

The Educational Team – an Alternative Solution for Romanian Secondary Education?

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Abstract

In the last twenty-five years' Romanian society sought solutions for the improvement of students' performances. Many problems were reported by diverse educational factors: students, parents, teachers, decisional factors and several solutions have been proposed. Our paper theoretically analyzes a possible solution to improve the students' academic performance and learning understanding: the educational team approach. Traditionally, teachers work alone in every step of the didactic process: student's assessment, planning, and implementation of the curriculum and monitoring student's progress. Current research demonstrates that team work in education has benefits both for teachers and students. A definition of the concept is proposed and some characteristics of an efficient educational team are taken into consideration. The three main team models, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary are critically analyzed and their benefits and disadvantages underlined. Also, possible solutions for practically implement this model in the Romanian educational context are proposed.

Keywords: educational team, secondary education, professional learning communities

Introduction

Human resources are the most important factor in any educational system. Teachers and students are the core of education and quality of education mean quality teachers and quality students.

Regarding teachers even is one of the most sociable profession, based on multiple interactions both on vertically and horizontally, in reality, the teacher is alone in the classroom. He/she teaches alone, designs alone, assesses alone. Rarely she/he asks for feedback or offers feedback to her/his colleagues. The biggest danger in the teaching profession is the routine because is very difficult to maintain a good level of motivation, to develop and improve your competencies without any kind of feedback or working

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with others. Working with others means learning from each other's, comparing them with others, offering and receiving feedback, easily finding solutions to different educational problems, sharing your thoughts, beliefs, and expertise.

Students should be partners in teaching, but often they are perceived as passive actors, who have to listen, learn and then reproduce what the teachers taught. The results of PISA assessment does not look very well for Romanian educational system. We are on the 45 place from 65 countries at the assessment from 2012. The average performance in Reading of 15-year-olds is 438 points compared to an average of 496 points in OECD countries and in Mathematics is 445 points compared to an average of 494 points. Based on the assessment report for our country, 73% of Romanian students declared "I feel alone in the classroom" and the Romanian students a less motivated and unhappy at school (MECS, CNEE, CNO, 2014).

These are the facts that determine to find solutions to some problems of our educational system. We cannot ask our students to work together and learn from each other, if us, as teachers, don't work, don't debate and don't try to find solutions to different educational challenges and problems.

Theoretical framework

In the current state of affairs of Romanian education, a real change is demanded by all educational factors, and ways of achieving this change were searched and suggested for 25 years, unfortunately without significant results. We propose a possible solution that aims to the core of the educational philosophy, a change of the teaching paradigm. The current Romanian educational main teaching approach is the traditional one, in which the teacher is the owner of knowledge and the sole decider of what, how and where is learned. In teacher-centred approach, students become passive learners and have no control of their own learning (Ahmed, 2013). Duckworth (2009) stipulates that teacher-centered philosophy instead of enhancing learning actually prevents it.

The student-centred approach is not a new one in the Romanian education, many books, seminars and training courses promoted it. But unfortunately, the paradigm internalization and its application in practice are not so frequent, only a small number of practitioners embrace and use it in the classroom context. "While Student-centred learning (SCL) is increasingly discussed in K-12 and higher education, researchers and

practitioners lack a current and comprehensive framework to design, develop, and implement SCL” (Lee, Hannafin, 2016). Maybe, in Romania too, the explanation of this fact is due to the theoretical ways of promoting it and the difficulties encountered by teachers to apply it to practice. Our concept, the educational team (ET), also student-centred, wants to be more applied, describing the practical ways to collaborate, assess, plan, apply and monitor the students` activity.

The student-centred approach is a social constructivist one, seeing learning as a process of knowledge construction, where students actively discover and transform information, in order to integrate them into their own system of notions, and thus become “theirs”. How the teacher chooses what (curriculum), how (teaching strategy), where, when and with whom (the school setting) directs the student, so as to learn actively, consciously and thus to form their own knowledge. “With the learner-centred approach, teachers bring command of content knowledge but design flexibility for learners to construct their learning.” (Brown, 2003).

DuFour (2004, p. 1) states that the “core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift—from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning—has profound implications for schools.”

