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Some complementary perspectives in understanding the axiological universe of teachers

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Abstract

The values in which teachers believe express the philosophy of education to which they adhere. Our study is based on two related dimensions: the study of the specialised literature and the conclusions of some studies that we have conducted in the last 5 years regarding the values in which the teachers at different stages of the Romanian education system believe. Its purpose: to identify significant perspectives for the complementary analysis of the teacher's axiological universe. We identified, developed and systematised the following perspectives: contemporary world and the dimension of values; initial and continuous teacher training and the issue of values; on axiological self-reflexivity and its effects and the transfer of values and the holistic evolution of the teacher. The conclusions reinforce the teacher's hypostasis as reflexive practitioner with profound implications, both on the day-to-day performance of the instructive-educational process and on the reconsideration of the coordinates of their initial/continuing training.

Keywords: Values, teacher's axiological universe, reflexive practitioner.

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1. Brief introduction

The idea of conducting a longitudinal study on the values, in which teachers (still) believe, has gradually grown as years have added experience to our work, and the experience has added years to working with different categories of teachers, of various ages, qualifications and from different levels of the Romanian education system in the context of the debates on the values of the world/society in which we live (and will live) and, at the same time, the neglect of the research/preoccupations regarding the spiritual world of teachers. Our relationship with them, the activities carried out, the formal and non-formal contexts that we have shared together over the past 30 years of teaching have begun to increasingly emphasise the importance of the role of teachers' values for their professional approach. Moreover, we have confirmed the point of view of Bloom and Ellis (2009, p. 2), namely that a teacher cannot progress professionally, cannot develop skills unless he/she is a reflexive practitioner; this necessarily implies 'the examination of the way in which each value belief influences teacher behaviour in the classroom'. In this context, the project of identifying and analysing the axiological universe of Romanian teachers was born in 2010. This was reflected in a number of 19 studies presented at different conferences and published in specialised volumes. The questionnaire-based research conducted has enabled us to identify successively the values in which teachers (from pre-school, primary, middle, high school, university) and students preparing for the teaching career (still) believe. This study aims to present the most relevant synthesis aspects that resulted from the project.

2. Values—the heart—philosophy of education

The starting point of our approach was the theoretical groundwork on the issue of values, their specificity and role in the didactic approach. As we pointed out in one of our previous studies (Cojocariu, 2012), from the pedagogical point of view, the values express the education philosophy to which each teacher adheres and which he expresses (implicitly/explicitly). Their role is vital because they set the pillars of the whole professional approach, regulate the relationships between the teacher and himself, the teacher and his whole work, the teacher and students, provide the foundation for classroom climate and relationships with students' families, school management and the community, imprinting a direction and significance. On this basis, we have identified, developed and systematised the following four complementary perspectives for analysing the teachers' axiological universe:

2.1. The contemporary world and the issue of values in relation to education

The current Romanian society and, implicitly, education, generally speaking, are marked by a series of features that DO NOT support (sufficiently, consistently and coherently) the transmission and transfusion of authentic values, but, on the contrary, seem to erode the social and individual axiological foundation. In an attempt to radiograph and systematise them, we mention the following:

- The phenomenon of 'dissolution, lack and ambiguity of values' (Cucos, 2017, p. 16) reaches the extent of a real/profound crisis of values. It may affect the teacher's relating to himself and his students, reaching a case where the teacher loses the path of authentic values, displaying contradictory or dual manifestations, generating, in turn, axiological ambiguity and deficiency.
- The decisive and all-encompassing impact of technology in a world that is becoming 'extremely flexible, fluid, overflowing with possibilities and reticence to any immobilisation' (Bauman, 2000, p. 211). In this world, there is room for many things 'but no room for the moral subject' (p. 215–216), who feels like a stranger, 'the most obvious and most important of the victims of technology' (p. 215). The teacher not only has to use the technology as an auxiliary in the teaching process or in the (school and extra-school) communication process but it is possible to begin, as he uses it, to lose the consistency and continuity of his value beliefs.

