Ecaterina Sarah FRĂSINEANU[1]

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Abstract

The article analyzes a number of tendencies of current education and summarizes ideas that are in the area of concern of the students who are preparing to become teachers. The quality of the education system is related to the value of the students' learning outcomes, but it is also conditioned by the convergence of the educational initiatives. From the perspective of the students who have experience in psycho-pedagogical studies and who fathom applied fields, a number of existing or potential problems are validated. Thus, the students indicated as the main deficiencies, that require initiatives: absenteeism, poor results in learning in the fields of science, technology, insufficient digital skills and curricular overload.

There is a consonance between the titles or lists of proposals of future teachers and the directions of educational policy, and the practical accomplishment of the actual projects requires, first of all, analyzes and group debates, from those who are preparing to initiate educational projects. In addition to the main problems, considered deficient, we were interested in the propositions of concrete solutions, and although students had some contagions with the titles of certain projects already implemented in Romania, they used formulations that highlighted the qualities of a desirable education: participatory; restructured/ recovered; electronic; community-oriented; extracurricular; curricularly developed. The effects of the pandemic situation between 2020-2022, in education, have led the future teachers to become aware of the role the projects that integrate interdisciplinarily, information and communication technologies have.

Key words: *Quality improvement; Romanian pre-university education; Deficiencies; Areas of interest; Educational projects.*

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[1]Associate Professor, PhD, Teacher Training Department, University of Craiova, Romania, e-mail address: ecaterina.frasineanu@edu.ucv.ro

1. The quality of education - the result of certain educational strategies and projects

The period of social-political and economic transition that Romania is going through also has an impact in the field of education. Quality analyzes are being made by reporting to the level of satisfaction offered to the beneficiaries by the effectiveness of the educational offer in the field of vocational training and education, by achieving the required standards and excellent results. In order to assess quality, reference is made to sustainable development in education (Sterling, 2001), to the need of increasing the efficiency and performance of the educational systems, to meet the expectations of the beneficiaries as well as the standards required by the institutions of control, such as Total Quality Management (Sallis, 2014), to improve the outcomes (Glewwe, Muralidharan, 2016).

According to the Eurydice Report of 2022, the developments and current policy priorities for pre-university education are the following: ensuring equity in education; supporting the teaching career; professionalizing the educational management; developing the vocational and technical education; developing early education that is accessible to all; modernizing the curriculum and assessment; supporting education in the languages of national minorities; ensuring the financing and modernizing of the infrastructure; accomplishing the digital transformation of education; improving the transition from upper secondary to tertiary education; developing lifelong learning; developing the international dimension of the Romanian pre-university education.

Among these directions, the future teachers for non-compulsory education can be directly attributed their contributions to ensuring equity in education, to developing the vocational and technical education, to the decentralized application of certain ways of modernizing the curriculum and assessment, to the implementation of digital technologies in specialized disciplines, to supporting students in their transition to higher education.

2. Deficiencies of the Romanian education

The Education Barometer of 2018 (p. 18) identifies as problems of the Romanian education system: student indiscipline (19.2%); corruption, reported by the students (16.5%); the low salaries of the teachers (10.1%); the indifference of the teachers or the lack of professional motivation (8.4%); the inadequate endowment of schools (8.1%). A significant part (13.5%) of the total number of people included in the study did not offer assessments (non-responses).

In the Report on Educated Romania (2020), two main deficient aspects of the Romanian education are pointed out: the reduced access and the low quality of the educational act. The statistics cited are that 44% of students are functionally illiterate, negatively affecting their future participation in social and economic life. There are a number of improvement measures, of which we note: increasing access to and participation in quality education for all children, regardless of the environment they live in; lowering the early school leaving rate to the average level in the European Union; the significant decrease in the rate of functional illiteracy in

15-year-olds; increasing the quality of services provided in schools; the permanent monitoring of the educational path of each child and the immediate identification of the necessary remedial measures; inclusively from the perspective of extracurricular activities; supporting the students with the skills to achieve excellence, promoting interculturality and ethnic diversity in projects.

Therefore, among the many deficiencies, with a great impact for the current education, there is the issue of absenteeism and school dropout, as well as the awareness of the need to use more effectively modern ways of teaching.

