Differences between the curricula and the evaluation system in Romanian schools; reasons and ways of encouraging independent thinking for both teachers and students in class

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Résumé : Nous présentons un point de vue sur la pensée indépendante. On étudie les différences entre les programmes et le système d'évaluation dans les écoles roumaines, en ce qui concerne les raisons et les moyens d'encourager la pensée indépendante pour les enseignants et les étudiants en classe. La pensée indépendante est plus adaptative et créative que la pensée dépendante. Malheureusement, le système éducatif en Roumanie continue de mettre l'accent sur la transmission des informations et la vérification de la mémorisation des informations transmises. Le système éducatif actuel en Roumanie est hérité principalement de l'ancien système communiste. L'idéologie communiste visait à dépersonnaliser l'acte éducatif en mettant l'accent tant sur l'enseignement que sur l'évaluation sur l'information et pas sur la personne. L'école communiste a laissé l'héritage d'une information fétichisée, la langue de bois, etc. Ces non-valeurs hantent toujours l'éducation en Roumanie, héritée d'une génération à l'autre par l'enseignement. La seule solution est d'enseigner aux enseignants afin qu'ils apprennent à enseigner différemment aux étudiants. À plus de 30 ans aprés le régime communiste et après de nombreuses réformes de l'éducation, de nombreux changements majeurs dans les programmes, de nombreux ajustements dans le processus d'évaluation, les écoles primaires et secondaires semblent rester plus ou moins dans la même mentalité éducative. Penser est essentiel. Avoir un processus cognitif actif dans notre relation avec la réalité est extrêmement important pour un adulte indépendant. Malheureusement, cela reste une condition préalable oubliée ou vaguement présente dans le système éducatif, comme le montrent les programmes et les manuels scolaires. Le manque d'attention portée à la pensée indépendante crée des divergences entre les étudiants et génère une discrimination inattendue à l'encontre des membres de la même génération, bien que tous soient les sujets du même système éducatif.

Mots-clés: *pensée indépendante, éducation, programmes, évaluation, mentalité éducative.*

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Cogito ergo sum. Since Descartes, the way we regard the process of thinking certainly has not changed in importance. If nothing else, it became more obvious at any level that to think is the most important attribute we identify with as human beings. (Kandel, 2000: 1169) It comes as natural to create an open and supportive environment for youngsters to help them develop steady thinking skills. The intention of this paper is to look at the importance of a healthy style of education (Goodlad, 1983: 466-467) in school when talking about dependent versus independent thinking, and to find ways to discourage the damage that a highly concentrated curriculum, a dry and strictly academic way of presenting the information in the class books and a restricted theoretical way of teaching it in classes in Romania (or elsewhere) could significantly affect in a negative way the development of an independent thinking and create on long terms discrimination against children (Adler, 2006, vol. 12: 146-148) exposed to only this type of education. School should be not only a place were information is transmitted and processed. More and more, the focus is put on developing a creative thinking (Hennessey, 1996: 283-285), as part of the independent thinking more than insisting on formal reproduction of information in dependent models of thinking, especially in these days, where access to any kind of info is very easy and competition to have access to high education is increasingly difficult.

Thinking is the abilitity to generate ideas. We mainly learn to express thinking through language, but not necessarilly. Through language we create the ability to codify ideas in signs in order to further communicate them, but thinking could be generated outside language as well; therefore, thinking is different from the ideas themselves. (Hennessey, 1996: 283-285) We learn and evolve through thinking, we communicate, exchange information and we teach and share through the process of thinking and resoning. The personal achievement, the success to socially adapt are also related to our capacity to express and exchange ideas and thoughts in a personal and meaningful way.

In the process of evolution, the independent thinking is more adaptive and creative than the dependent one, for working the information presented and evaluating it as true or not, good or bad, reasonable or aberrant, possible or impossible gets better chances to create a safer and improved environment. The independent thinker needs to convince oneself about the benefits of the new information and makes personal decisions about it. In this independent behaviour, one is not comfortable to let other people think for self, to just engulf other people's ideas, not because of lack of trust, but because the very specific way of reasoning and need to think for himself or herself. Therefore, the independent thinker could be a better asset for the society, since the way of thinking prepares a higher willingness to be pro-active, responsible and assertively involved socially. Analysing the information makes the independent thinker less prone to manipulation, more able to take decisions on its own and not only to find solutions, but to also identify problems and raise them for the benefit of the society. We see the independent thinker with moral values as the mature citizen able to make the world a better place through his contribution.

