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HOFSTEDE'S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The present article explores the impact of educational culture on the learning process considering Hofstede´s cultural dimensions as a model of analysis. Educational culture is understood as the combination of behaviours, beliefs and attitudes regarding the learning process. A diachronic study is presented throughout the last 60 years in Romania by describing the country's educational culture evolution. This time encompasses the communist period, the following and consecutive reforms after the fall of the regime and the implementation of democracy up to the present day. The study was carried out through 12 semi-structured interviews with 12 educated informants aged from 25 to 70 with university training in and out of the country which allowed them to have a comparative approach to other different educational cultures. The information offered by the informants was processed, checked and categorised by using NVivo a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software. The results show the main changes in the Romanian post-communist education and may indicate a decrease in some cultural dimension levels except Masculinity and Individualism which seem to have increased. Although these changes were studied mainly in the educational context, they can be understood as a result of the profound sociocultural transformations which have taken place in the country.

1. Introduction

1.1. Romanian Education

The communist regime carried out great measures to control the education and information which came to the classrooms. Education was characterised by rote learning (Misco, 2008) without stimulating the students to think critically by themselves. The main objective was, above all, the production force, guaranteed according to socialist planning, especially for heavy industry, energy and agriculture. The Communist education valued science and technical fields more than humanities or social sciences and pushed the young to get degrees in those areas.

In December 1989, the communist regime collapsed and marked a turning point in Romanian culture and society. The steps in the education system restructuring which started in 1993 were gradually implemented over the following years by creating a new curriculum, new textbooks, new managerial ways and vocational training, new materials and pedagogical and evaluative tools. Such changes, which imply a whole list of components, processes, institutions and social agents, hardly ever occur in the history of an educational system (Ulrich, 2001). As Romanian politicians moved towards democracy, officials clamoured for a more expansive reform, recognising that "democratic societies require citizens who can make informed judgements about controversial topics" (Misco, 2008, p. 8).

There has been an increasing change from a teacher centred approach to a student centred one. The reform has urged teachers and administrators to implement programs which put aside rote learning and encourage children to think critically. In general, motivational factors behind the reform are based on the expectations regarding a paradigm shift from the acquisition of information to training, from authoritarianism to autonomy, from the unilateral transmission of information to cooperation, from students' subordinate position to an active participation in pedagogical tasks. All these changes have had a relevant impact on the quality of the learning process (The Romanian Education System, 2011).

1.2. The cultural dimensions in the educational context

The theoretical framework of the variable Educational Culture in this study is based on Hofstede model of national culture (Hofstede, 2001). The following dimensions were explored in this study:

Individualism /Collectivism (IND)

This dimension measures the relation between individuals and groups. In collectivist societies, students who belong to the same ethnic group or clan, often form subgroups in the classroom. In individualist societies, team work allocation based on tasks can lead to new group formations more easily. Students from the same ethnic or family background expect preferential treatment on this basis. In an individualist society, this would be considered nepotism and intensely immoral Hofstede (2001).

Power Distance (PD)

Power Distance deals with the perception of power, authority and social inequalities. In the large power distance classroom, teachers are treated with respect. The educational process is teacher centred. In the classroom there is supposed to be an strict order, with the teacher initiating all communication. Student speak up only when invited to. In the small power distance classroom, teachers are supposed to treat their

students as basic equals and expect to be treated as equals by the students. The educational process is student centred and student initiative is rewarded (Hofstede, 2001).

Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)

UA can be observed through the importance given to rules, norms and correction. Countries exhibiting high UA maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas. According to Hofstede (2001), students are rewarded for being correct. However, when the level is low, the idea of having only one correct answer can be a taboo. Originality is rewarded.

Another UA level indicator can be the amount of order and structure in the education system and in the learning process.

Masculinity/ Femininity (MAS)

According to Hofstede (2001), High MAS, means competition, assertiveness and ambitiousness. Assertive behaviour and attempts at excelling, which are appreciated in masculine cultures, are easily ridiculed in feminine ones, where excellence is something one keeps to oneself. On the masculine side, students' academic performance is a dominant factors while on the feminine side students social adaptation plays a bigger role. In more feminine countries, the average student is the norm; in more masculine countries, the best student is the norm (Hofstede, 2001).

1.3. The cultural dimensions in Romania

Very few studies have been undertaken regarding the identification of cultural dimensions in Romania. One of these studies was conducted by Gallup International and Interact (Luca, 2005) using *Value Survey*. The results were evaluated on a scale of 0 to 100 (low level 0-40; 41-60 average, more than 60 high).