As for dropping out of school, it is determined by a complex set of causes, of a different nature. In the study coordinated by Fartușnic (ed., 2012, pp. 53-54) the authors identified three main categories of determinants of dropout: individual, family-related, school-related. The individual factors include: low motivation to learn, learning difficulties, special educational needs, poor health. Among the family factors there are mentioned: very low subsistence income, low level of education of the parents, lack of minimum living conditions, negative attitude of the family towards school, performing lucrative activities, dropout situation with older siblings, unemployment of the parents, the type of disorganized, reorganized or single-parent families, the situation of the child placed in the care of the grandparents, the fact that that child is institutionalized. The school factors are represented by: poor school results, low attendance/high absenteeism, low participation in activities, school year failure in previous years, isolation from classmates, registration of failures in several disciplines, the existence of deviant behavior, etc.

To this old deficiency we could add the effects of pandemic changes, which brought to light the lack of digital skills, the shortcomings of the exclusive use of online learning platforms, which brought into question some socio-emotional issues and the need for non-formal education. Thus, Botnariuc *et al.* (2020, pp. 46-47) concluded that in the online education system "Regardless of how performant the technical framework can be, the skills of teachers, the degree of adaptation of the content to the new context, the process of teaching, learning, assessing is diminished, loses consistency, quality, naturalness", and "the generalist 'computerization' of education, through the formation of beginners digital skills, is not enough for the establishment of virtual learning; transformations are needed at the teaching level, through focus for contexts designed specifically for this purpose". In fact, regarding the use of digital technologies, compared to the face-to-face system, the relativity or coexistence of advantages and disadvantages has long been recognized by several authors (Beard, Harper, 2002; Cavey, Gregory, 2002; Frederickson, Red, Clifford, 2005; Manochehri, Young, 2006, *apud* Li, 2010, p. 30). The perspective of the teachers is that the experienced benefits have contributed to the identification of some alternative resources, by collaborating with other educational factors.

Regarding the development of educational projects, as non-formal activities, their contribution and usefulness for increasing the quality of the educational activity has been proven. For example, Eccles *et al.* (2003), showed that: a) The participation of students in all types of extracurricular activities is correlated with the increase of their school results; b) The participation of students in sports, administrative or club

type activities creates a higher probability for students to attend a college; c) The participation in prosocial activities is correlated with the decrease in delinquency among the participating children.

3. Identifying the issues that can be addressed through educational projects

Project management (Gherguţ, Ceobanu, 2009) has a whole foundation, which is focused on the design-implementation-evaluation cycle. Projects are a coherent set of activities, which are designed and organized with the intention to achieve well-defined objectives and results. Mogonea reveals a broadened meaning of the educational projects and programs, such as "the wide range of (intentional) approaches of some public institutions (including the Ministry) and/ or private ones (including Non Guvernamental Organisations), through which certain educational goals and objectives are pursued, usually complementary/ collateral to formal, official educational programs." (2013, p. 176). Therefore, educational projects apply to non-formal and/ or informal education. As Ilin (2008, p. 349) pointed out, "The most obvious feature of a project is that it must achieve a goal. But the most useful thing is to think of the project as a tool for change".

In recent years, the orientation of education has evolved under the influence of fundamental social, economic and political changes. Educational school projects are the natural result of these changes (Anghelache, 2012) that have occurred in the life of school organizations as a result of the implementation of the democratization process (Wilhelm, 2000), of ensuring equity (Pfeffer, 2015, Robinson, Phillips, Quennerstedt, 2020) and of reforming the pre-university education system.

Identifying an issue that could be addressed through a project is an important phase, during which specific ideas, relating to the framework established by the national strategy papers, are stated. As a first step, the issues, needs and interests of the possible interested factors are analyzed. In order to correctly identify and analyze a problem, we must start with a detailed analysis of the existing situation in the field of interest. A fact, an existing socio-educational condition becomes a problem when it is considered harmful by several people.

In our opinion, as a favorite topic for educational projects initiated by teachers, we can observe certain tendencies of modernizing education, through: the multiple correlation of certain areas of teaching; the promotion of collaboration, interactivity; the advocacy of diversity and pluralism; the manifestation of openness to flexible, non-formal education; the recognition of multiple pathways in the field of teaching and learning profiles; the practical approach, the experiential learning; addressing ethical and aesthetic issues; the recognition of multicultural diversity; intertwining the teaching activity with counseling in life issues; the discovery of unconventional learning places and new tools (including digital ones).