We are born to think, discover, progress. (Kandel, 2000: 1169) We inherit the natural desire to question our environment and to have the willingness to discover more about it. The school should be the perfect place to encourage our inner abilities in order to give chances to children to grow into assertive intelligent adults, able to take charge for their lives and to make their own mind about the surrounding reality; able to fight for a much better world and to understand through critical thinking where your contribution is

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needed. It is up to school models to create consistent independent thinking models and to develop critical thinking with good empathic and creative thinking skills. It takes social courage and high self esteem to be able to constantly put questions, assume conclusions, trust own judgement and capacity to understand reality. It takes effort not to fall into already obsolete solutions to reality, especially when they are away from our own life convictions. In this respect, the independent thinking could protect the person and the community one belongs to from abiding to decisions, solutions, attitudes, jugdements unable to serve the community's interest or person's wellbeing. Therefore, we can strongly uphold the importance of encouraging and teaching not only information, but how to deal with information through independent thinking skills.

Unfortunately, the education system in Romania is still emphasizing mainly the transmission of the information and verifying the memorization of the transmitted information. The syllabi and the evaluation system are concentrated on reproducing rather than analysing. Even when the curriculum gives way to analysis, the solution of choice in class is to dictate ready made interpretations and analysis and expect students to reproduce them as such. This bounded educational style is limitative for not only the students exposed to it, but longterm for the society's needs. (Adler, 2006, vol. 10: 82-90) Moreover, it creates social differences and possible longterm discrimination against the person unable to equally compete in a world where independent and critical thinking are needed assets to get in. One who educates just by presenting ‚ready-made' information is cleary jeopardizing the development of independent thinking. Through strategies and concepts as we would find in most of the curricula and the evaluation processes, the education in Romania is predominantly developing a dependent formal thinking. The consequence is a generation of adults uncomfortable to generate independent thinking and reliant on solutions and decisions given by the outside. These adults could stagnate into a dimished capacity to understand the social, political and economical reality and would be more susceptible and easier to be manipulated. Their power and will to make a social change and to actively contribute in the social reality the belong to would be rather non-existent.

An axample we could invite is the evaluation of the 14 years old students in Romanian language and literature. This exam needs to be passed in order to get admission to highschool. The evaluation process involves since generations already written texts which are supposed to be learned by heart and therefore they are the main focus in class one year before the examination. The tests, on the other side, involve complicated notions about morphology and syntax; their complexity could easily be judged as beyond their age. Moreover, the whole material learnt in a dry and theoretical way will remain completely unused, since it is not at all part of highschool syllabus and will not be applied ever after. The exam also includes a task about an argument having as starting point a text from Romanian literature. But the students are not supposed to advocate a personal opinion regarding the text as one could think (the story, the hero figure, the emotional content, messages identified in the text etc.), but rather to highlight the arguments making the text belonging to a certain genre, a certain literary category (ballad, fairy tale, short story, novel etc) or to contain a specific style. The argumentation is actually non-argumentative, since it does not use independent thinking. The students are only supposed to repeat as far as word by word some standard paragraphs specifically designed for each possible category. Strangely enough, they are taught to also mention syntagma like „ My opinion about . is", or „I would consider this text as belonging to the epic genre because..." The pupil is taught to express in a formal and meaningless way something as being a personal opinion, when

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many times it's just some information transmitted and automatically memorized. The landmark of a successful admission becomes a stereotyped way of thinking, the repetition of a formal language, the memorization of some information. It comes as a surprise when the same exam could include a creative thinking subject as: „Imagine an unusual incident from your holidays and narrate it in 30 lines. Since the previous 8 years of education didn't systematically prepared pupils for this kind of task, we could assume the evaluation process and the curricula are disjunctive. The students find themselves facing a task they haven't been prepared for.

Of course, in every world and system we'll find independent thinkers. They are people with a certain personality, who are assertive, self confidence and unable to abide by rules they don't understand. But less encouraging the independent thinking is in a system, fewer such people exist.

