

Continuity And Change: Building A Quality Culture In The Romanian Educational System

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ABSTRACT

Educational objectives, like educational quality, are contextual and evolving—they may exhibit both continuity and change. This paper capitalizes on the role of neo-institutionalism and on the contribution of Douglass North (one major representative of the neo-institutionalism trend) in identifying the institutional impact upon cognitive development, national consciousness and economic performance. Out of this large theoretical corpus, we have focused on the theories of learning. The core idea which we have drawn on refers to the fact that educational improvements are dependent on the characteristics of social institutions and institutions, in their turn, are variables dependent on the level of education. Is this a vicious or virtuous circle? If political factors considered both formal and informal aspects in the implementation of educational reforms in Romania, this would increase the chances for progress. Any strong educational “edifice” needs to start from national values and beliefs. The impending changes should be gradual rather than radical. The importing of patterns from developed countries should take place cautiously. Quality assurance is one of the most important parts in restructuring the national educational system that not have a Romanian label. Yet, the interest related to the theory and practice of quality management in education has echoed in Romania as well. A recommended goal is to identify that organization chart and synchronization of efforts so as to determine people to respond to their tasks enthusiastically and constantly improve their problem solving strategies. A “quality culture” will entirely depend on this mechanism, on the framework of constraints and incentives under which individuals interact. Consequently, our approach stresses the idea that a “quality culture” needs to derive from the Romanian context and this could be possible only by many successive, long-term institutional changes. Once such conditions are met, the passage from quality to sustainability becomes shorter and obstacle free, as a quality culture is likely to develop responsible attitudes to community and the environment.

Keywords: neo-institutionalism, quality, formal education, sustainable development, quality management

INTRODUCTION

A large amount of the economic literature has been written out of the desire to provide clear and adequate answers to a crucial question: Why is the world divided between the rich and the poor? Why are some economic players unable to reach high performance standards? Which are the rules to govern the business game? Are we all subjected to the same rules? Who imposes such rules?

Out of the variety of theoretical paradigms approached by those who intent on identifying the mechanisms to ensure the achieving of high economic performance, we shall consider the one functioning under the terms imposed by social, economic and political institutions. Institutions are essential in setting up structures of incentives under which people interact within society; they are a product of the overall society or a social segment. Considering their endogen nature (as they are the result of a collective desire) we can infer that the act of establishing institutions requires the harmonization of otherwise heterogeneous interests. Within a society, there is no guarantee that all

individuals and social groups should make similar institutional choices due to their potential impact on the future sharing of resources. Who will prevail in such a confrontation? Although the efficiency of a certain set of institution is important during the selection stage, political power is the supreme decision making power. The politically stronger group will determine the rule of the game according to its interests. Consequently, political institutions determine the pattern of economic institutions and in their turn, such institutions will impact a nation's economic performances.

The neo-institutional discourse on continual and systematic institutional change has a considerable influence over long-term economic performance and it lends itself to a topic of general interest - the quality of education. This article emphasizes that individual choices in the realm of education are considerably influenced by personal values and beliefs; they derive from the process of learning materialized in the culture passed on from one generation to another. Time is the framework in which the learning process shapes institutional evolution and institutions are the social constructs which create social knowledge and progress. The mutual interdependence between the two processes is a challenge for political decision making factors. The educational reform aiming at developing a "quality culture" for the educational system needs to start, in our opinion, from Romanian values and beliefs.

THE TEACHINGS OF A NOBEL PRIZE WINNER

Douglass North, a Nobel Prize winner for his contribution to neo-institutional thinking, ironically hinted at an provocative idea: efficiency is more important for theory than for practice. Institutions are not necessarily created to be socially effective; formal rules most often serve the interests of those who are able to abide by such rules. According to such reasoning, economic efficiency is an exception rather than the rule (North, 1993, p.7). Such a warning coming from a heterodox is without doubt against mainstream economics hypothesis, yet extremely useful for those who are keen on watching the things around them realistically.

While narrowing such debates to the process of acquiring theoretical knowledge (a vital element meant to boost economic performance on long term) the adepts of neo-institutionalism consider that this is influenced by financial rewards and positive social attitudes to science.

The overall social approach to the benefits of expanding knowledge (in various stages of historical development) is the major source of long term change. Likewise, educational improvements are dependent on the features of social institutions and the institutions are variables strictly influenced by the level of education. Therefore, fostering the progress in the theory of social change involves (in North's opinion), doing away with the hypothesis of rationality (as in traditional economic principles) and constructively explore the nature of the learning process.