According to Bulat (2011, p. 9), "Identifying a project requires the analysis of the existing problems, of the difficult situations that need to be removed". The methodological indications given by the author propose discussions, surveys, the organization of focus groups, so as to make sure that the problem is a real one and that

it is a priority. There is certainly the need for preparing in choosing the issue, through discussions with the beneficiaries, through reviewing the existing experiences (projects, reports, statistics), even with specialists or community members.

The role of the teacher interested in educational projects focuses more on what, from a constructivist perspective, means animating the class of students (Johnson, Mc Elroy, 2010). These are a series of qualities that are subsumed by the animating intervention of the teacher − "edutainer" (*idem*, p. 23): to use respect, relationships and responsibility more, to be competent, organized, practical, passionate about teaching, close, focused on student success, transparent, to have the power to influence them.

4. The design of the accomplished investigation

We consider the assessment of the perceptions of students − future teachers a first step in forming the skills of writing educational projects, which is a challenge to get out of the sharp criticism of the education problems, by stimulating the assault of constructive, resolute ideas. Those titles that have the role of determining the positive and significant changes in education, in the sense of developing and increasing school results, for priority and relevant needs for teachers, students and the community are found to be interesting. In building such a premise, we took into account what is recommended after the period of suspension of activities: remedial activities and authentic socialization (Dalu, ed., 2021). The training department for future teachers and the potential targeted students are from the South-West Oltenia region, where was found (*idem*, 2021) that students were vulnerable to the technical problems of the online communication, and those in the 12th grade have complained of school fatigue. Very few students felt that they had free time (*ibidem,* 2021). Thus, it would be appropriate that now, when we are returning to face-to-face activities, the outdoor activities, the remedial ones to be even more beneficial so as to counterbalance the lack of direct contact between teachers and students and to support the emotional rebalancing of the students.

In building our hypothesis, we took into account the fact that the success of institutional development projects (Androniceanu, 2004) depends primarily on internal factors, which start from a careful planning and from addressing the real issues of the target group. The purpose of the investigation was to identify perceptions and opinions of students on deficient issues, for their reconversion into areas of improvement intervention. The data collection took place during the return to face-to-face activities in university education, in March 2022, and the sample was a natural one, composed of 65 master students, in their second year.

The actual hypothesis was that for future teachers with applied master specializations, who already have experience in the initial training program (basic psycho-pedagogical, didactic and practical instruction) and who become familiar with Educational Project Management, through personal reflections and group re-evaluations, it is possible to relevantly identify certain issues at national level and to propose resolving titles.

The sample of subjects who agreed to participate in the micro-research included a series of specializations, presented in Table no. 1.

Table 1. The distribution of the students in the sample according to specializations

Specialization	No.	Specialization	No.	Specialization	No.
Management in Agritourism and Food Quality	4	Theology and culture	6	Applied Mathematics	8
Environmental protection in Agriculture	1	Conservation and restoration	4	Information System for e-Business Advanced Techniques of prócessing information	12
Food safety and Consumer protection	2	Regional development and social intervention	2	Modern vehicle design Design and Manufacturing in Automotive Engineering	7
The natural ecosystem evolution and the conservation of Biodiversity; The Ecological Management of the Natural Resources	3	Romania in the European history; National and Euro-Atlantic Security	4	Physics	4
Vine-wine expertise	1	Philosophy applied in organisations and business environment; Public Administration	3	Tourism and sustainable development	4

The method we used was the conversation and an adaptation of the Delphi technique (in which, based on the documentation on the approached topic, the students first answered the question related to the deficiencies, and in the second round, after they were pointed out the answers collected from all the other participants, through joint analysis, they were encouraged to review their responses, depending on the consensus reached in the group and with the trainer). Thus, the task given to the subjects, in the first phase, was to identify three problems of the contemporary education that would require institutional projects/ initiatives. After the elaborated

answers were inventoried, the students were invited to choose the ones they considered stringent and relevant, proposing related, suggestive program titles.

5. The results obtained. Presentation and discussions

5.1. The identifications of the students covered first of all, the basic elements, related to the educational effectiveness, consisting in the learning outcomes of the students, but also the curricular components, as well as those related to the material endowments, the investment in human resources development (students and teachers, their motivation) or the extension and diversification of community relations.