To be able to prepare independent thinkers, a good syllabus and an evaluation of stimulating creative skills would not be enough. The biggest influence and the direct responsibility comes from the educator. It becomes critical to increase teachers' awareness into developing their personal independent thinking and then create motivation to spend time and effort to teach pupils how to learn, not only what to learn, in a creative and independent manner. The educator needs also strategies and exercises able to transfer and encourage independent thinking skills to scholars. This should include personality differences and group dynamic. (Bruce, 1972: 2-6) As student in class or working within a group, an independent thinkers could create awkward moments by putting too many questions and slowing down the rythm of the lesson, especially when their way of thinking matches an oppositional personality. The dependent thinkers on the other side could be seen as an obedient and comfortable students (not asking questions, taking the information as real and acting accordingly). These students don't put pressure on the group and could be seen as good and cooperative learners, working easily in groups or when know the rules and what is supposed for them to do. The ability of the educator would be to create a place where dependent thinkers are encouraged to explore deeper and different way to look at the information and the independent thinkers are encouraged to develop the empathic thinking. Adler would call empathic thinking to walk with the shoes of the person next to you. It means to consider the environment and its needs before considering yours, in order to create a final consistent image of the reality, involving your needs, but others at the same time. Along with them, critical thinking comes as a natural consequence of a free and responsible spirit. Critical thinking is a process of collecting data and make use of the information collected in order to interpret it and possibly bring it at a higher or deeper level by giving it a personal interpretation which comes as logical and enriches the input. The independent thinking shows our relationship with the information and the critical thinking shows what we do with this information. The magic of a good educator would then be the ability to encourage both independent and critical thinking with respect for the group norms and with a cooperative attitude within the class. The independent thinking is receptive, curious, analitical, skeptical, argumentative, inventive, speculative, synthetic, creative, able to take decisions, and is not nihilistic, negative, picky, oppositional, distructive, contemptuous. The independent thinking would not always make a person the most comfortable thing to deal with in a group and could create time delays, but it brings as well value and insight for everybody. Both independent and empathic thinking, are part of the early determinative years, since it would be very difficult if not impossible to

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stimulate them at a later stage of life. The critical thinking is developed on the presumption the independent thinking is already there.

Early recollections (Ansbacher, 1964: 350-357) come up easily when talking about our formative years. One could hear either stories about being motivated by a teacher's beahaviour and attitude or feeling dramatically discouraged by one. Or many. Madalina, for instance, a young adult now, remembers her geography teacher taking constantly the class on short trips outside the classroom, telling them exciting stories about how rocks and then mountains have been born, about how plants are growing in a certain climate, explanations about dramatic geological changes, challenging them constantly to generate ideas and issue opinions in order to get to final explanations. Putting questions, assuming logical consequences of facts – past or future, having curiosity for details became part of Madalina's way of looking at not only geography and nature, but her whole world. She is not nowadays a geologist, but she carried nevertheless within the love and enthusiasm exercised in class along with a way of putting things in a real explanatory context. This made her a succesful brand manager, with passion for photography and climbing, Mont-Blanc being the last top she's been on. She, like her former teacher, would be rather an exception of what the educational system in Romania was and still is. But her example shows the benefit and chances a child in her position could get in life. As adult, the student encouraged to freely think and express oneself, could become an autonomous person, with a developed ability to find answers, to take decisions, to be flexible in finding solutions and be pro-active, organizing the movement of his or her life and solving the problems in a balanced and self-determined way. This person will be more capable of conscioulsy and responsibly generate a desired life scenario and to engage in a assertive rather than dependent life experiences. Through expression of the independent thinking within a group the person developps self-awareness and learns to appreciate and recognize the full worth of his or her thinking, and learns as well to respect other people opinions and integrate the personal thinking as a contribution to the group[1].

The models we are exposed to as children and teenagers are of course as important as the way the person decides to interpret them. (Greeenfield, 2000: 58-59) Creating the proper encouraging environment gives better chances in developing an self-determined adult with a high self-esteem. (Driver, Guesne, Tiberghien, 1995: 2-4) Independent thinking is a process of deciding in an autonomous way if the information the world is offering you is real or not, valid or invalide, reasonable or illogical, useful or useless. In the process of independent thinking the person takes charge and „thinks for oneself". On the opposite side, the dependent thinking takes ideas and decisions as such and builds the reality according to what is told, without questionning.

When we look back at the Romanian former educational system, the emphasis was mainly on dependent thinking. Is was no equal relationship between pupil and tutor, but mostly a patriarchal way of looking at the educator's figure. It was not unusual for a teacher to just dictate along the class what the student was then supposed to conscientiously learn by heart. The process of examination was more a test of memory and dependent thinking than discussions and encouragement of personal opinions.

The actual education system in Romania is inherited mostly from the old communist system (1948-1990), which was based on an atheist, antiromanian and antieuropean ideology. The purpose of that system was to create a communist ideology trough censorship and strict rules for educators and students. The comunist ideology was

[1] Lena Rusti's therapy notes, with client's consent.

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aimed to depersonalize the educational act putting accent in both teaching and evalution on information and not on the person. The communist school left the legacy of a fetishized information, the wooden language, the cliché way of thinking; putting value more on quantity than quality of information, discouraging creativity and personal interpretation; the avoidance and lack of assertively questioning the information, the lack of exercice of finding atypical questions. These non-values are still haunting the education in Romania, inherited from one generation to another through teaching. The only way out is to teach the teachers so that they learn to differently teach the students. By training teachers to have a deliberately open attitude to encourage independent thinking, one could create an environment where students have better chances to cope with the challenges of a competitive academic or non-academic place.