The study by Hofstede (2005) shows higher levels, particularly in Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance dimensions. According to Hofstede, the Romanian participants place themselves on a level of "what is desirable" rather than what is perceived as a real. Low levels of Power Distance and high levels of individualism would be within "what is desirable" and would explain Hofstede's higher level assumption and consequently the differences between both studies.
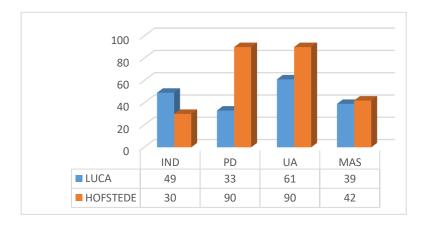
	IND	PD	UA	MAS
LUCA	49	33	61	39
HOFSTEDE	30	90	90	42

Figure 01. Cultural dimension levels in Romania (Luca, 2005; Hofstede, 2005)

2. Problem Statement

Today, globalization in education has reached an unprecedented development. Foreign students come with their own learning experiences acquired throughout their different training phases within the education system of their respective countries. These experiences, at the same time, have been reshaped by cultural assumptions and expectations and by what can be called "educational culture". This term is understood here as the combination of behaviours, beliefs and attitudes regarding the learning process, about what must or must not be done, what is correct or desirable or what is expected or not from the learning experience. Within the field of individual differences, the way in which one learns may derive from the way individuals have lived and have been taught. Teachers' awareness and knowledge about where the students come from, culturally speaking, may be of help when it comes to understand learning difficulties or adaptation problems caused by cultural differences in the educational context. Manikutty (2007) shows the difficulties migrant students can confront when learning in a foreign institution:

"Students are confronted by a new culture, a new educational system, and different learning and teaching styles, while their learning styles have been those imbibed by them in their schooling and early college days. They need to adapt to a very different teaching, collegial learning and administrative styles and in a different culture. […] This transition could be a difficult one for the migrant students as well as the receiving institutions and is likely to influence the performance of students, teaching faculty, and administrators in the host country" (Manikutty, 2007, p. 71).

When teachers don't recognise cultural differences, students may react negatively to the instruction and get poor learning outcomes. An individual's cultural values can establish a face-off between the host country expectations and past learning experiences. These questions may affect the academic, social and emotional success in the learning process. In order to improve the learning process, trainers need to understand their students' culture (Barmeyer, 2004).

3. Purpose of the Study

This study aims at describing and analysing the impact of Romanian educational culture on teaching and learning. Romanian educational culture was chosen as a model of profound social, educational and political transformation. The study follows Hofstede' s cultural dimension as a model of analysis.

4. Research Methods

In order to collect data about the Romanian educational culture, an in-depth semi structured interview was designed. Following Canales (2006), the interview aimed at exploring individuals' perceptions about their educational experiences according to their own views on education, behaviours, values and beliefs acquired within the corresponding framework of reference. The interview gathered information about the meanings and views the informants attributed to the educational culture.

In-depth interview work is not as concerned with making generalizations to a larger population of interest. The aim of in-depth interviews is to create "categories from the data and then to analyse relationships between categories" while attending to how the "lived experience" of research participants can be understood (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1162).

The kind of analysis was descriptive interpretative through the identification and categorization of elements (topics, behaviours, meanings and contents) and the exploration of their connections.

Recruitment was done through existing organizations and networks, enlisting the assistance of a contact person to gain entree (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992) and also through networks of colleagues and community organizations (Hawe, Degeling, & Hall, 1990). Institutions like Instituto Cervantes in Bucharest, through its student and colleague network played also an important part in the recruitment process.

The sample consisted of 12 educated Romanian informants aged from 25 to 70 with university training in and out of the country, this was the main selection criterion as training in a foreign country was thought to be a main factor which would allow them to have a comparative approach to other different educational cultures. The criterion for judging when to stop sampling was the category's theoretical saturation. Urquhart (2013). It was considered a sufficient sample size as the same stories, themes, issues and topics were emerging from the interviewees (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

The information was processed, checked and categorised by using *NVivo* a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software.