- The gradual replacement of the monism of values with the relativistic axiological dimension (Marga, 2014)—Gardner (2012) argues that in our polymorphic and fragmentary world, it is increasingly difficult to share a secure, universal and unique system of values. In this context, ‘the moral ego cannot survive and does not survive polymorphism and fragmentation. Therefore, the issue of values and their bases, the relationship between axiological perennality and transience becomes one of the most exciting aspects’ (Cojocariu & Albu, 2015, p. 304). For the teacher who has believed in work as a primary value and practiced it systematically, there may come a moment when he finds that others around him cherish, more comfortably, non-work. This finding can lead to deep self-seeking and searching, which will also be reflected in the interaction with students, the exigencies for them.
- The unprecedented manifestation of hyper-individualism that encourages exclusive self-care and indifference towards others (Lipovetsky, 2007). Sevilla (2009) noticed the fact that we now live in a society ruled by king-individualism and the praise of immediate pleasure. He found that ‘our epoch has placed the individual at the centre of everything’ (2009, p. 36). The extension of hyper-individualism at the formative level almost means the cancellation of the individual. Because educating begins with caring about the other.
- Over-sized accents of a pragmatic nature at the level of social and education policy, with unilateral and narrowly hyper-specialised connection to the labour market. The way in which teaching and learning, the typology and marking of national exams, the way in which teachers are professionally evaluated and promoted may be affected and, in particular, limited and drained of their rich formative sap through unilateralisation.
- Trends of exacerbated application of mathematical and/or statistical models to the human universe [causing a real impoverishment of the latter, a transformation of education into a dry ‘accounting approach’ (Gardner, 2012, p. 28) to understanding/explaining/transforming human nature]. Schools where students mean a number of clients, a budget allocation, where teachers are reduced to a wage cost, buildings are material costs and teachers’ professional development is measured only by published articles or credits accumulated at different courses (it does not matter where and by whom these courses are delivered!) are only a few excrescences of this loss.
- Predominantly quantitative and bureaucratic occupational requirements addressed to teachers/students, accompanied by a relative forgetfulness/shadowing of qualitative aspects. School performance (meaning high marks, successful examinations, promotion/graduation/access to university studies) is obstinately aimed at. However, school performance, although epistemologically relying on the interdependence between knowledge and skills, cannot be ensured without an axiological orientation (Cojocariu, 2014). Teachers are required, immediately after graduation, *hic et nunc*, to quickly get the best possible results in their scientific training (theirs and that of their students!), without any obvious and sustainable interest in their complete training, also with regard to the long-term axiological dimension (as spirit, as people, as citizens). The world of education seems NO LONGER interested in building ‘skills to be HUMAN’ (Cucos, 2017, p. 25).

As can be seen from this wide range of manifestations of the contemporary society, in spite of acquisitions in knowledge, technology, comfort and material gains, the Romanian society does not seem to generate profound positive axiological effects. As regards college teachers, there is a diminution of the reflective and meta-reflective aspect of their activity and, correspondingly, an increase in the weight of bureaucratic and managerial activity (Cojocariu, 2013). In this context, at the same time (and paradoxically!!!), teachers are asked to remain (and they do continue to remain!!!), despite all the pressures and crises they bear, true models and, first of all, moral models (Mergler, 2008). Synthetically, what defines the contemporary world and the issue of values in relation to education may be condensed in the following seven aspects: 1) value dissolution, deficiency and ambiguity; 2) the decisive/all-encompassing impact of technology; 3) relativisation of the axiological dimension; 4) exacerbation of hyper individualism; 5) overshadowing pragmatism; 6) exaggerating the transfer of mathematical and/or statistical models to the human universe; 7) prevailing quantitative and bureaucratic occupational requirements. For the world of education, the axiological universe is

trembling, axiological options may be contradictory, real moral and professional dilemmas appear and are manifested.