In the Romanian educational approach, the teacher is alone in all the aspects of the didactic process, solitary assessing the students` performances, planning the curriculum or designing the instructional strategy. Our view is a collaborative one, in which teachers meet, share ideas, plan together, discuss and learn from each other. Strahan (2016) shows that an important characteristic of a successful school is that teachers work collaboratively, and in consequence develop stronger instructional strategies and these strategies enhance student achievement. The educational team concept has its roots in two separate approaches, each contributing to the architectural concept with its own vision: collaborative professional communities (PLC) and school-based problem-solving teams (SBPSTs).

The concept of PLC is focusing on teacher professionalization and on the positive effect on students` learning performance. Vescio et al. (2008) state that PLC is a result of the increased need for school reform and reorganization toward professional development. The teachers` competencies develop on collaboration basis, when they

share ideas, work together to better their performance and progress through collaboratively examining their day-to-day practice. Bolan et al. (2005) describes five characteristics of PLC, which can be integrated in our educational team approach: shared values and visions, a clear and consistent focus on student learning, reflective dialogue on curriculum, instruction and student development, collaboration focused on teaching and learning and promotion of collective and individual learning.

Segura, Pirtleand and Tobia (2014) enumerate the following activities that can take place in a PLC meeting, also integrated in our educational team approach: studying standards and reviewing concepts, selecting instructional strategies and assessment techniques, planning lessons, implementing lessons, analysing students` work, and adjusting instruction after reflecting on teaching experiences. The team consists of general education teachers and decisional factors.

The second concept from whom educational team approach defines its identity is SBPST. This teaming approach is “an indirect service delivery approach consisting of a group of three or more educational professionals who share the responsibility of working with a colleague or family member to develop and evaluate an action plan to address an academic or behavioral problem or to meet someother specific goal.” (Welch et al., 1999, p. 38). The principles of SBPST are: the use of a systematic, problem-solving process, focus on assessment of student needs, use of interventions that have a demonstrated success, monitoring the consistent implementation of strategies and determine the student response to intervention (Schwanz, Barbour, 2004). The SBPST team members are the same as in a case management team: specialists, general education teachers, and decisional factors, and also the activities they perform: assessment, planning, implementation, and monitoring.

From these two methodological perspectives, we develop the educational team concept. In Table 1 we present the common points with PLC and SBPST.

Table 1: A comparative view on PLC, ET and SBPST

PLC	Educational team (ET)	SBPST
Teacher -centred	Student-centred	Student-centred
Goal: teacher professionalization, that leads to student progress.	Goal: all students` development through learning.	Goal: resolving the problems of SEN students.
Team members: general education teachers and decisional factors.	Team members: general education teachers, and when needed, specialists.	Team members: specialists and general education teacher.
Activities: share knowledge, selecting strategies, curriculum planning, sharing implementation, adjustment of the whole process regarding students` progress.	Activities: assessment of students needs and knowledge, selecting strategies, curriculum planning, monitoring and adjustment of the whole process regarding students` progress.	Activities: assessment, planning, implementation and monitoring an individualized educational plan (IEP).
Type of instructional strategies: all strategies, the accent is put in finding new and effective ones.	Type of instructional strategies: differentiated instruction and when needed individualized curriculum adaptation.	Type of strategies: all types, but the accent is put on selecting the ones effective for a specific student and a specific need.

Conceptual framework

The educational team refers to a group of specialists who work together in order to improve the learning process through customized psycho-pedagogical interventions, addressed to the whole classroom and to each student.

This collaborative way of addressing the didactic process is proposed for the following reasons and aims to overcome some of the secondary education problems:

- The work solitude experienced by many teachers, who are all alone in planning and implementing the curriculum. They don`t have a real feedback of their teaching process, only from the students` performances, but often this indicator is not taken into consideration by teachers as a reflection of their work quality, but of student indifference toward learning. A team effort is more productive, objective and performance-centred.

- The teachers are the only ones responsible for the students' academic performances, and often they are not objective in analyzing them. A team shares the responsibility of their work and the pressure is placed upon the entire team, the teachers feel more secure and free to engage, experiment new methods or search for a way of improvement.

