



Exploring the students' perceptions regarding unethical practices in the Romanian educational system



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the students' perceptions regarding unethical practices in the Romanian educational system. This research topic is highly sensitive, because it is about teachers' deviations from norms and malpractices. The aims of our research are: to investigate the perceptions of Romanian students on the weight of unethical practices by comparison with appropriate pedagogical practices; to analyse the perception of students on the hierarchy of unethical practices; to draw comparisons between the respective perceptions regarding unethical practices by taking into account three variables (level of instruction, gender and residential status). The data was collected from a sample of 452 Romanian university and high-school students. The instrument we have used was a questionnaire, designed specifically for this purpose. The concept of unethical practices was operationalized into several categories of indicators: indicators of teaching practices, assessment practices indicators, indicators of relationship management and of teacher public behaviour. The results reveal several findings: (1) Romanian students are quite critical regarding the evaluation of their teachers' morality. (2) Favouritism and discrimination in assessment are perceived as the most frequent unethical practice. (3) High-school students are more critical than university students, boys are more critical than girls and those from the urban residence are more critical than those from the rural residence in terms of appreciating the morality of their teachers.

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1. Theoretical introduction

Teaching is a complex process, demanding special human qualities. It is said that teachers should be an example of morality. Working in education implies certain particularities, such as: it is a non-technical, human action, dependent upon others, inaccurate about the results, personalized and unique (Perrenoud, 1996). We often hear about 'good practices' related to teaching skills. By contrast, we assume that there also exist 'bad practices', which teachers should eliminate from their professional conduct. Unethical practices are considered taboo and discussed about only 'in a whisper'. Nevertheless, McPherson et al. (2003, p. 76) argue that two thirds of teachers engage in behaviours which demoralize students. The destructive aspects of communication studied by specialists include offensive messages, anger, disappointment, jealousy, embarrassment (Boice, 1996). The aim of our

research is to study the perceptions of Romanian high-school and university students upon several types of bad practices occurring in teacher behaviour. In order to achieve this purpose, we have elaborated our own definition of bad practices, accompanied by a classification of unethical practices related to teacher activity. Making use of the statistics from a survey among Romanian high-school and university students, it intends: to investigate the perception of Romanian students upon the percentage of unethical practices by comparison with proper pedagogical practices; to classify unethical practices according to their frequency and look at the comparison of perceptions of high-school and university students, boys and girls, rural and urban students.

A common concept, circulated in both domains, ethics and pedagogy, is "normativity". The theory of the educational process, called didactics, makes use of the notion of "didactic normativity" to describe the system of principles, norms and rules closely connected to the act of teaching, without including administrative and disciplinary regulations (Cerghit, 1992, p. 41). Călin (1996, pp. 65–66) prefers the expression "normativity of education", operationalizing it into teaching–learning–evaluation norms, as well as norms for the teacher–student relationship in the

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educational activity. Regarding our topic, our study focuses on the educators' deviations from norms. In order to understand the nature and gravity of the deviations, we shall explain several correlated concepts from the reference literature. Thus, in relation to the deviation from moral norms, we shall analyse the concept of immorality and, in relation to the deviation from pedagogical norms, we shall approach incompetence, didacticity, professional mistakes and teacher failure.

Immorality refers to wrong, morally "inappropriate" attitudes and behaviours, as well as conducts which contradict the standards accepted by the community (Fulmer, 2002). Let us circumscribe immorality in the teaching profession. Where is the border between what is allowed and what is forbidden in the educational activity? When can we categorize a person as "immoral"? Should we apply the same standards when talking about a teacher? There have been attempts to identify universal standards for defining the educators' "immorality", irrespective of community norms. For example, the attempts to engage students in intimate situations, inviting students outside school (to dine with the teacher, for example), approaching inappropriate discussion topics, physical contacts with the students, ordering alcoholic drinks and consuming them in front of students, smoking marijuana in front of students (Fulmer, 2002). Punke (1965, p. 53) has also included the legal meaning of immorality. He has argued that "the moral code for teachers is more rigid than for people in many vocations", because society expects teachers to be models. Labelling teacher behaviour as "immoral" does not lack ambiguities. On the one hand, parents and society expand the list of "immoral" situations involving educators, on the other hand, the latter have the right to protect their individual freedom, privacy. Nevertheless, society requires that teachers display certain special qualities, unlike other professional categories.

