

The State of the Pre-University Education System in Romania. Is Educational Management Professional and Based on Responsibility?

Alina Nicoleta BONCILICĂ¹

Abstract

One of Romania's concerns is represented by the current state of the education system. A first step in this endeavour involves an introspection of the education system with the aim of identifying deficiencies and their causes and proposing measures and directions to follow for effective and efficient educational management. Therefore, this article proposes to present the current state of the pre-university education system, especially the state of educational management and how it manages to cope with challenges from education. The professionalisation and responsibility of educational management are the main elements pursued in the educational reform strategy. With these things in mind, our aim is to highlight the essential aspects of achieving school success.

Keywords: *education system, educational management, pre-university education*

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1. Introduction

The education system is the fundamental field on which all other sectors of a society are based. As far as Romanian society is concerned, it has recently been characterized by an exodus of knowledge, technology and major changes on the labour market, but also by strategic changes in the framework of social adjustment policies to European requirements.

But a series of system gaps, such as the lack of learning and education opportunities, threaten the future of the Romanian economy. According to UNICEF data (UNICEF, 2023), 3.4 million children of school age are identified in eastern Europe and Central Asia, but are not enrolled in any educational institution, and another 19.5 million children do not have the minimum mathematical skills of mathematics in school. Therefore, we can observe a learning crisis that is amplified by school closures as a result of the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This contributes to increasing educational inequality, especially for marginalised children, such as those with disabilities or minority groups, who are left behind, bearing the brunt of this crisis.

¹ Alina Nicoleta Bonciliică, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, alina.dobre@man.ase.ro

Improving learning outcomes and addressing permanent challenges of the Romanian education system, such as inequity and school dropout, depend on the existing teaching-learning environment in educational institutions. These concepts are also encouraged by school management, which has a predominantly administrative role.

In this context, can we say that educational management is professional and based on responsibility?

2. Description of pre-university education system

Regarding the education system in Romania, the highest governing body is the Ministry of Education, which oversees all educational levels, as follows: early education (0-6 years), primary education (preparatory class and grades I-IV, lower secondary education (grades V-VIII) or gymnasium, upper secondary education (high school or vocational), non-university tertiary education (post-high school), higher education. All educational levels except higher education, form pre-university education which is directly subordinated to the Ministry of Education through the county school inspectorates (Uniunea Europeană, 2023).

The school inspectorate is a management body that ensures the coordination of public educational institutions at the county level. It has directly subordinated the Administrative Councils of the schools, made up of teaching staff from the school, its president being the director, representatives of the students and parents, as well as representatives of the Local Councils. The school's Board of Directors is the main governing body for an educational institution, to which all the other actors involved are subordinate: the Teacher's Council, the Methodical Committees organised by curricular areas, the Work Committees, the Coordinator of Educational Programmes and Projects, the auxiliary teaching staff and non-teaching staff (Ministerul Educației, 2023b).

Thus, school management considers the exercise of management functions (planning, organisation, coordination, motivation, and control-evaluation) within all units of the pre-university education system (school inspectorates, teaching staff houses, educational units, children's clubs and palaces, etc.) (Ministerul Educației, 2023b). The quality of school management represents a basic coordinate in the relationship between the organisational image and the organizational components. The specialized literature identifies the organisational image as a factor that affects social opinion in academic environments, contributing to the increase of the state of psychological well-being by capitalizing on the commitment of the staff of educational institutions towards the organization (Kalkan, Aksal, Gazi, Atasoy, & Dagli, 2020).

The vision of the Romanian pre-university education system is to promote values-oriented learning, cognitive, action, and volatile capacities, fundamental knowledge, creativity, knowledge, skills, and abilities needed in society and in the exercise of a profession. According to these, the mission of the education system is to form, through education, the mental infrastructure of Romania in the context of

globalisation. Therefore, the objective is to generate competitive human resources at the national level that are capable of functioning effectively in the current and future society to ensure the sustainability of the country (Parlamentul României, 2018).

The educational ideal desired by the Romanian state envisages "the free and harmonious development of man, the assumption of a system of values necessary for personal development, for active participation in society, for the development of the entrepreneurial spirit, for social inclusion and employment on the labour market" (Parlamentul României, 2018). Thus, the National Education Law outlines a series of principles that are the basis of the pre-university education system:

- the principle of equity, which provides access to education without discrimination;
- the principle of relevance, according to which education is a response to social-economic and personal development needs;
- the principle of efficiency, involves the management of existing resources to obtain maximum educational results;
- the principle of quality, according to which the activities within the pre-university education system correspond to reference standards and good national and international practises;
- the principle of transparency;
- the principle of social inclusion;
- the principle of decentralization, according to which the main decisions will be taken by the actors directly involved in the process.