The identification of the problems allowed a multiple answer, and the problems identified by the students and the weight of their validation in the whole sample were:

a) Absenteeism: 92% of the respondents

- Absenteeism and school dropout, the phenomenon of early school leaving
- Insufficient knowledge base, falling behind, failure to complete tasks, homework
- Lack of intellectual work techniques, lack of using reading, proper illiteracy, functional illiteracy, superficial or mechanical learning
- Insufficient lesrning in more complex fields, specific to high school education (mathematics, computer science, physics, mechanics, logic-argumentation, etc.), which requires the promotion of STEAM education (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics).

b) Insufficient digitization: 86.1% of the respondents

- Difficult adaptation, out of phase with technological evolution, outdated material endowments of schools
- Skills gaps as opposed to the rapid evolution of digital technology
- Impairment of health in children, young people, adults.

c) Socio-educational inequity: 66% of the respondents

- Poverty of the students' families
- Difficulties in integrating children with attention deficit, children with behavioral problems
- School schedule and overloaded homework
- Bureaucratic impediments to exert certain rights or the freedom of expression.

d) Lack of free time, extracurricular activities: 61% of the respondents

- Insufficient free time
- Insufficient entrepreneurial initiatives
- Lack of preparation for extreme situations, such as first aid
- Irresponsible behavior in relation to the environment
- Ignorance/ poor valorization of the cultural heritage.

e) Poor bonding: 46% of the respondents

- Poor communication with the students
- Lack of politeness, respect in bonding, the crisis of relational and life models
- Self-centeredness and promotion of competition
- Manifestation of juvenile delinquency, harassment

- School bullying, aggression between students
- The use of outdated teaching methods, non-democratic practices in schools.

f) Inefficient curriculum: 18.4% of the respondents

- Information overload of the school curricula
- Perishability of school curriculum content
- Lack of pragmatism
- Insufficient free time.

In relation to the total of 241 proposals initially made by the 65 subjects, following the debates we were able to appreciate the importance of the deficiencies, Figure 1:

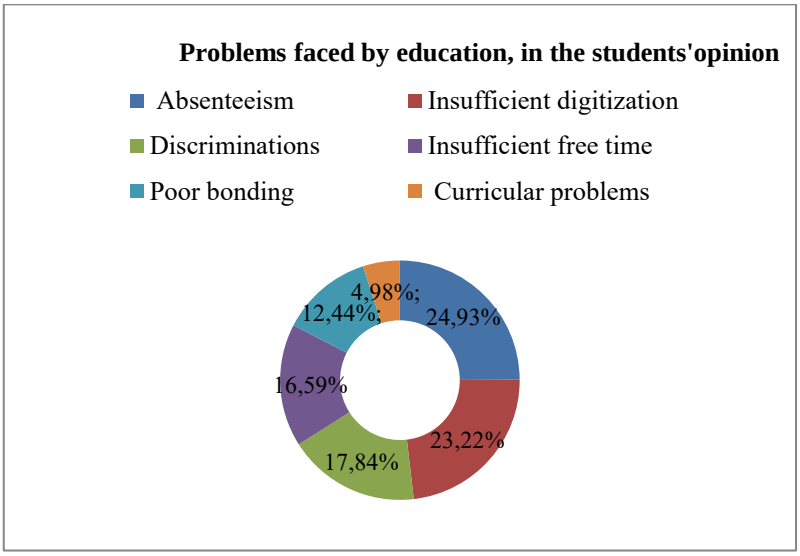

Figure 1. Deficiencies of the Romanian education system, in the opinion of the students

The number one deficiency mentioned is Absenteeism (24.93%), the second is Insufficient digitization (23.22%), the third is Discrimination (17.84%), the fourth is Insufficiency of free time (16.59%), the fifth is Poor bonding (12.44%) and the sixth is represented by Curricular problems (4.98%). We find that the students were realistic, and their options or valorizations are justified in relation to the area of learning/ skills held.

5.2. Proposing constructive solutions through suggestive titles or ideas

Bulat (2011, p. 13) suggested that a title should be short, concise, preferably referring to its key outcome/ activity. The idea must be attractive, with an optimal expression (not many words, not few), in order to suggest what the project will contain. The proposed titles, as multiple solutions are listed under the form of the following categorial model (PRECEDE), in which a more participatory education is desired; restructured/recovered; electronic; community-oriented/cohesive; extracurricular; developed from a curricular point of view (Figure 2).

I. Participatory - to combat absenteeism:

No absences in the catalog! Classmates go to school; Without education, dreams are going to be dreams! Focusing - part of the result; Teacher-student for one day; the student - instead of the teacher! Interactive during and outside the lessons! We debate the subject;

II. Restructuring/recovery:

Support for learned lessons; The chance to prepare for the baccalaureate;
The right specialization and profession; Early vocational counseling and guidance; The model that inspires me; Scholarship - as a way of rewarding; Let's learn more easily through school experiments; Maths Camp; You can and you deserve more!