Another concept which caught our attention is incompetence. Incompetence is difficult to define, just like professional competence. The terminology itself is vague, with several terms being used simultaneously: incompetent teacher, teacher with poor achievements, poor-performance teachers, and marginal teacher. Tucker (1997) argues that incompetence is a concept without any precise technical meaning, and Menuey (2005, p. 320) claims that incompetence has an "extremely complex and multifaceted definition". Nevertheless, it is a phenomenon with multiple implications, as 5–15% of teachers are incompetent, but only 1% of them have their employment contracts terminated (Tucker, 1997, p. 104). For Wheeler and Haertel (1993, p. 70), incompetence is "failure to perform at a minimally acceptable level" for whatever reasons. Investigating the teachers' perception upon professional incompetence, Menuey (2005) has identified the relevance of several factors contributing to the definition of professional incompetence, relating it to widened professionalism, which covers several categories (managerial, didactic, relational internal and external), without insisting too much upon the ethical aspects (only one factor being connected to the ethical aspects).

Raths and Lyman (2003) identify several categories, from poor professional practices to best practices: criminality, malpractice, unethical behaviour, lack of basic skills, teaching incompetence, plain teaching and teaching with best practice. Somehow, the level structure of incompetence determines its contextualization. One may be a very good primary-school teacher, but not as good a high-school teacher, one may integrate very well in one type of school, but not as well in another. However, there are several standards based on which we may argue that deep incompetence may be identified, and the person who displays the respective flaws should not teach, irrespective of the educational cycle, type of school etc.

One concept which Poenaru (1992), Poenaru and Sava (1998) and Popovici (2000, p. 99) use is "didactogeny", as a negative effect occurring in the educational process, generated by a certain

behaviour of the teacher, other than the one imposed by the norms. Another key notion is "mistake". Kearney et al. (1991) have conceptualized mistakes as being "those behaviours which interfere with education and learning". Relying on the perceptions of students upon the way in which teachers annoy, demotivate and distract them from learning, Kearney et al. (1991) have identified 28 categories of mistakes, organized into three dimensions, as follows: *dimension I—incompetence; dimension II—offensiveness, dimension III—indolence*. Lewis and Riley (2009) establish a wider taxonomy of mistakes, reuniting three criteria: the axis commission–omission intercalated with the axis conscious–unconscious and the axis of legality (legal–illegal). Finally, there result eight categories of behaviours (Lewis and Riley, 2009). For the criterion of legality, all teacher misbehaviour could fall into two categories: the misbehaviour either does or does not break the existing law(s) of the land in which it takes place. For the commission–omission axis, commission refers to what teachers do to students that they ought not to, and omission refers to what teachers should but fail to do. These kinds of misbehaviour can be either consciously or unconsciously motivated. The first category, illegal behaviour, includes physical and sexual abuse, as well as financial cheats. The second category, behaviours which do not violate the law, includes an even wider range of manifestations, highly frequent, which affect a larger number of students than those from the first category.

Bridges (1974) proposes the concept of teacher failure, with the following typology: technical failure, bureaucratic failure, ethical failure, productive failure, personal failure. Weitz and Vardi (2007) use the concept of *organizational misbehaviour* (OMB), making an inventory of the terms related to realities tangent to OMB: noncompliant behaviour, workplace deviance, workplace aggression, antisocial behaviour, counterproductive behaviour, noncompliant behaviour etc. Barnett et al. (2007) argue for gradations in counsellor–client relationship boundaries, distinguishing between *boundary crossings* and *boundary violations*. Aultman et al. (2009) establish the following categories of limits in the teacher–student relationship: communication boundaries, cultural boundaries, emotional boundaries, personal boundaries, relational boundaries, temporal boundaries, institutional boundaries etc.

This theoretical incursion supports in delineating the scope of our investigation. The classifications presented are distinct by the fact that they explain the concept of bad practices from multiple perspectives:

- (a) By integrating and relating to the teaching activity in general, in terms of a teacher performance scale ranging from good to excellent teaching (Raths and Lyman, 2003). Such a conception may be useful in the activity of evaluating teachers, in developing tools to support this approach.
- (b) By referring only to bad practices, but in a very detailed, analytical manner (Kearney et al., 1991) or by including several classification criteria (Lewis and Riley, 2009) (type of teacher motivation, manifest behavior, legal implications of the acts performed). Thus, we discover that teachers may commit errors not only through certain ways of acting, but also through inaction.

The similarities between these classifications are few and they are related to the fact that most authors take into account the implications upon students and the evaluation from the juridical point of view of the respective behaviours (Raths and Lyman, 2003; Lewis and Riley, 2009). We have concluded that the teachers' bad practices are a nuanced and complex phenomenon that can be approached from an organizational (Weitz and Vardi, 2007), psychological (Kearney et al., 1991; Lewis and Riley, 2009), socio-pedagogical (Menuey, 2005; Aultman et al., 2009), juridical (Fulmer, 2002; Punke, 1965) perspective. A rigorous conceptual

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