- The teachers who work alone have a unique, personal perception upon the didactic process and often they are incapable of recognizing that something is not how it should be or finding what really goes wrong. An independent, objective perspective from another specialist is always welcome and can be a valid mode of assessing the teaching performance and correcting the problems.

- A group of specialists provides for all members different didactic and scientific perspectives, diverse experiences, creative points of view, each teacher benefits from their entire colleague's expertise.

- An educational team is a form of collaborative professional development, in which teachers learn from each other and professionalize as individuals but also as a group.

The goal of the educational team is the constant improvement of students' individual and group learning and helping them to achieve their potential. This goal requires a differentiated instruction approach, which recognizes the individual differences, and values them.

All team members are teaching different subjects in the same class and guide the same students, but their teaching approaches are different. In the current educational practice, the students from one class experience many different teaching styles, requirement, classroom rules or communication methods. They must adapt to this variety and are expected to perform equally well in all subjects. In our working methodology, the educational team analyze the best individual practices and select a recommended sample of teaching strategies, assessment, communicational methods, classroom rules, classroom management strategies based on the classroom and students' individual profile. In this way, a unitary and coherent educational practice is formed and applied by all teachers of the same class. The students' must adapt to a single, unitary type of educational methodology and not six or more different ones.

Each student has a unique personality, with its own familial and educational background, different learning styles, motives, interests, abilities and learning pace. Therefore, in order to maximize the learning of each student, a differentiated approach to instruction is needed. We propose in our educational team philosophy the differentiated instruction approach, and when children with special needs (SEN) are integrated into the classroom the curriculum adaptation may be addressed too.

The principles that regulate the educational team functioning must be stated from the beginning and respected throughout the teams' activity. The working group is composed of teachers with different specialization, teaching experiences, ages or gender and therefore they must accept and value these differences, relating to them as a valuable resource for professional development. The team goal can be achieved only by a permanent process of sharing information, about teaching practices and students' individual characteristics and progress. Only when all team members have common knowledge and the same initial data to be analyzed we can speak of taking joint didactic action. The teachers will present different points of view, based on their specific expertise, and formulate didactic goals for each subject. The team duty is to agree on common principles of educational goals development and later, to negotiate and prioritize those goals. Basic principles for educational goals development that can be taken into consideration are: promoting learning understanding and relevance for students, developing daily basis abilities and transversal competencies. In the negotiating process, all opinions must be valued and analyzed, adopting the conclusions that are reached democratically. All team members must adopt in their teaching practice the reached conclusions and proposed measures and collect information about their effectiveness. The teachers must relate to the team also as a collaborative professional development frame, sharing teaching experiences, negotiating and reflecting upon them as a group surely leading to individual and group progress.

Putting the concept into action

The educational team is a very practical concept, and easily applicable to practice. All that is required for its implementation is the will to do it and the managerial decision to experiment it at the school level. Of course, like in any situation, there will be resistance

to change attitudes but they can be overcome by seeing and experimenting the good effects of its implementation.

Educational team members and their roles

In the educational team, all teachers from a particular class are included and represent the core of the team. Their role is to participate with all their knowledge and experience to the team effort, respect the working principles and take part in all the team activities that will be described further.

When SEN students are integrated into the class or some of the students' experience learning difficulties, additional team members are added: psychologists, psychopedagogues, speech therapists or educational counselors. Their role is to contribute to the team effort with specific expertise and to offer consultancy in assessment, curricular adaptation or school environment accessibility.

Another possible member of the educational team is the curricular expert, who can contribute with his own expertise in planning and implement the curriculum.

A crucial role in team dynamic has the team manager, the role played by the class master. His responsibilities are both as a specialist and as the team coordinator. He must ensure that the team function efficiently and coordinate it accordingly. He convokes the meetings, coordinates them, mediates the negotiations, ensures that proposed measures are applied, prepare and gather necessary documents.

Team activities

The main activities of the educational team are: collaborative developing and designing assessment tools, classroom observation, and individual assessment, prepare initial evaluation report, formulate didactic goals and negotiate them, collaboratively planning the curriculum, implementing the curriculum, monitoring the progress and final evaluation and team reflection upon a year` work.