2.2. Initial and continuous teacher training and the issue of values

The process of training for the teaching career and, implicitly, the teaching-learning process should be recovered and rethought in an axiological manner as 'a morals and value-based process' (Mergler, 2008, p. 1) or as a process of 'embedding values' (Marga & Trif, 2009, p. 4). We may think that in the process of teacher training, one can shape their ability to assimilate and display the values and attitudes favourable to the whole specific of the field as a component of their personality profile. Sachs (2005) provides a solid argument in this respect when correlating the axiological dimension with the professional identity of the teacher. He integrates a series of beliefs and values which "provide a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society" (p. 15). Ursery (2002) shows, to the same effect, that 'one's own system of values provides the foundation for one's personal and professional judgments and choices' (p. 1). In this way, the values are placed at the heart of each teacher's personality ego, practically generating one's axiological profile (Cojocariu, 2015a). Often, teacher training and professional development carries and is, unfortunately, limited, especially to the area of specialty and didactic training. Understood in a reductionist and mechanic way by some specialists and/or decision-makers as a purely technical process in which assimilation and application of tools and rules ensure the learning of content, education is not only mistaken for instruction but eventually loses, even for teachers themselves, its essential axiological foundation (Cojocariu, 2015a; 2015b). Thus, the educational process is about to lose its 'heart and soul' (Gulati & Pant, 2008). One of the possible ways to mitigate this trend of fundamental human loss could be a reconsideration of the process of admitting students to the teaching study programme (Cojocariu, 2014), but also of the study programme itself. There are authors (Raths, 2001) who believe that introducing an evaluation of beliefs and values as one of the admission criteria would be appropriate. Precisely, because prospective teachers have enough experience as students, they already learn how to be teachers directly from the experience through a process called observational teaching practice (Kennedy, 1997). Along the path of this popular pedagogy, they have built 'deeply rooted beliefs and tendencies' (Raths, 2001, p. 1), certain solid beliefs about the role of education, school performance, what is good or bad in the classroom, what and how they would like to work in the classroom, what the existence of certain values and preconceptions in this respect implicitly means (Cojocariu, 2014). This delicate and empathetic assessment would place us, teachers and fresh students who inaugurate the training process for the teaching career, at the beginning of the process of '*values clarification*' (Raths, 2001, p. 3). Practically, it means a trajectory of full examination of one's own beliefs. These should be known and recognised, analysed and accepted, including in terms of the implications they determine in one's life (professional and personal), and eventually turned into values. The experiments conducted by the quoted author have highlighted the fact that the values clarification process is slow and not always successful (Cojocariu, 2014). Of course, this assessment may reflect an existing stage, at a certain moment, of the beliefs and values of those wishing to become teachers, without putting labels or establishing ultimate verdicts. It is, rather, for future students, an opportunity to become aware of one's value points and a possible moral-character evolution. It is not about uniformity, but about generating the motivation for enrichment and refinement. It follows that it is possible to intervene both in the initial evaluation/training process for the didactic career and also subsequently, in continuous training, with curriculum vectors (content and methodologies) of a formative and reflexive character that ensure the integration of the process of values clarification as a profound element of continuity of professional development. Of course, this would require unitary mechanisms established in the education policy plan to promote and stimulate this effort. Synthetically, what characterises the initial and continuous teacher training from the contemporary perspective of the issue of values may be systematised in the following seven dimensions: 1) the ability to assimilate and manifest values favourable to the whole specific of the field; 2) the ability to assimilate and manifest attitudes

favourable to the whole specific of the field; 3) reconsideration of the process of admission of students to the teaching study programme; 4) evaluation of beliefs and values as one of the admission criteria; 5) the beginning of the process of values clarification from the point of view of the teaching career; 6) continuation of the process of values clarification from the point of view of the teaching career and 7) integrating the process of values clarification throughout one's entire life.

2.3. On axiological self-reflexivity and its effects

Even more relevant is Atkin's (1996) recommendation that stressed the need/impact of an axiological reflection of the teacher himself on his own work, identifying the values, beliefs and priorities that underpin his choices and approaches. As he becomes more axiologically self-reflexive, there increases the likelihood that he may reconsider his own goals and re-organise multiple 'right ways' to approach education (Bloom & Ellis, 2009, p. 2). Another possible effect could be the evaluation of their impact in relation to the school community. Both may become relevant steps in optimising the formative activity and in the transition from values and beliefs about learning to principles and practice. Atkin (1996, pp. 4–17) will graphically, accurately and expressively illustrate and exemplify the relation of congruent determination and becoming between the basic values of teachers, the principles deriving from these and practical behaviours as the living expression of personal values. In the '90s, Pajares (1992) analysed the special relevance of teacher beliefs for their educational practice, reaching the conclusion that these represent 'the most valuable psychological construct for teacher education' (p. 308). And this effect is neither accidental nor minimal. As previously highlighted (Cojocariu, 2015a), the impact of the axiological transfer is profound for all the actors involved (Harecker, 2012): for teachers, because values will become impregnated into the entire teaching process and will be transferred to students (Sunley & Locke, 2010); for students, because they will internalise values and place them at the root of their training, orienting their entire becoming on the long term; for parents, because they will become aware of the model they represent and the impact (convergent with the school or, on the contrary!) they have/may have. 'In the absence of values, individuals are disoriented, act randomly or are driven by immediate interests, lack of constancy and moral relevance in their behaviour, are opportunistic and try to find a justification for any type of action' (Cojocariu, 2015a, p. 525).

Synthetically, what defines successively the axiological self-reflexivity of teachers and its effects on the partners of the formative act can be systematised in the following seven dimensions: 1) identifying one's own values, beliefs and practices; 2) analysing one's own values, beliefs and practices; 3) reconsidering one's goals, pathways and formative practices; 4) effects for teachers—a more conscious and efficient axiological transfer; 5) effects for students—a deeper and more thorough internalisation of a conscious set of values, beliefs and practices; 6) effects for parents—awareness of their role of model, their option for a convergent formative action (or not???) with the school and 7) increasing the consistency of the consciousness and moral conduct of those involved.