The interview

Before starting the interview, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study to the interviewee, why he or she had been chosen, expected duration of the interview, how the information would be kept confidential, and the use of a digital voice recorder. Once informed consent was obtained from the participant, the interviewer addressed all questions or topics listed in the interview guide. Most of them in the form of open-ended questions to elicit unstructured talk from participants about their educational experiences and recollections. The interviewer asked follow-up questions (some of which were scripted in the interview guide) in order to elicit participants' complete knowledge and experience related to his or her education throughout the different educational levels. The interviewer also probed participants for elaboration of their responses, with the aim of learning all they can share about the research topic. Probing continued until the researcher felt they had reached saturation, a full understanding of the participant's perspective. Therefore, saturation operated not only at the level of the dataset as a whole, but in relation to the data provided by an individual participant.

Every interview lasted between 50 and 60 minutes All the interviews took place in Bucharest and were done in Romanian except some remarks in English.

The interviews started by asking about the informant's school recollections in general and from this point, the interviewer explored teacher – student relationships, teaching methods, feelings and kinds of behaviours. The same questions were asked regarding secondary and university education, encouraging the informants to report if there had been changes between cycles, teacher's role, unacceptable or desirable behaviours, etc. During the whole interview, those factors or aspects related to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, particularly within an educational context, were investigated, like for example, the communication level between teachers and students (Power Distance), the amount of structure or the importance of norms (Uncertainty Avoidance).

Following Boyce & Neale (2006), in presenting results, qualitative descriptors have been used rather than try to "quantify" the information. Qualifiers such as "*the prevalent feeling was that . . .,*" or "*several participants strongly felt that . . .,*" or even "most participants agreed that . . ." have been used).

5. Findings

The information was organised and categorised following Hofstede´s cultural dimensions model but that did not exclude coding from the same data. The analysis model related to the contents listed in the interview guide. Cultural dimensions were considered the main categories. Within each dimension, several subcategories arose.

5.1. Individualism /Collectivism

Students' relationships (subcategory 1)

According to the informants' reports, during the communist period, the relations between students in the rural areas were established by birthplace, particular at secondary education, as there used to be one education centre which gathered students from the surrounding villages.

On the contrary, all of the younger informants (born in 1990s) reported that at secondary education and at the university, there used to be a lower level of group cohesion. Alex states: "there was no unity, no friendship, everyone on his own".

In collectivist societies, if a student is a teacher's family member or an administrative official' s one, he expects to be treated differently due to this condition. Bogdan reported on an example that had taken place in the 80s:

> "*A teacher of history organised a literary club, In summer we used to go on trips, visit ethnographic and history museums, archaeological sites…You had to get grade 8/10 to belong to this club. There were many classmates who suffered because there could not be admitted, but there was an exception, a girl who hadn't got that grade. She was the school economic director's daughter. […] We had to get used to it*".

Communication/Interaction (subcategory 2)

Several participants agreed that during the communist years, students would pay attention to others' judgement about their behaviour. This kind of feelings usually takes place in a community where meanings are implicit and shared by the group. Lacramiara said: "*We were afraid of asking, of saying we hadn't understood. I used to feel this and I think my classmates used to feel the same. We felt strange, embarrassed, I am stupid if I haven't understood*". The prevalent feeling was that there used to be two separate spaces: the teacher's and the student's. They would maintain little intercommunication. It's an space of one-way communication from the teacher to the students whose behaviour was expected to be passive.

After the 90's new textbooks were introduced and little by little, classes began to be more interactive, by introducing pair and team work. According to the younger informants´ reports, there has been a trend towards higher levels of individualism in the educational context, since the Reform has encouraged teachers to promote autonomy, creativity and critical thinking. Alex, one of the youngest informants said "*I think that most teachers tried to make us think, not just rote learning but learning through understanding*".

5.2. Power Distance

Teacher-student relations/ teacher's role (subcategory 1)

Alexandra, one of the informants compared the teacher-student relations at the university between Spain and Romania basing on her experience as an university student at the University of Granada in the 2010's. She pointed out a smaller distance in Spain and stated that the education she received in Romania prevented her from talking to her Spanish teachers with the Spanish distance level (same level):

"*What called my attention here (in Spain) was the teacher's respect for the students, the fact that it seems that there is an equal relation, that the teacher is not "up there", overbearing, the one who knows everything, and you, the stupid student, who has no idea. This is the Romanian university teachers' image I have. […] In Romania, everybody uses the formal "you" whereas in Spain students use the informal way. I can't call a professor by his name or by "tu" (the informal "you" in Spanish). In this respect, I didn't adapt" Most of the informants strongly felt this high level of power distance between students and teachers*".