The European context of pre-university education requires a number of practices such as administrative capacity development, local responsibility and transparency. In order to integrate in this context, the Romanian education system must develop national programs that encourage organizational change and cooperation between educational institutions so as to bring about changes in the educational practices used. A first step in making the administration of public education services more efficient is the decentralization of pre-university education (Tuşa, Voinia, & Miricescu, 2013).

It is well known that Romanian education is a follower of centralized management, a practice favoured by factors such as the strong organisational culture developed as a result of the stability of teaching positions, which amplifies the school organisation's resistance to change. Although the Romanian education system has adopted reforming measures over time, they were oriented towards the practice of centralization. However, in the context of some challenges of the external environment, the existence of flexibility within the framework of educational policies is required, so that the main stakeholders involved in the education process benefit from a flexible, modern educational system, with a curriculum corresponding to the European one, centred on students and society's requirements (Grigorescu & Olteanu, 2014).

The main characteristics of Romanian pre-university education are:

- free access of all students to education services provided by the Romanian state;

- financing of national education with a minimum of 6% of the gross domestic product;
- the open character, which offers students the opportunity to transfer from one school unit to another, to change the study profile, under the conditions imposed by the regulation of the Ministry of Education;
- represents a public good, operating according to the legislative regulations in force, available in Romanian, in the languages of national minorities or in the languages of international circulation.

As for the number of students, the main beneficiaries of education services, they have been in continuous decline in the last decade, as we can observe in Figure 1. In the 2020-2021 school year, a number of 2,907,516 students were registered in the Romanian pre-university education system, 43 thousand students less than in the previous school year (Ministerul Educației, 2023c).

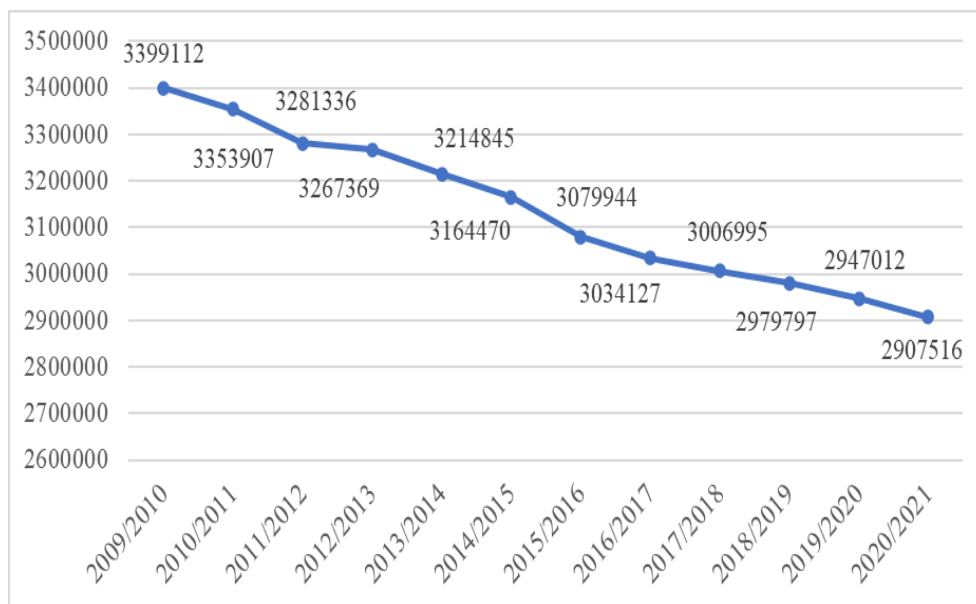


Figure 1. Evolution of the number of students in pre-university education

Source: Ministerul Educației, 2023c

A decrease in the number of students leads to a lack of qualified labor, which represents a major problem for the Romanian economy. In this context, an x-ray of the educational system is necessary to analyze the deficiencies and their causes and to propose measures to improve the educational process.