2.4. The transfer of values and the holistic evolution of the teacher

What makes the education process more interesting as an act of enculturation is the fact that the transfer of values (known—unknown, conscious—unconscious, assumed—not assumed) may be simultaneously or successively achieved in two ways, equally rich in impact: explicitly (direct, intentional, organised) and implicitly (indirect, unintentional, unorganised). In either of them (explicit curriculum and hidden curriculum), the transfer is values-laden (Brady, 2011) and combines personal and social dimensions in a different way, from one teacher to another. For the multiple and complementary analyses elaborated in the literature, there may be considered the studies by Mogonea & Mogonea (2015), Celebi, (2014), Harecker (2012), Panti & Wubbels (2012), Collinson (2012), Brady (2011), Tirri (2011), Sirin, Ryce and Mir (2009), Lovat (2008), Slater (2008), Kohn (1997). These cover different facets of the problem of the axiological universe of teachers, also revealing

its complexity and depth (Cojocariu, 2017). As previously shown (Cojocariu & Albu, 2014), the axiological grid of each teacher is extremely important because it becomes a defining aspect of personal/professional identity that will impact each student. Even though the teaching process implies, on the one hand, so-called neutral values (knowledge from different fields or skills, e.g., reading, mathematical computations), they cannot be separated (Slater, 2008) from teaching the values that accompany them (perseverance in the learning effort, respect for those with whom we work, compliance with rules). In agreement with him, we appreciate that ‘teaching is as much a moral effort as it is an intellectual enterprise; teachers not only educate students how to think and solve problems, they also inform student’s beliefs about what is right, good and important in life, shaping their values in the process’ (p. 47). At the same time, studies have begun to increasingly recall and reconfirm the impact of a special category of factors upon the quality of education: teachers’ beliefs/feelings, the ideas/force states that determine their action in the classroom and beyond (Cojocariu, 2016). In our own studies (Cojocariu, 2015b; 2016), we have shown that from this point of view, it is helpful to understand the axiological sets with which teachers operate on a daily basis in their professional and personal life as a whole. Outside this self-reflexive approach, ‘the teaching process remains purely technical, blind to the whole beauty and diversity of the humane in human, as well as to its full potential that can be revealed and developed’ (Cojocariu, 2016, p. 136). Synthetically, what illustrates the transfer of values and the holistic evolution of the teacher may be systematised in the following seven dimensions: 1) the transfer of values may be explicit; 2) the transfer of values may be implicit; 3) everything is axiologically impregnated (there are no absolutely neutral values); 4) the teacher evolves as a teacher; 5) the teacher evolves as a trainer; 6) the teacher evolves as a member of the community and 7) the teacher evolves as a man.

3. Conclusions and future directions

The results obtained from the previous four-step analysis, each generating a set of seven partial conclusions, may be synthetically traced in Table 1.

Table 1. A possible model of complementary perspectives for understanding the teacher’s axiological universe

Complementary perspectives for understanding the teacher’s axiological universe
1) The contemporary world and the issue of values in relation to education—the spirit of the contemporary world is shaken, the value options are/can be contradictory, real moral and professional dilemmas appear and are manifested (the socio-cultural perspective)
2) Initial and continuous teacher training and the issue of values—the need/possibility/availability of initial/continuous teacher training to re-become a process of values clarification (the pedagogical perspective)
3) The axiological self-reflexivity and its effects—significant positive changes in the axiological universe of those involved in the educational process (moral perspective)
4) The transfer of values and holistic evolution of the teacher—a complete evolution of the teacher (the psycho-socio-pedagogical perspective)
Teacher training should re-become a value-based, psycho-pedagogical and socio-cultural process

These highlight the idea of the permanent presence of values in the teacher’s life/activity and their global impact, in a world unprecedentedly marked by an authentic crisis of values. The configured model reaffirms the reflexive teacher’s paradigm and gives it extensive significance that goes beyond the meta-reflective act aimed at the curriculum or design of the formative approach, reaching their foundation, beliefs, values and principles that underpin them. For a real reflexive teacher-practitioner, the axiological dimension of its approach is a new challenge that will increasingly imply, in the future, the reconsideration of certain coordinates of the initial/continuous teacher training process and the actual teaching process (Etherington, 2013; Mergler, 2008; Taylor, 2000; Values Education Study, 2003). Briefly, the teacher cannot exist and act outside the values without losing himself and others. We believe that it is essential that he constantly cultivates the best values of humanity, for the service

of the innocence of the childhood universe and the support of the growth of younger generations in the spirit of the classic values of Truth, Good, Beauty and Sacred, in an actual way, that may acquire the expected resonance.

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