THE NEED TO PROMOTE ELITISM IN EDUCATION

Mircea VLADU

“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
vladumircea57@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The idea of elaborating this article came to me after reading over and over again the content of Art.2 paragraph (1) of the National Education Law no.1 / 2011, with subsequent amendments and completions, a very important normative act for the present, but especially for the future of Romania, according to which „The law aims to promote an education oriented on values, creativity, cognitive abilities, volitional abilities and action capacities, fundamental knowledge and competencies/skills and abilities of direct utility, in the professional life and in the society. Anyone who reads the content of Art.2 paragraph (1) is entitled to believe that the most efficient secondary and higher education in the world is taking place in Romania. Unfortunately, when reading and analyzing the content of Art.3, it can be seen quite easily that the principles governing secondary and higher education, as well as lifelong learning in Romania have a more declarative character, i.e. there is one thing written on paper and something else is happening in reality. I would like to continue to talk about this, with arguments, supported by my knowledge and experience in the field of education, starting with September 1979, when I first entered a classroom consisting of military students, from the highly flattering position of instructor and educator and until now, after a lifetime of working in classrooms, laboratories, amphitheatres and auditoriums of several military and civilian higher education institutions, in the honorary position of university professor doctor habilitat and chairman of the University Ethics Commission.*

Keywords: vision, non-vision, secondary and higher education, principles

1. Introduction

It has recently been 42 years since I first stepped into a classroom as a teacher, shaking both of joy and excitement, generated by the obsessive questions: „What if I will not do well and the students will not appreciate me? What if my hand starts to shake when I write on the board and the students would think that I do not have the necessary skills to explain the processes and phenomena?”. Forty-two years have already passed and none of what I assumed happened to me and this was due to the fact that I did my job as a teacher with passion, devotion, self-confidence and the desire to give to those who were my

trainees, students, master students a lot of the knowledge I had accumulated over the years. And I had certainly accumulated a lot because I also had brilliant teachers who taught me what to learn, how to learn and what to do in order for those to whom I addressed in a classroom, a laboratory, an amphitheatre, an auditorium etc., to understand what I was saying, convinced that it was useful in their lives.

2. Analysis of the vision promoted by the normative acts specific to the national education before and after December 1989

At any stage of my position as a teacher, I

tried to understand what vision the normative act in force promotes, in order to understand what kind of education I should direct my efforts towards. I studied very carefully Law no. 28 of December 21, 1978 - The Law on Education, issued by the Great National Assembly and published in the Official Gazette no. 113 of December 26, 1978 and I found that it promoted a very clear vision [1] regarding the way of planning, organizing and conducting education in Romania. At the same time, I found that the principles governing education were presented very clearly in the content of Articles 1 to 11, without ambiguity and without any room for interpretations. From this perspective, I understood that [2]: (1) education was considered a factor of culture and civilization; (2) the citizens of the Socialist Republic of Romania had the right to education, regardless of nationality, race, gender or religion and without any other restriction that could have constituted discrimination; (3) was exclusively state education; (4) was conducted in Romanian language; (5) cohabiting nationalities shall be provided with the free use of the native language in all levels of education; (6) the whole education was free (no education fees were charged for any form of education, the state bearing all the expenses for providing the teaching staff and the material resources necessary for the educational process, and for primary, secondary, high school and vocational education school textbooks would be provided free of charge); (7) pupils and students benefited from the state or socialist units from scholarships and other forms of material support, under the conditions established by law; (8) the education system was organized in a unitary conception and included the preschool, primary, gymnasium, high school, vocational, foremen schools and higher education; (9) compulsory education used to be for a period of 10 years; (10) it was an open education, the graduates of a form of

education, having the possibility to continue their studies in higher forms, (11) the education had to ensure the youth a thorough training in the exact fundamental sciences - mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology; (12) education was conducted on the basis of the principle of integration with production, scientific research and planning.

I realized that the principles that governed education in those days were very clear and easy to remember. I also realized that they were applied in practice, as I had been myself the beneficiary of their application, who, by then, I had graduated from eight years of study from a military high school and a military school of active officers. At the same time, I applied these principles as an instructor and educator at the military school I graduated from in 1979 and where I first worked in my military career, after graduating as top of the class in the most numerous number of graduates from the military branch in which I had trained.