3. Analysis of educational management

An important role in the organizational structure of the pre-university education system belongs to the managerial staff whose skills and technical expertise depend on their training and professionalisation. Therefore, the appointment of

school managers to various functions of the education system must take into account the availability to assume new responsibilities arising in the decision-making process (Tuşa, Voinia, & Miricescu, 2013).

The Ministry of Education (2011) classifies educational managers from pre-university education into the following types:

- educator, teacher: leads the didactic activity at the level of a class or group;
- the leading teacher: leads the educational activity at the level of a class or group of students;
- the speech teacher: leads the process of language training and psychopedagogical assistance specific to students through speech therapy centres or offices;
- the counselor teacher: leads the psychopedagogical activity of students, teaching staff, and parents through psychopedagogical assistance centres or offices;
- the methodist teacher: leads the methodical activity at the territorial and county level through the teaching staff Houses and at the interschool level through the methodical committees and chairs;
- the director teacher: leads the activity of an educational unit at the global level;
- the school inspector teacher.

The newest reform proposed for the Romanian education system belongs to the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis through the "Educated Romania" project (România Educată, 2021), which includes major changes in preuniversity education that will contribute to the sustainable development of Romania. This project aims to create a quality educational system, adapted to current generations, and prepared for the challenges of the future. Within it, a series of elements that require urgent measures are identified: the capitalisation of technological developments, the flexibility of educational paths, innovation, digitisation and the correlation of skills and knowledge with the requirements of the labour market, thus being closer to achieving global competitiveness (România Educată, 2021).

One of the priority axes of the "Educated Romania" project (România Educată, 2021) is the professionalisation of educational management, for which several deficiencies of a general nature have been identified:

- There are no professional standards for management positions within educational institutions.
- There is no well-defined profile of the director, correlated with professional standards, roles, responsibilities, and competencies.
- For the position of member in the House of the Body of Experts, the selection criteria are restrictive and limited to tenured professors with degree II, which excludes the possibility of these positions being occupied by specialists from other fields who possess management knowledge.

- The position of director can be held without adequate training in the field of educational management, without providing unitary training for the management of school units.
- The absence of an established path for professional development that takes into account the assumption of the mandate, preparation for the managerial career, as well as continuous training during the mandate.
- Increasing the role of school inspectorates in the organisation of the competition for the position of director to the detriment of its organization at the unit level.
- Regulations regarding the incompatibility of political functions with educational management are not taken into account. Occupying positions in political parties by school principals entails risks in terms of decreasing the quality of managerial activity and the politicisation of the educational space.

Going for a more in-depth analysis within the pre-university education system, it is found that it presents a series of specific problems identified in the management of pre-university education units:

- There is no well-defined competence profile for all persons occupying management positions (only the competences expected of candidates for director and deputy director positions are listed).
- The Board of Directors has a predominantly formal role; in some cases, it does not perform its functions in a real way.
- Often the representatives of the students, as well as of the local authorities, do not participate in the CA meetings.
- There are cases in which the specialised commissions of the educational unit do not work. This can be determined by the following causes: lack of training of the people involved, lack of information regarding the role and importance of such commissions, lack of time because one person is a member of several commissions, a fact that leads to overcrowding.
- Deficient cooperation and communication between the school and the local authorities, lacking clarity of the responsibilities of each party.
- There is no continuous training of people who hold management positions at the level of the educational unit, necessary to adapt to legislative changes in the conditions of the challenges and opportunities of the external environment.

Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube (2015) agree that the educational management process involves the development of systems that ensure the implementation of management strategies and practices to achieve the educational goal. Therefore, an improvement in educational management is needed to increase school success and the prestige of the school institution.

4. Improving educational management

The way high school education is organised is based on three fundamental elements: structure, academic, and social organisation (Lee & Burkam, 2003). These

components favour the integration of students with a tendency to drop out of school organisations. Thus, the education system aims to achieve better performance for its students, which gives it high resilience to continuous changes in society. Dogaru and Neacșu (2013) are of the opinion that a "successful school" achieves exceptional results for each student. They also believe that the principal's leadership style affects student learning. A participative style that involves the participation of teaching staff (the main actors who are in direct contact with the needs of students) in decision making will lead the school unit to success.

For the correct functioning of a system, whether we are talking about the health system or the education system, we must consider values such as responsibility, transparency, fairness. These are transmitted mainly through the power of example, from teachers to students, from experienced people to apprentices, but also through the knowledge that students acquire and apply at school. In this sense, educational accountability is approached from a traditional perspective according to which the school is responsible for the academic results of its students, especially for their performance on standardised assessments.