Always the educational process begins with the assessment. Every teacher must assess the students` knowledge in their specific field, but also the children` interests, learning motives, learning styles and learning pace. To begin this initial process, the team must plan it, and develop assessment instruments. In this stage, the psychopedagogue can contribute by offering specific tools in measuring the learning styles, motive or pace. This process may take two weeks, followed by three weeks of individual assessment in the classroom. After the assessment is finished each teacher must prepare an evaluation report, in which they record the classroom and individual knowledge

level, and reflect upon the assessment instruments` validity. All teachers` reports are analyzed in a team context and conclusions are drawn.

Based on the assessment results each teacher formulates didactic goals and presents them in the team context. Afterward, the goals negotiating process takes place, in which the whole team prioritizes them occurring to the principles stated above.

The curriculum planning is a team effort and targets the annual, quarterly and lesson-unit levels. The teachers must make compatible all types of documents, and compare the themes all across subjects to find possible integrative ones. All documents must be made to be flexible in order to adjust them accordingly to the students` progress and understanding.

Each teacher implements the curriculum in a differentiated manner. They value individual characteristics, respect students` learning pace, offer different learning methods, in order to meet all the learning styles and maximize the learning potential. Different forms of teaching assistance may be conducted insight the team: mentoring, coaching, team teaching or inter-assistance. In the mentoring process, the experienced teachers offer their expertise to those in their new career beginning, facilitating the transition from one post to another. Coaching is used whenever a teacher feels the need for assistance, not necessary in the beginning of a new teaching experience, and consists in a peer-to-peer relation aiming the overcoming of a difficult situation. In the inter-assistance situation, the teachers participate in each other lessons, analyze them in order to better it. Team teaching is the situation in which two specialists teach together the same class in an integrative manner. A specific form of team teaching is the co-teaching, in which a support teacher helps the class teacher to manage the SEN students.

Monitoring the progress is the feedback stage of the teaching process. In the ongoing evaluation, the individual and class progress are evaluated and conclusions are drawn about the validity of the proposed methodology, the effectiveness of the teaching strategies and also of the entire educational team approach. Conclusions are obtained and strategies rethought, new objectives proposed.

The final stage of the team effort is the final evaluation, in which each teacher evaluates the students` progress and the class results and generates a final report. All the team members reflect on the one-year experience and re-evaluate the positive and

things that need to be improved in their collaborative work. Measures for the year to come are made and plans for bettering the whole process proposed.

Conclusions

The change in the educational paradigm is needed and demanded by all educational factors, especially in the secondary education. Our approach proposes a practical model, in which teachers collaborate in a team effort in order to improve the learning process through customized psycho-pedagogical interventions, addressed to the whole classroom and to each student. The teachers share information about teaching practices and students' individual characteristics and progress, take joint didactic action on which they rely on their specific expertise, formulate didactic goals that promote learning to understand, adopt conclusions that are reached democratically. The teachers must relate to the team also as a collaborative professional development frame, sharing teaching experiences, negotiating and reflecting upon them as a group surely is leading to individual and group progress.

The team is led by the head teacher and has its core is represented by all the teachers from one class and additional members as psychologists, psycho-pedagogues, speech therapists or educational counselors.

The main activities of the educational team are: collaborative developing and designing assessment tools, classroom observation, and individual assessment, prepare initial evaluation report, formulate didactic goals and negotiate them, collaboratively planning the curriculum, implementing the curriculum, monitoring the progress and final evaluation and team reflection upon a year's work.

Table 2: A SWOT analyses for the educational team approach

Strengths	Weaknesses
Different didactic experiences	A relative new method
Different subject specialists	Lack of experience in collaborative work
Different specializations (general teachers and psycho-pedagogues)	Lack of experience in coaching, team teaching or co-teaching
Collaborative work	
Different approaches to curriculum	

The holistic team advantages Integrated perspective about learning Collaborative professional development	
Opportunities	Threats
Many competent teachers The will of change in the educational system level The structure of the educational team is present, but not practiced Collaborative professional development	The resistance to change in the individual level The lack of procedures in implementing the concept More time consuming More financial resources must be allocated More support technologies needed

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