30 years away from the communist regime and after many reforms in education, many major changes in curricula, many adjustments in the evaluation process, the primary and secondary school seem to remain more or less into the same educational mentality, same style of teaching, even without the ideology behind. Way so? Why is the teacher unable to change? The obvious answer is in the way he or she was educated. The academic system where educators are trained has not the capacity of transmitting a new style of education and new vision, despite the superficial changes and new didactic techniques. The new style is missing in the essence the encouraging the independent thinking to pupils, the importance of creativity and personal opinions. Therefore, the educator remains unable to transfer an argumentative and empathic style of thinking, a critical and interrogative, receptive and curious, analytical and speculative since he or she themselves are not able to produce such a model of thinking. When a teacher is able to transfer such a creative way of thinking beyond the curriculum will be only a personal achievement and not a consequence of the system. Romania has a plethora of teachers able to think out of the box, but they would be a minority, unable to change a system. Despite the fact there were many initiatives and attempts to change the system, the movement was never strong enough.

Which would be then the proper behaviour of a dedicated teacher, willing to develop an independent thinking to students? Challenge the students to find not only the evident consequences of things, but also the causes and on that base, to imaginarily produce different kind of causes and analyze the possible different consequences. Encouragement is essential to involve every single student in the process. The active learning and encouragement of independent thinking could produce reactive behaviours, especially from students with avoidant personalities and low self esteem. They will need kind and constant encouragement, since keeping ourselves in a constantly comfortable and nonchallenging enviroment does not help our development. Alfred Adler says that the inferiority feeling is the dinamo of evolution. We would not get the need of doing more without the frustration we are not good enough. When the class is involved and encouraged, the students will have a safe place to think, talk, put questions without feeling judged, diminished or discouraged. It is up to the teacher to create such a creative enviroment.

The very inner nature of the critical thinking is the mind's autonomous path starting with the decision of questionning the already given answer regarding any type of reality the person is exposed to and in which is able to collect information from, to participate to, to understand it. Therefore, in this autonomous free way to exist in the world of ideas, the person would be able to take decisions according to the personal conclusions, to be aware of these decisions and their consequences. In order to get to this level of taking decisions, the person is going through a stable reference model and many cognitive processes, which we

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assume the person already integrated and became able to feel like they are part of a personal and natural way of being in the world: questionning, analysing, selecting, argumentating, interpreting, recalling, verbalizing and reaching a conclusion. This complex process our minds would make on independent thinking mode are acquired all through exercise, exposure to a similar model and encouragement from outside during our learning years as children and teenagers. This king of environment could only create a consistent support where the person could decide to contribute by identifying a personal motivation and verbalize questions, to express personal alternative ideas, solutions, decisions. We believe that educating a child or a teenager should specifically enhance these particular abilities. The trainer should act as a main actor in transferring these skills to the trainee. This process would need time and method. (Appleton, 1996: 1-2)

The Romanian educator needs primarly to reset the relationship with the students, as regards cognitive, psychological and emotional criteria encouraging an equal and dynamic relationship. We envisage some simple steps to be taken, which the educator could start with.

Creating insight for the educator with respect to the concept of autonomous or independent thinking and what this would mean to focus on it when working with the students. In order to create this insight, the teacher could be encouraged to consider his or hers own model of independent thinking by:

a) *Considering the way the educator is receiving input from reality, any reality involving one's attention and cognitive processessing*. Our mind is always connected to external stimuli. A lot of the information we receive is beyond our awarness and meant to be unconsciously processed with respect to the principle of homeostasis. At the same time, the reality offers constantly huge amounts of information complex enough to be considered a cognitive challenge asking for an intelligent reaction. This information could be offered by any kind of reality surrounding us: social, spiritual, economic, intellectual, textual, media, virtual, emotional, experential, cultural and so on. The mind needs then to stay on and able to intervene. Being aware of this in a comfortable time and environment is the first step in creating further inside to students. (Stahl, 2000: 2-4)
b) *Putting the inner needs in context* by empathically considering the environment.
c) *Stimulating the motivation* to find a way to express the personal approach in the given reality. The motivational energy is the driven force we need to make connections between our inner self and the external reality creating input for us.
d) *Semantical productive expression* meaning to verbally express questions, ideas, insights to either another person or to simply through a process of introspection. This stage would involve selecting the quality information, interpreting it, argumenting and finally choose answers.
e) *Taking a decision regarding the information and implementing it.* This step involves taking actions and implementing our thoughts and decisions into reality; making a contribution in our environment by giving them consistence.

