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Two perspectives, same reality? How authentic is learning for students and for their teachers

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Abstract

The recent PISA results show that our 16 years old students are the most demotivated for learning from all participant countries. We assume that one of the reasons is related to the learning experiences students are living at that age level (upper secondary). In the research inspiring this article (based on an extensive survey on high school students and teachers) we tried to investigate the perception of students and their teachers on what is and how should be organized an authentic learning experience and an authentic learning environment. As shown by the results, the learning experiences are perceived quite differently in many extents by the two key actors involved (learners and teachers). The paradox of living the same educational reality and working in the same environment, but having different, even contradictory opinions, perceptions and meanings of them seem to be one of the causes for deficits in academic achievement and in motivational level of the high schools students in Romania. Some preliminary results of the research are presented and analysed in the frame of a broader conceptual framework for understanding authentic learning.

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1. When things are going down. Fall of a myth?

A well intentioned statement used in public policy field is that you cannot solve a problem unless you accept it exists. And for many years already it seems that large proportion of key stakeholders refuse to admit we have a problem with education. Not in education, but with education, as we have reasons to suspect it became endemic. For already quite a long time, we (well, some / many of us) argued we have an excellent education system. And the stereotypical way to support that statement was strongly related to arguments like: “we have olympics, we earned medals (again)”, “our kids learn in the 6th grade what they learn in country X in the 8th....”, etc. For a while we thought that “only” performance goes wrong, as it goes down. We didn’t like it, but improving performance is not impossible. Is completely possible if you find the reasons for performance deficits and you act in appropriate manner to prevent them. Performance falls could be prevented, solved if understood correctly and approached with direct interventions and appropriate tools. But now we know is not just performance that goes wrong. It is also the motivation of students for learning. The last PISA results published fall 2013 are not surprising necessarily by showing we perform well below OECD average, but what is really to be taken into account is the motivational factor, where Romania is completely alone, out of any normal statistical distribution (see fig. 1).

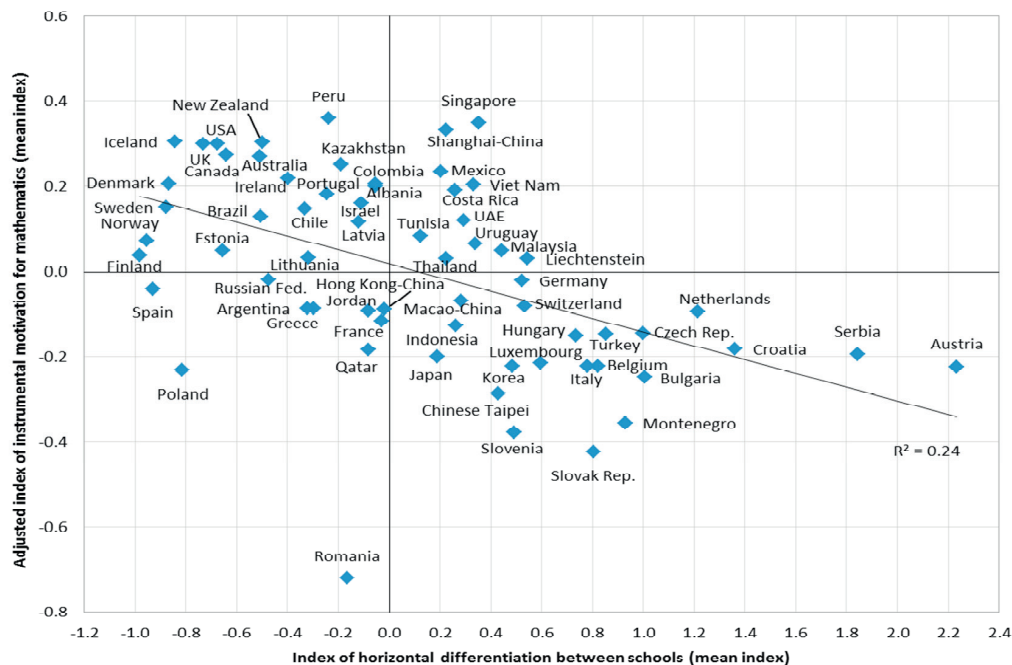


Fig. 1. Motivation and grouping of students. The situation in Romania.

Today nobody can explain evidence-based, in a scientific manner, why the situation looks like this, what makes our students so demotivated for learning, the most demotivated from participant countries. Our supposition at this point is that learning process as organized in schools and organization of schooling per se are lacking an important characteristic, which makes them not sufficiently attractive for new generations of students; students do not resonate in an authentic manner with their learning experiences and the impact of these experiences on them is rather poor. The myth of Romanian schools and students being highly competitive cannot be sustained any more on “side” realities, such as disciplinary Olympiads and high level of content / theory included in the school curriculum. Things are going down for quite a while, and now they became alarming. But, unfortunately, no consistent policy and research initiatives yet are in place to open the way for improvement.

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