The accumulation of knowledge requires the development of a structure meant to interpret various signals received by senses from the environment. The provisional architecture of such a structure is genetic and it gradually undergoes the process of metamorphosis, as a result of personal experiences. Such a structure is made up of categories and taxonomies gradually developing, which reflect the way in which individuals organize their own perceptions, record and classify their memorized experiences. Using such taxonomies, individuals construct mental models meant to interpret reality. Both the categories and the mental models develop throughout time, either emphasizing or altering previous positions. On the other hand, beliefs are transformed into social and economic structures by institutions (which can be seen both as formal and informal behavioral constraints). The following quotation is illustrative for the stage of our research: "The relationship between mental models and institutions is an intimate one. Mental models are the internal representations that individual cognitive systems create to interpret the environment; institutions are the external (to the mind) mechanisms individuals create to structure and order the environment" (North, 1993).

Consequently, knowledge develops and determines our perception of the environment and in their turn, such perceptions inscribe the need to improve our knowledge. The learning process depends on the way in which values filter experience-derived information and on the various experiences lived by individuals and societies throughout time.

Under such circumstances, it is essential to understand the “path dependence” phenomenon; once a national economy is on the upward / downward trend or stagnates, it is very difficult to reverse such trends on the long term. Knowledge acquisition is underlain by perceptions derived from the process of collective learning across generations. The act of learning is a cumulative process subject to social and cultural filtration. As learning incentives are also influenced by culture, there is nothing to guarantee that the amount of experience gathered by society can adjust the rewards / incentives so as to support the solution identification process. When the social and economic development is on a set path, the network of externalities, the learning process within organizations and the subjective interpretation of the problems encountered by society will strengthen the path. It is difficult to reverse a downward trend mainly because of political institutions and the values taken on by social actors. History has given evidence that it is not enough for statesmen to be aware of economic problems and to come up with “reasonable” solutions. The mere transfer of formal political and economic regulations from a successful market economy to underdeveloped economies does not automatically ensure high economic performance, as economic results are also influenced by informal /and gradually changing rules and by the enforcement of formal regulation.

EDUCATION - A STRATEGIC FACTOR OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Political discourses, curricula and plans related to Romania’s sustainable development are generously filled with sentences capitalizing on education. At first glance, one may argue that the Romanian society acknowledges that education is a strategic factor in the national development, given its vital contribution to the multi-faceted and anticipative shaping of the human capital. Yet, this is all, of course, wishful thinking.

In this respect, one should pay specific attention to the dichotomy formal-informal; educational reforms target formal education only, and overlook the inertia induced by informal education. The reforming ability to learn new things is determined by informal education, those time-molded values which describe social tolerance against the progress of knowledge. The act of renewing social institutions takes time and asks for extensive reforms; acquiring the idea that formal education brings about welfare is a gradual and time consuming process.

The educational policies aiming at including minority group into the educational system are closely intertwined with the efforts made to implement the concept of sustainable development. They should become the vector of the educational reform. Development should start from long forgotten areas by this phenomenon; extending and improving the educational network, increasing teaching career opportunities, improving school transportation in rural, poverty-stricken areas are formal measures, yet meant to rekindle long forgotten feelings: respect for school and learning. To this end, the passage from quality to sustainability becomes short and obstacle-free, as high-quality education is likely to develop responsible attitudes toward community and environment.

Early education is another area to cover. “The seven year education at home” is the period to delineate the process of individual becoming, the period in which parents teach their children to tell apart the good from the evil. This parental responsibility is both natural yet difficult in a society whose social values are continually perverted and social hierarchies undermined. People with doubtful behavior reach the top of the ladder. Unfortunately, in the Romanian society, the setting of example has undesirable results. The achievements and the efforts of the authentic elite are too often discarded. Consequently, consistent efforts to self improvement do not attract large numbers of supporters. We are still charmed by the myth of the “overnight success”. Everything is analyzed from a money-oriented perspective and in a short time span.

Such considerations urge us to recommend in-depth educational reforms, aiming at restructuring learning incentives and informal educational institutions. We strongly consider that formal education should be built on the solid foundation of informal education. In real life, however, reforms aim to restructure the higher levels of education to perfection as they consider that the foundation will inevitably be laid anyway. It goes without saying that a technical solution to this edifice is difficult to find.

TOWARDS A HIGH QUALITY CULTURE IN FORMAL EDUCATION

Quality is a multi-faceted concept, difficult to render operational in educational terms. It cannot be solely evaluated by calculating quantitative indicators, such as: the number of students per member in the teaching staff,

educational spaces etc. Other specific indicators are even more important: the professional and methodological competence of the teaching staff, the cultural, ethical and social accountability of education, student satisfaction. Consequently, a quality education depends, to a large extent, by the synergic harmonization of three elements: institutional capacity, educational efficiency and quality management.

To this end, a functional emerging educational system should capitalize on the following aspects:

- educational goals, curricula, teacher competence and the efficiency of educational practices;
- educational spaces, equipment, libraries and reading rooms;
- performance criteria, standards and indicators, internal and external evaluation pertaining to such standards and causes of dysfunction;
- amount of financial resources.