When the events of December 1989 occurred, I was studying at the Military Academy, after having successfully passed the admission exam on the first place, in a competition of eight candidates for one place. The fact that I graduated from the Military Academy first in the military branch in which I had trained, gave me the opportunity to compete for and win a position of assistant professor and to continue the noble profession of teacher in a military higher education institution. Just like when I graduated from the military school, I tried to ground my activity at the new job starting from what was provided by Decision no. 521/1990 on the organization and functioning of education in Romania in the school (academic) year 1990/1991. I understood very well from the study of this normative act that [3]: (1) Romanian citizens had the right to education, regardless of nationality, race, gender or religion and without any other restriction that could constitute a violation of fundamental human rights;

(2) education in Romania had an open character, each citizen being ensured access to all levels and forms of education, as well as the possibility to pass from one type of school to another, by taking difference exams. The state ensures protection conditions and the protection of minors up to the age of 16, by including them in various forms of education or protection; (3) education of all levels was conducted in Romanian language, and for national minorities conditions for learning their native language were provided and, as appropriate, training in the native language, (4) all education was subordinated to the Ministry of Education, which was responsible for organizing the content and control of the instructive-educational process.

I started working, as a young assistant professor, being aware that the normative act is clear to me and I can do my job accordingly.

Since 1994, my life has given me the opportunity to work in a central structure of the Ministry of National Defence and to continue working as a teacher, as an associate. Therefore, I had to study further the content of Law no. 84 of July 24, 1995, the Law on Education, and I found the same clarity of the principles governing education, inserted in the content of articles 2-8, as follows [4]: (1) in Romania, education was a national priority; (2) education aimed at achieving the educational ideal based on humanistic traditions, on the values of democracy and on the aspirations of the Romanian society and contributed to the preservation of the national identity; (3) education had as finality the formation of the human personality; (4) Romanian citizens had equal access rights to all levels and forms of education, regardless of social and material condition, gender, race, nationality, political or religious affiliation; (5) compulsory general education was of eight years of study and this compulsory education ceased at the age of 16; (6) state

education was free, except for some activities where taxes may be levied, in accordance with the law; (7) education of all types was conducted in Romanian language, and persons belonging to national minorities had the right to learn in their native language and the right to be trained in this language, according to the law; (8) the study and learning in school of the Romanian language, as an official state language, were compulsory for all Romanian citizens; university autonomy is guaranteed.

Unfortunately, the National Education Law no. 1 was approved and entered into force on February 9, 2011, which now consists of about 365 articles. All the „previous versions” of this law, amended and completed countless times, do not bring together the number of articles in the current law on national education.

The position of university teacher, involved in military and civilian higher education, either as a tenured professor or as an associated teaching staff, determined me to study the content of this „mammoth” of national education law and to find that 21 principles are inserted within its content, which represent almost more than all the principles set out in the normative acts that legislated national education, starting with the one from December 1978. It would not be a big deal that there are more principles in the current national education law, the problem is that each principle is not explained well enough, so that the one who tries to understand and apply it is confused because he/she does not know what to do and whether what he/she does is useful.

3. Analysis of some principles from the National Education Law no. 1/2011 with subsequent amendments and completions

I will further make an analysis on some principles provided in this law to highlight the idea that the existence of a quality education in Romania is illusory, and its effects can be seen quite clearly from the almost totally non-performing way in which

economic and social activities are carried out in our country, which will be dramatically reflected in the future evolutions of Romania [5]. It is important to emphasize that the ministers of post-December national education stated unequivocally that education and research in Romania were suffering profoundly, but each blamed the previous ministers for any inconsistencies, without taking responsibility for anything.

For example, if we analyze the content of the „principle of equity”, we must assume that access to learning excludes discrimination, which, according to the letter and spirit of Ordinance no. 137/2001 on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination, constitutes any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, social category, beliefs, gender, sexual orientation, disability, chronic non-communicable disease, HIV infection, membership of a disadvantaged group, and any other criterion having as its object or effect the restriction, removal of ignorance, the use or exercise, on equal terms, of human rights and fundamental freedoms or rights recognized by law in the political, economic, social and cultural field in any other areas of public life. If we are not satisfied with the extended form of the concept of discrimination, we can take a narrower form, which shows that discrimination is an action that involves a different treatment, unfair to people because of their membership in a particular social group. Exclusion or rejections are forms of discriminatory behaviour. The discrimination criteria with which the Romanian legislation operates are: race; nationality; ethnicity; language; religion; social category; beliefs; gender; sexual orientation; age; disability; chronic non-communicable disease; HIV infection, belonging to a disadvantaged category. Discrimination can be direct, indirect or multiple, harassment and victimization [6].

