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## **Possibilities and limits of innovation of didactic strategies in primary classes, in the current social context**

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**Abstract.** The present study investigates how digital education and the global pandemic crisis influence the reconstruction of teaching strategies through the lens of the pedagogical concept of educational innovation. We contribute to the debate in the specialized literature that discusses the possibilities and limits of the reconstruction of didactic strategies in primary schools as part of a broad process of innovation in education. Identifying the problems faced by primary school teachers, before and after the Covid moment, as well as outlining teaching strategies based on the solutions proposed by them, is a priority in the process of rebuilding the education system. Also during the pandemic, the two main issues raised by an OECD survey of 59 countries were students' access to technology and teachers' ability to find ways to carry out their activities using technology. Data from the Teaching and The International Learning Study (TALIS) show that in many countries, teachers' skills regarding digitization in educational practice are still limited. Remaking didactic strategies, especially in primary school, is necessary to reduce the gaps faced by the current generation of students, those who are the main beneficiaries of the educational act and those who suffer first when the quality of the educational system decreases.

**Keywords.** education, reconstruction, innovation, digitalisation, strategies

### **1. Argument**

Existing studies have determined the crucial role that social changes, progress or crises play in the reconstruction/innovation of the education system. These factors influence innovation: they can be favorable to the initiation and evolution of innovation, as well as inhibitors of the innovation process (Béchar, 2001).

The need to innovate instructional design in primary education comes from the need of the teaching staff to make the student "love" coming to school, as well as the parent's desire to see their child not stressed when it comes to school. The training system must meet the demands of society, but at the same time it must consider meeting the needs of all involved.

Pedagogical research about rethinking, reform, innovation in education was also done especially in the early 2000s. But pedagogical research aimed at the reconstruction of instructional design in the context of the Covid-19 crisis is only a few, maybe some of them are ongoing or in project phase.

This research study identifies the problems faced by all stakeholders in education, in the primary cycle, in the current period, in the lack of technology on the one hand or in the excessive use of technology on the other hand, correlating the data obtained from them. Also, all the data on the solutions proposed by all those who were investigated were centralized, in order to identify the best teaching strategies, adapted to the demands and needs of today's society.

## **2. Theoretical presentation of concepts**

### *2.1. Innovation in education*

The reconstruction of teaching strategies is part of a whole process of changing the educational system. This problem has been approached under different names: change, innovation, reconstruction, rethinking, reform, etc. Innovation in education as a measurable, deliberate, sustainable measure and improvement unlikely to occur frequently (Huberman & Unesco, 1973). Later, in 2001, innovation in education is defined as a deliberate activity, which aims to introduce a novelty in a given context and is pedagogical because it aims to substantially improve the training of students through a situation of interaction and interactivity (Béchar, 2001).

Innovation in education is a creative product made as a result of a creative process that ensures the restructuring of education, training, education design and training at all levels of the educational system and process (Cristea, 1998)

Innovation in education is perceived either as a creation of new methods, new designs, concepts and doing things (Taylor & Coffey, 2009) or as an improvement to an existing method (Xenitidou and Gilbert, 2009).

Regardless of how it is approached, innovation in education implies a change, a transition from traditional to modern, in order to increase the quality of the educational act.

Innovation in education can be achieved through educational reform and pedagogical change (Vlasceanu, 1979). The first form of achievement designates a type of structural and systematic innovation that affects the functioning and structural relations of the entire education system (macro level). The second form of achievement aims at the modernization of educational practice, in accordance with the established objectives (micro level). In the author's view, the two can be correlated in a planned innovation process.

The difference between reform and innovation in education is given by the fact that, while the first is imposed from the central level - from top to bottom - and has a high degree of generality from the beginning, the second, innovation, can go from the level of an educational institution, from the level of a teaching staff, researchers, group of partners in the issue of education - from the bottom up - and only after proving its effectiveness is it taken up at a wider level.

Therefore, innovation in education means change with positive effects on subsequent educational activity. Innovations have no value if they are not integrated into the general context of the education system (Bocoş, 2003).

### *2.2. Innovation in education from the point of view of teachers*

The different types of educational innovations are based, first of all, on changing the teacher's conception and attitude towards the problems that arise in the educational reality. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to educate and self-educate teachers in the direction of producing, accepting and introducing educational innovations. Studies on innovation in education place special emphasis on the role of teachers in the innovation process, on the characteristics, behaviors they must have. Although these are different perspectives, it has been

observed that the main characteristics of an innovative teacher are cooperation, collaboration, trust in others, willingness and desire to innovate.