The success in setting up a “quality culture” is influenced by objective and subjective factors, by national and international trends. We are not trendsetters; others have set the trend and we need to follow in their footsteps. We can so far assert that we have understood the expectations of the European Union. We are a new piece in a puzzle called the European Union, which needs to adjust to fit in. Very much like a diligent student who learnt his/her lesson well, Romania sets priority action plans which will directly impact upon the future development of the national education system. In this respect, an example is the specific goals of the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (2007-2013), aiming to ensure educational opportunities, quality professional development and quality education.

How can such goals be accomplished? How can we achieve a quality culture? The necessary steps are easy to set, hard to achieve and impossible to quantify, as tangible results become visible in many years. Firstly, one should improve the quality assurance system at pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary levels, by assisting schools to improve their management and supply relevant jobs for the labor market. Secondly, improving teaching competences and the competences of the people involved in the educational system by supporting them in their life long learning process. Thirdly, one needs to extend the life long learning framework by assisting the agents/suppliers of life learning education to reach the standards of quality management assurance. Fourthly, young researchers should be encouraged to develop their competence by increasing their doctoral and post-doctoral educational opportunities. This enumeration can continue indefinitely. It will be interesting to note, however, whether such desires, expectations and actions pertaining to a “quality culture” will ever take effect in our Romanian culture. In retrospect, forthcoming generations will easily solve this problem.

For the time being, we are currently importing patterns and solutions created by developed countries. Although quality assurance activities have not had a long tradition worldwide, there are countries or groups of countries which obtained worthwhile results. Therefore, our mission lies in promoting “compatible quality assurance systems” meant to render Romanian education internationally recognized. In more concrete terms, we need to set in motion a mechanism meant to ensure that educational establishments observe national and international quality assurance standards. To this end, quality assurance strategies mirror the ability of an educational supplier to be accountable to internal clients (pupils, students, teaching staff) and external agents (employers, society) and ensure that standards are met. This quality assurance becomes an important factor in the invisible competition between nations in terms of culture and education.

Consequently, judging by the promise of progress it delivers, we consider that the implementation of a quality assurance system is necessary, yet far from being accessible, due to certain specificities: the school is not a factory, students are not goods/commodities, there are multiple clients (students, parents, employers, the society) and so one cannot identify precisely all the elements of a manufacturing process. Despite such specificities, quality management can be functional in education as well. The educational process can be improved, teaching efficiency can enhance and teacher/student satisfaction can increase. Quality management stands for a different way to organize and harmonize efforts so as to ensure that people fulfill their tasks enthusiastically and actively contribute to improving their techniques. (1) It might look rather impossible, yet practice provides us with plenty success stories for this type of management. To increase the chances of success, one needs to observe a simple principle - the process should prevail over the product. Such management will capitalize on the learning process as such, rather

than on the results evinced by tests and examinations. From this perspective, the human factor is in the foreground again, and we consider that the weak spot which management should address is individual attitude towards the educational process. We need to consider that both the student and the teacher act and interact under complex incentive structures. We need to identify those mechanisms to induce perceptions and values meant to ensure the quality of the teaching activity. Quality culture derives from this; it stands for cooperation, competition and responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

Educational discourse is replete with references to the process of building a quality culture inside the educational system. In particular, the issue of educational quality has become an area of great interest and concern due to the conviction that education plays a pivotal role in national sustainable development. In choosing to investigate continuity and change surrounding learning process, the questions rely on the contextual and evolving character of the process. The ideas elaborated on throughout the article point to the fact that education is a “path dependence” phenomenon. Knowledge acquisition is underlain by perceptions derived from the process of collective learning across generations. The act of learning is a cumulative process subject to social and cultural filtration. The overall social approach to the benefits of expanding knowledge (in various stages of historical development) is the major source of long term change. Likewise, educational improvements are dependent on the features of social institutions and the institutions are variables strictly influenced by the level of education. Hence social institutions are likely to become inertial to change. How can one overcome this obstacle? Economics can provide at least one solution: joining the efforts of researchers coming from different economic areas can lead to worthwhile progress with respect to unveiling the causes and mechanisms of change. Thus, progressing onto a continual ladder of discovery and learning, horizons will broaden, and the prevailing patterns of thinking and perception will become more flexible.

The dichotomy formal/ informal education determines a shift in focus. As pointed out previously, formal and informal educations are interdependent categories. Learning is a culturally –filtered and cumulative process. Most reforms should be targeted at informal education. The pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education form a complex edifice which needs to be built in gradual stages.

Meeting international quality assurance standards is not against this principle; on the contrary, it is quite compatible. It will make us aware that we are in competition with other participants/players worldwide and only quality players win. According to the guidelines developed by this paper, the authentic and enduring progress in the quality formal education is only triggered by reforms targeted at informal aspects pertaining to the Romanian institutional paradigm. This is the unique way to create a real quality culture. Otherwise, we will hopelessly aim to become winners, although we do not have and will not have what it takes to be a winner.

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