III. E-learning to complete digitization:

Steps in choosing my profession; improving practice with the help of the computer; How to make currently requested documents?
The club of the students who use computer technology; How do we relate to the digital world; Purchasing my first personal computer/ laptop; The Internet - a useful tool in learning; Interactivity for young computer scientists; Computer security: the online environment - opportunities and dangers; Joint teacher-student contributions for the development of effective learning materials;

IV. Cohesion to eliminate discrimination:

How do we recognize and prevent harassment? I am not a victim; Identify bullying in you and others; Disadvantaged children have a chance! Support for Roma children! How do we relate to interethnic differences? Be respectful, to be respected; Lunch at school; We isolate violence! School - the place without violence; Say no to conflicts! Combating juvenile delinquency; Let's work as a team: together we will succeed; Knowledge - a way to develop self-confidence; Through generosity, I surpass my ego! In search of authentic values;

V. Extracurricular activities to make the most of our time:

How we plan our activities so as to have enough time; Everyone has a vocation; Romanian educational models and rural images; Let's get to know our ancestors and traditions!; The wooden churches in Maramureș: representations, style and symbolism; In the heart of museums; I take care of the environment I live in! Nature teaches us; School fair, an opportunity to get to know the community; We save correctly and invest in the future;

VI. Curricular developments:

School curricula adapted to the present; School through games; How, why, when? Creative, in my own way; We learn about innovations in Geography; How climate change occurs; News about the solar system; Geometry in my life; Mathematics in everyday life; Experiments in learning physics/ chemistry; Learn how to be careful about what you eat! First aid … so necessary; Health - above all; Clean in a clean environment; Practical training sessions for future drivers; Safe karting; Entrepreneurial and creative, as a producer! Do we know what to eat? Do we eat healthily? Fun gastronomic workshop: a sweet break.

Figure 2. The PRECEDE Model of the educational projects proposed by the students

Regarding the analysis of the elaboration of the titles, the criteria of simplicity and expressiveness of the formulation of the themes remain valid. Any teacher has access to the simplicity of expression, and "(...) the teacher will take care (permanently) to use - as much as possible - a simple language, short sentences, chosen and focused on expressing clear and distinct ideas. He will be careful to use suggestive words (...) "(Albu, 2017, p. 127). We found that, in this respect, the master students selected their ideas very well, but there was a tendency to confine ourselves to titles/ ideas already implemented in our country. The subjects explained that the process of delimiting previous or current contributions is difficult for them, because they fail to systematize the diversity of the documents issued at national or European level.

6. Conclusions

Referring to the deficiencies, the obtained results converge towards two ideas: the most frequently invoked aspect is the students' absenteeism and the need to prevent it, then, given the self-appreciated experience of the pandemic, the need to develop digital skills is clearly outlined.

By appealing to their critical thinking, to listing problems, through reflection, group discussion, the students identified and put forward solutions worth remembering. The PRECEDE model (in Romanian language, which precedes), outlined with the help of the students, captures a series of qualities that they consider desirable for the Romanian education system.

Taking into account the specifics of the sample and the methodology used, the data obtained have an empirical value, they cannot be generalized and must be corroborated with other future studies, for specializations that would cover all curricular areas. In order to carry out certain concrete initiatives, analyzes and public discussions remain useful ways, which can contribute, in a constructive way, to the shaping of some stable options, the results of which should be successful.

The diversity of educational policies and directions coexists with their unity, simplicity and consistency, so that the initiatives can be convergent, involve partnerships, agreements on actions to be taken, in which most documents, including the one of the European Commission, 2020, The Digital Education Action Plan, name the interested parties (Stakeholders).

In agreement with the authors of the UNICEF. Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (2020), UNESCO. Global Education Monitoring Report (2020), it is useful that any intervention to be carried out in an integrated way, not only for education, but also in other sectors: health, social, technological, political, administrative. Even if the pandemic has disrupted teaching and deepened inequalities between students, changes can be seen in the educational concept and school atmosphere, including the need to relate more closely, by raising awareness of the welfare of children, by focusing on safety, offering support and a more flexible curriculum. Therefore, reflecting early and jointly with teachers on educational initiatives can be a starting point in substantiating education policies.

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