From the point of view that education is believed to have an ethical duty to support positive change in society, this paper aims to create a debate about the state of emergency in how we approach education today. In addition, the role of the teacher is seen as one of the most crucial - the skill to manipulate and lead the learning process (Biesta, 2013) and the astounding importance of the teacher-student relationship and feedback (Hattie & Yates, 2013) are just two of the main issues that can make a difference in the classroom.

### **3. Research methodology**

#### *3.1. The purpose of the research*

The purpose of this research is to identify the main problematic aspects existing in the educational process in primary education and to formulate some strategies regarding the possibilities and limits of innovation of instructional design in primary education in the current context.

#### *3.2. Research hypotheses*

*Hypothesis 1* - If both teachers and parents perceive the use of interactive methods and advanced digitization as positive aspects of supplementing learning, then we can expect an increase in students' ability to develop more effective learning skills in the current social context.

*Hypothesis 2* - If primary education teachers use alternative, interactive methods, as well as digital resources in the development of teaching-learning-assessment strategies, then we can expect significant results regarding the innovation of instructional design, with a positive impact on all the factors involved.

*Hypothesis 3* - If primary education teachers had at their disposal guidelines/guides that include new elements for the teaching-learning-evaluation process, then we can expect an increase in the quality of the educational act in primary education.

#### *3.3. The phenomenological method.*

The method used in the research was the phenomenological method, as the perception of those investigated regarding the impact of the use of alternative, interactive methods, as well as digital resources by teachers in the teaching-learning-evaluation strategies in primary schools, their individual experiences and the description of the phenomenon from the point of view of the one under investigation. Data collection, for the phenomenological research, was carried out through a focus group. The focus-group technique is part of the qualitative research techniques and involves obtaining information following the interaction between the opinions of the participants, opinions related to the problem established by the one doing the research. The advantage of this research technique is that responses can be stimulated by group interaction and dynamics. "The discussion is comfortable, even pleasant for the participants, because they share ideas and perceptions with each other. Group members influence each other, responding to ideas and comments made during the discussions." (Krueger & Casey, 2005)

#### *3.4. Participants*

Two categories of subjects were sampled in the research, both urban primary education teachers and rural primary education teachers.

Compliance with ethical norms was followed, so that the participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research, they were assured that their confidentiality would be ensured and that they could withdraw from the sample at any time. Thus, after reading the information sheet approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Bucharest, all participants gave their consent to participate in the research study.

### 3.5. *Focus group – analysis, processing and interpretation*

Two focus group meetings were organized, one with primary education teachers from the urban environment and another with primary education teachers from the rural environment. 7 teachers participated in both group interviews. Both meetings took place on the Zoom platform, lasted approximately 90 minutes each, and were recorded with the unanimous consent of the participants.

The moderator opened the focus group session, introduced himself, presented the topic of the discussion and briefly told how the meeting will be conducted. Then followed brief presentations of the participants in which they specified their position, length of service and place of work.

In both focus group meetings, the same questions were asked.

The first question was:

*"Starting from the idea that change in education presupposes on the one hand educational reform (which presupposes the change of the entire education system, at the level of educational policies) and on the other hand pedagogical change/innovation (which presupposes the innovation/modernization of educational practice, at class), evaluate, from a personal point of view, the following statements:*

*-I believe that for the improvement of the Romanian education system ONLY educational reform is needed, at the level of educational policies.*

*-I believe that for the improvement of the Romanian education system ONLY the innovation/modernization of the educational practice is needed, at the class level.*

*-I believe that to improve the Romanian education system, more educational reform is needed and less innovation/modernization of educational practice, at the class level.*

*-I believe that in order to improve the Romanian education system, we need more innovation/modernization of educational practice, at the class level, and less educational reform.*

*-I believe that for the improvement of the Romanian education system, both educational reform, at the level of educational policies, as well as the innovation/modernization of educational practice, at the class level, are needed to the same extent."*

To this first question, while all the participants from the urban environment answered that for the improvement of the Romanian education system, both educational reform, at the level of educational policies, and the innovation/modernization of educational practice, at the class level, are equally needed, the participants from the rural environment had the unanimous opinion that to improve the Romanian education system, more educational reform is needed and less innovation/modernization of educational practice, at the class level. The latter justified their statement by the fact that the schools in the villages do not receive any kind of support from the state, on the contrary, when a change is attempted, they encounter the reluctance of the authorities.

The second question of the group interview was: "List some aspects of Romanian education that you consider to be weak points (we refer to primary classes)."