An individual is directly discriminated against when treated in a less favourable manner than another person who has been, is or may be in a comparable situation, and the difference in treatment is based on any criteria of discrimination provided for in the legislation in force [7].

Indirect discrimination refers to the fact that a provision, a criterion, a seemingly neutral practice disadvantages certain persons on the basis of the criteria provided by the legislation in force, unless these provisions, criteria or practices are objectively justified by a legitimate aim and the methods of achieving for that purpose are adequate and necessary [8].

Multiple discrimination requires that a person or group of persons be treated differently, in an equal situation, on the basis of two or more criteria of discrimination, cumulatively [9].

Harassment refers to behaviour that leads to the creation of an intimidating, hostile, degrading or offensive environment, based on race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, membership in a disadvantaged category, age, disability, refugee or asylum status or any other criteria [10].

Victimization is any adverse treatment, in response to a complaint or action in court or the competent institutions, regarding the violation of the principle of equal treatment and non-discrimination.

Analyzing these elements, we appreciate that the principle of equity is purely declarative as it is very difficult to apply in Romanian education. There are many well-known cases in which discrimination in Romanian secondary and higher education occurs on the basis of race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, social category, beliefs, gender, sexual orientation, disability, chronic non-communicable disease, HIV infection, membership to a disadvantaged category, etc. Besides pupils, students, master students, doctoral students, teachers, as well as persons from the management of educational institutions also bring their contribution to this

discrimination. If the legislator knew that this principle was difficult to apply, why put it in National Education Law no. 1/2011, which was later amended and completed? Did not the initiators, authors and those who approved this law did question why the previous normative acts, which regulated the national education, did not have provided this principle in their content? This is evidence that those who initiate bills, those who discuss them and propose amendments in Parliament's discussions, and those who vote for them lose sight of content elements, which are subsequently identified and require countless interventions to amend and promote them. In view of these elements, I would say that, in case of a new amendment and completion of the law, this principle should no longer be mentioned in its content, as it is purely declaratory. How can anyone believe that at a top private university, in the country and abroad, a young man from a low-income family could afford to study? Given that state universities also offer places with taxes, how can anyone believe that young people from low-income families can pay these fees? And we must admit that in Romania there are many low-income families, who can barely afford a modest living standard. Also, school dropout is widespread among children in secondary education. Children are withdrawn from schools and sent by their parents to work to earn their daily bread. Whether we like it or not, this is the situation in education, which has worsened a lot since December 1989. Our politicians are proud of the winners of several Olympics, some of them coming from low-income families. But as professor engineer Gheorghe Boldur-Lătescu, PhD, used to say in the preface to the work of Petre T. Frangopol "O radiografie a științei și învățământului din România" [An x-ray of science and education in Romania] these successes do not constitute the merit of Romanian education, but of young people and their families, who made superhuman

efforts for the young people in question to be able to rise above the unfavourable conditions of a deficient education. Perhaps the difficulties they had to overcome, determined the respective young people, supported by their modest families from a material point of view, to show an extraordinary will and to show the world that Romanians are also capable of outstanding performances. There have been situations in the tradition of the Romanian people from the countryside to spend their last penny in order to build schools where their children could study. From this perspective, it is worth presenting a passage from the report of the prefect from Ialomița, addressed to Minister Angelescu, continuator of the idea of a national school created by Spiru Haret, in the summer of 1923: „... old people from the countryside said that they would sacrifice every penny for education and that all the construction work and transportation is for them and they will give one, two or more amounts of food. I saw that little by little the idea took root and if the villager is advised today and tomorrow, he can become a true citizen. The county was touched half by hail and half by drought....we have no wood, it costs expensive....we have no gravel or sand....all the villagers decided to build their school with their own money and work... we have seen in some villages how during the breaks between classes, instead of resting, the children carried bricks to the workers, under the urging and the satisfied eyes of their parents” [11].

We live at the beginning of the third millennium and at least at the declarative level in Romania there is an apology for education aimed at equality for all as pursued by the education reform of 1948, not mentioning the fact that some children are born more gifted than others, intellectually speaking, that some of them have parents with better opportunities to support them during school years. Others, even if they have a native intelligence but come from families with modest material

possibilities, are forced to waste it, because the state is very little involved in supporting them.