Creating insight in educators to affirm an independent thinking ability and comfort to deal with are of at most importance. The former generations in Romania were mainly putting accent on memory as learning skills and many syllabi didn't encourage the creative thinking, but rather the students' capability to repeat teacher's ideas. It was an act of courage to get out of the norms and express personal opinion on different subjects. These teachers

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were used mostly to an hierarchical and even patriarchal system, were they are in a position of power and control. For these teachers especially, to encourage independent and critical thinking and direct feeedback from students (Hart, 1999: 344) has to come with consistent training in order to understand, accept and adapt to the changes. For many teachers equal relationships in class are still a bit hard to swallow and create a feeling of insecurity which could wrongly decompensate and affect the progress of the class.

Building strategies able to transfer a style of independent and critical thinking from teacher to student during the classes is a big challenge of the system and it has to come with a consistent method and effort to implement it. Every teacher has a personal working method, there are then different subjects and of course different students. It is up to the educator to integrate all the information into a coherent method to make students familiar with sistematically using independent thinking. The final purpose is to generate awareness among students regarding their specific way to make contact with the new information and to develop the useful skills related to independent and critical thinking. Then, to follow up the style they are pursuing to go forward, to consciously push them towards an independent style of collecting and analysing the information. During the whole process they would need encouragement and direction. This should be constantly done by teachers, as they pay attention to the way students make deductions, put questions, make analogies and connect new information with the old one. The reproductive thinking based on memory skills should not be condemned, but indirectly discouraged, by not putting anymore the spot on it.

The stages we would consider to create a model of mindful transfer of skills helping in developing the independent thinking:

- Create an open common non-judgemental area based on democratic rules from the beginning. The rules could be established together with each and every participant of the group. The students would be encouraged to express their expectations, their worries, their needs. The teacher will mediate under the rules of respect and common sense.
- Choose a subject from the curricula. The task needs to be set according to the needs, the class level and to be complex enough to be subjected to independent thinking.
- Generate discussion. The students can work together or in small groups before they are exposed to the class, in case they are not yet used to openly express their opinion. They can also be helped by introductory questions: *What do you see? What is the theme? What are you personaly thinking about? What connections did you make thinking about the subject? What is your personal opinion in the matter?*
- Brainstorming could be an welcome technique at this stage, to better stimulate students creativity and to secure them a non-judgemental environment. This stage is essential in creating freedom to think and to dare to express oneself. The educator needs to actively discurage criticism and negativity and oppositional behaviour. The pupils are encouraged to raise questions. Non-judgemental rule is very important to strengthen confidence.
- Draw personal feedback. Enriched by the information presented (life scene, movie, story, image, etc.) and filtred through each personal experiences, the students are encourages to draw conclusions and argument them.
- From questions to answers and then to solutions. Analysing the questions. Selection of questions. Simple and transparent analysis of questions.

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Interpreting through building arguments pro and con. Selecting criteria of important information and choosing the conclusions accordingly. Taking decisions and assuming beliefs and behaviours.

The school system in Romania has still a long way to go to share and teach this vision. Since we could find places where the independent thinking is appreciated and encouraged, the process of transfer of independent thinking is still extremely poor and subordinated to dependent thinking, based on memorization and formal reproduction. We can generalize saying that the system is still unable to transfer to students a strong interogative way of thinking, does not teach them to be present and involved in the reality they are part of and does not help them develop the ability to have insight of their need and interests. The syllabi, the classbooks, the evaluation are not steady and they don't encourage students to analyse the surrouding reality, to be able to make correlations between being informed and being able to make informed decisions, to use the previously gained information to analyse and synthetize new information, to develop to ability to distinguish between fake and real information, and to critically analyse the difference, to be able to meaningfully express the opinions and argument them.

Thinking is essential. Whether is critical, analytical, empathic, independent, or able to envisage future events and to take decisions, the cognitive process of being active in our reality is extremelly important for an independent adult. Unfortunately, this remains a forgotton or vaguely present prerequisite of the education system, as seen in curricula and class books. The lack of emphasis on independent thinking creates discrepancies among students and generates unexpected discrimination against members of the same generation, although all subjects of the same romanian educational system. The discrepancy becomes even more dramatic when compared to the european educational system.

Those effects we are probably going to be seen it many generations from now on. It will be seen in the way we as adults will take decisions, find a social place, deal with economical problems and with the political challenges. As for now, we can only rely on independent personalities to challenge the system.

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