Among the weak points in the education system, which we found in the answers given by the participants from the urban environment, we list the following: *small budget allocated to education, teaching in two or three shifts, high number of hours per week for students, few courses digital skills training provided or settled by the state for teachers, bureaucracy*. On the other hand, the participants from the rural environment identified as the main weak points of the education system: *unqualified staff, lack of equipment in schools, poor communication with parents*.

Regarding the participants' views on the following statement: *Online school was not only an extreme solution for a limited period of time but also a way of working that can still be used and have benefits in the future*, they were diverse. We will give some examples:

- *"Yes, the digital kids quickly connected with their core resource."*
- *"I don't think there have been positive effects at the pre-primary/primary level, so I don't think online school is a way of working that can have benefits in the future."*
- *"Yes! I thus discovered a new perspective in education through the multitude of resources made available."*
- *"The transition to this teaching system has accelerated digitization, technology and innovation in the Romanian education system and beyond, so I believe that there may be future benefits."*
- *"Yes. Developing the skills of children, teachers and parents to use remote communication technology and access information sources other than classical ones."*
- *"Yes. Real bases of educational resources have been created that can be used in class at any time, on the one hand. On the other hand, we have all learned to appreciate education and its necessity more. Another positive effect would be the training and development of teachers' digital skills from the need for adaptation."*

To the fourth question, all participants in the focus group, both those from the urban environment and those from the rural environment, affirmed that they frequently use alternative, interactive teaching methods in their teaching activities, such as: individual and team projects, portfolio, the cluster method, the gallery tour, the thinking hat method, digital educational games, the quadrant method, the „I know/I want to know/I learned” method, the cube method, discovery learning, starburst, etc. Regarding the same topic, two teachers stated that it is more difficult to use interactive teaching methods in small classes, they argued that first the students must be given a learning base and then such modern methods can be successfully used of teaching-learning-evaluation. The rest of the participating teachers stated that interactive teaching strategies are possible and necessary in the preparatory class.

The last question was: "Do you think that through your teaching activity in the classroom you can contribute to the innovation of instructional design?" Answering this question, most participants believe that through the didactic activity carried out in the classroom, everyone can contribute to the innovation of instructional design. Some answers are argued as follows:

- *"Certainly we too can greatly contribute to the innovation of instructional design, because we are the first factors in the teaching process. Therefore, if we pursue innovation, the educational instructional process will have the same consequences."*
- *"Yes! In my opinion, a teacher contributes directly to the innovation of instructional design through the methods and didactic strategies used, by accessing digitized resources, through creative activities that arouse children's interest."*

- "Yes. The innovation of instructional design requires a permanent search, involvement, creativity, innovation, attributes absolutely necessary for an effective teaching staff!"

- "Yes. If we talk about innovation in the educational system, it concerns all active participants, even more so the teaching staff."

- "Yes, at the classroom level, both by using modern methods and resources, and by devising and implementing new methods and means."

However, there were also negative responses, from those of the participants who do not believe that they can contribute to the innovation of instructional design:

- "No, I don't have the skills."

- "No, we are not listened to and in whatever results later we do not find anything consistent from what we proposed."

- "No, I consider that what I could change is like a drop in an ocean, so something insignificant."

At the end of both focus-group meetings, conclusions were formulated, all participants, both urban and rural teachers affirming that the entire discussion was interesting and constructive and that such meetings are needed periodically, not only in within a research study.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The focus group discussions highlighted the unanimous opinion of the participating teachers that the use of alternative, interactive methods, as well as digital resources in the development of teaching-learning-evaluation strategies, can lead to significant results regarding the innovation of instructional design, with a positive impact on all the factors involved. At the same time, all the participants stated that training programs would be necessary, as well as good practice guides that include new elements for the teaching-learning-evaluation process, their use leading to an increase in the quality of the educational act in primary education.

We live in a dynamic world where 21st century skills are becoming mandatory and knowledge is continuously enriched. Thus, there is a need to change the educational landscape, to rethink and reconstruct the instructional design, suitable for a digital participatory world. "This does not mean breaking, detaching, separating from the past, but presupposes a positive attitude towards change, a critical takeover of what is valuable in the tradition of Romanian education and the mastery of a methodology of continuous innovation." (Manolescu, 2005)

It is very important to remember that in all this effort, the purpose of which is the reconstruction of instructional design, it is not only the existence of digital resources, equipment, access to the Internet, or the digital skills of teachers that is important, but also the "quality of the interaction between the teacher and student, his concern for his needs, the strategies used, the focus of his activity on the students' interests, etc." (Albulescu & Catalano, 2021)

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