Romania is integrated into NATO and the European Union and as a result, must accept the effects of globalism. One of these effects is the formation and promotion of elites.

Petre T. Frangopol showed in the work I have mentioned earlier, that nature rejected uniqueness, equality that would have condemned it to extinction and chose the diversity of the world, which ensured its perpetuation and development. The ratio between elites and slackers in a class should be 1-1 as it was in the interwar period. In the middle there were the other students in the class, who represented the average. Teachers used to teach at the level of understanding of the best pupils, while after 1948 the level of teaching was related to the slackers of the class, which made the elites suffer and in some places even stopped being competitive. Unfortunately, these practices have been perpetuated to this day, a fact also expressed by Mihai Şora, the former Minister of Education for a short period after December 1989: „School must become a breeding ground for elites” [12]. With egalitarianism in education, Romania’s chances for a bright future are almost inexistent, and in this way the natural wealth of the native intelligence of young people is destroyed, instead of being cultivated through diligent study, responsibility towards the people it represents, through reward of those who make efforts and strive to prepare themselves professionally, as well as by recognizing and respecting the efforts made by them for themselves, but also for their close ones.

Eligitarism is also not „healthy” in terms of budget allocations for universities. If the „Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy in Sibiu has become an elite military higher education institution, why should it receive funding in the same way as a university struggling in mediocrity? A place in the

elite of higher education institutions can be occupied after special efforts by the entire university community, supported by tailor-made budget allocations and this is even harder to be maintained. Why does not the Romanian state give more consistent funds to higher education institutions that get remarkable results and that bring Romania’s fame worldwide? Is it not clear that employers are recruiting their workforce especially from elite university graduates?

I witnessed an interview for a job by a graduate of a private university in Sibiu. After being asked about his abilities, the inevitable question followed: What university did you graduate from, what specialty and in what year? The interviewee, after answering that he had graduated from the private university „x”, in a specific year, he was stopped, was respectfully thanked for the efforts to come to the interview and was told directly that he was not what they were looking for. The ensuing dialogue between the members of the interview committee was mind-boggling. They unreservedly accused the audacity of the candidate, who had dared to show up for the interview, although they said he had graduated from a private university with the rector’s office which was located in an apartments’ building. Unfortunately, the members of the commission did not have the patience, if not the decency, to find out „live” what answers the candidate could have given to their questions.

Another principle that does not make sense to be maintained in the content of Law no. 1 of 2011, amended and updated countless times, is one of relevance, in my opinion. From the point of view of the explanatory dictionary [13], relevance expresses the quality of being relevant, meaningful, of having significance. Going further in the thread of logic, relevant means something that stands out, that notices something. Comparing the definition from the explanatory dictionary with the meaning

given by the authors of the law to the principle of relevance, I find that they claim that education „meets the needs of personal and socio-economic development”. Analyzing this argument, I find that it has a purely declarative character. In fact, most graduates of higher education institutions begin their professional careers with the „honourable” position of unemployed. Graduated studies do not help most of them to develop their own personality nor to fit in a job whose requirements can be met to a certain extent, based on the knowledge gained during bachelor and master’s degree studies. Therefore, I cannot help but wonder why such a principle has been inserted in the law, if it has no coverage in reality, except for a small number of graduates with higher education. It may have been considered that the principle of majority sovereignty over the minority has been reversed and in this case the minority becomes relevant.

4. Closing remarks

Considering these elements, I consider that it would be possible for me to „tear apart” the contents of several principles that govern the Romanian secondary and higher education, as well as lifelong learning in

Romania, as provided by Law no. 1/2011 - Law on national education, with subsequent amendments and completions. I am not surprised that such things happen since some illiterate ministers, with dubious higher education studies, self-sufficient, incapable of understanding the explanations of some counsellors who mastered the elements of the educational process, wandered at the leadership of the Ministry of National Education. There were also a few enlightened ministers of education, but the puppets above them did not provide them with the financial resources necessary to put into practice the ideas for organizing and conducting a modern education. I am reminded of the truth presented in Ion M. Popescu’s work „O jumătate de secol cu prea mulți mediocri” [Half a century with too many mediocre people], published in *România Liberă* from 23 12 1997: „Reform is a political, economic, social, limited or structural transformation of certain states of affairs, in order to obtain an improvement or a progress” [14]. Unfortunately, in the short and medium term I do not see any improvement, but maybe I have „the inappropriate dioptries on my glasses”.

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