On the other hand, most informants agreed that during the communist time, teachers were information transmitters and students had to reproduce it. According to Lacramiara, "*there were not good or bad teachers, with no talent, there were all the same. Some subjects didn't exist because they would include ideas and personal ideas were not accepted. You didn't have to have ideas at that time*". Several participants strongly felt that the lack of development of ideas and critical thinking led the student to adopt a passive role. In the last 20 years teachers have increasingly moved from a reproductive learning approach to a more reflective one based on problem solving. Along with these changes, the youngest informants reported changes in the teacher-student relations and indicate warm relation with their tutors particularly during the compulsory education. After the 90's Dan noted that: "*we could have a talk to them (the teachers), there wasn't any problem. They were available after classes, via e-mail, mobile phone, things changed a lot*". However, several participants points out that teacher-student relations at the university are still, in many cases, quite strict.

5.3. Uncertainty Avoidance

Rules and norms (subcategory 1)

During the communist time, Lacramiara pointed out: "you had to follow the marked path". Most participants felt that every behaviour or trend out of the standard was refrained. The atmosphere at school was described as very restricted. The best pupil was the one who was sitting without doing anything, without taking initiatives. Rules and procedures should be respected. Dan stated that the school before the 90's was quite formalist. and added: "It was a less open school than the typical Anglo-Saxon one where you can communicate openly. Obviously here, you talked only when you were allowed"

Importance of correction (subcategory 2)

Most participants agreed that during the communist time, the education system gave a lot of importance to correction. Students expected to be rewarded for accuracy. Lacramiara indicated this value in her description of an English session: "We had to do the homework, we corrected it, it was less important the content than the correct writing. For this reason, we also had to read the lesson aloud […]. A classmate was chosen and the rest of the classroom used to check their answers comparing them with the correct form

which was said out loud and written on the board". On the contrary, the younger informants felt that, particularly in the Primary Education, there was room for creativity, they were involved in open-ended activities where they had to think by themselves. The emphasis was more on the learning process.

The amount of structure in learning (subcategory 3)

Most informants reported a high level of structure in their classes, with the exception of the transition period (1990 -1995). Informants described those years as chaotic because nobody could understand what was supposed to be done or taught. At that time, Adriana pointed out that teachers taught within a socialist economy and they were supposed to change into a "nice kind of capitalist teaching in 24 hours". They didn't have the skills and they were afraid.

5.4. Masculinity

Competition and the evaluation system (subcategory 1)

A distinctive feature of the Romanian education system is the high number of exams. Apart from class subjects evaluation, there are exams to gain entry to every educational level and also at the end of the different cycles. The entry exams were very demanding and students had to get the highest marks to get a place. This situation has lasted until today as the youngest informants reported very tough competition as only the students with the best results gain entry to the best centres. Colleges are ranked by prestige. Access to a good high school can make an important difference in training and in the academic career. In such a context, praising the best, is part of this culture of "excellence" in which performance has priority over social adaptation. In this sense, and considering competitiveness as a male trait, (Téllez & Verdú, 2011), one could say that the Romanian educational system has become, in this regard, less feminine in the period after the revolution.

6.   Conclusion

To show how educational culture can affect learning processes, the Romanian educational culture during the last 50 years can be taken as a good example due to the important reforms which have taken place at all educational levels in the country since the fall of the communist regime.

The Romanian educational culture was studied considering Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The model of analysis took into account the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs associated to these dimensions. After analysing and categorising the reports of twelve educated informants, it might be inferred that the post-communist Romanian education system could be experiencing a decrease in some cultural dimension levels, particularly regarding PD and UA if we attend to the younger informants' reports. The new programs and curricula are implementing a student-centred approach which is allowing for more student participation, creativity and autonomy in the learning process and affecting the distance between students and teachers as well as the attitudes and behaviours related to uncertainty avoidance. With reference to IND and MAS, they could have increased if we consider the information provided in relation to group cohesion and level of competition.

This study shows how changes in the educational culture may affect the learning process particularly regarding aspects such as communication patterns, participation, level of structure, importance given to rules, performance expectations, or teacher-student relations among others. When we talk about students

studying abroad, an individual's educational culture can enter into conflict with the one in the host country. Raising awareness of this issue is the first step to understanding and dealing with the potential difficulties regarding these kinds of intercultural differences

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