Fossland & Sandvoll (2021) are of the opinion that the new requirements in education emphasise the increased responsibility for improving the quality of teaching and learning. They also believe that the responsibilities of school units vary according to the characteristics of the unit, but their core is to strengthen education and bring innovation to the education sector. The idea that school only produces young people who absorb and apply information is outdated. The current context requires the formation of human characters with values such as fairness, integrity, tolerance, social and ecological responsibility, and respect for others. Thus, the educational system forms active citizens, able to adapt to economic and social conditions, with European values and a strong civic and democratic culture.

In order to have a professional educational management, the pre-university education system must consider the following directions:

- Elaboration and implementation of specific training programmes within educational management;
- Establishing an effective system of monitoring and control-evaluation of policies within educational management, as well as their improvement
- The transparency of the decision-making process and management activities must be ensured through a public accountability system;
- Correlation of the competition methodology with the evaluation methodology in the case of directors, in order to increase the attractiveness of the position of director;
- Defining the professional standards and the director's profile;
- Outline the roles, competencies, and responsibilities of educational managers;
- Redesigning the quality assurance system;

- Involvement of all stakeholders (parents, students, school counsellors) in the planning, organisation, coordination, and evaluation of the performances recorded by the school;
- Concluding partnerships with trade unions, parents' organisations, and student associations with the aim of organising training sessions with appropriate content for members of school management structures.

In order to measure the level of knowledge and the correct assignment of the position, a competition was organized to occupy the director positions. In this way, the candidates' professionalism is tested through an interview test and a written test, the final result being the average of the two tests.

Following the organisation of the 2021 competition for director positions in pre-university education, 29.05% of the positions remained unfilled (Ministerul Educației, 2023a), which means that people who occupied these positions before the competition were not suitable for this function. In the case of the candidates declared admitted, results between 7.00 and 9.79 were obtained, their distribution being presented in Figure 2. As can be seen in Figure 2, the highest weight of 65% has grades between 8.00 and 8.99, followed by grades between 9.00 and 9.79 with a weight of 25%, and those between 7.00-7.99 with a weight of 10%. Moreover, it can be observed that there are no grades higher than 9.79. This demonstrates the fact that persons occupying leadership positions in pre-university education need an improvement of management knowledge and practices.

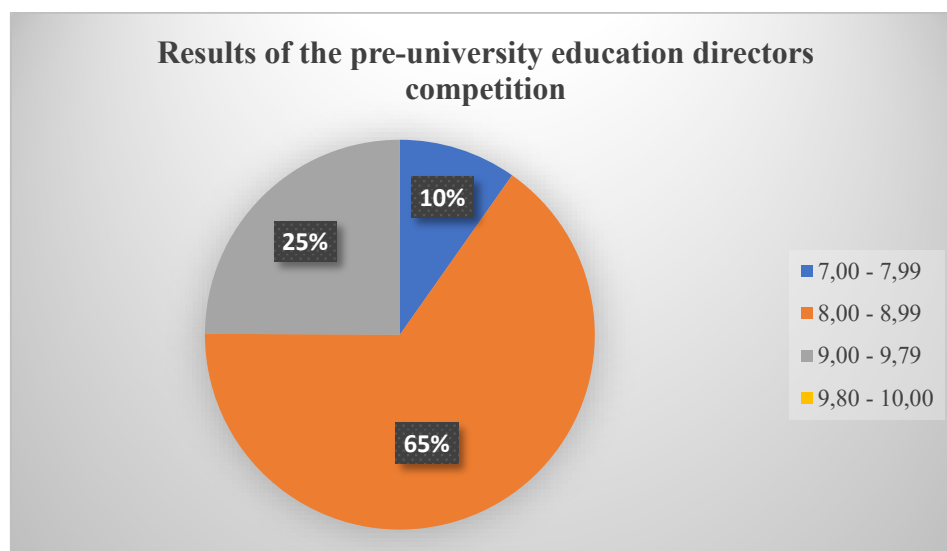


Figure 2. The results of the pre-university education director competition

Source: Ministerul Educației, 2023a

In this context, the main issue identified through this study is the professional training of educational managers. Exercising effective and professional management requires the existence of a set of skills, competences, and characteristics

specific to the function of manager, also known as soft skills such as innovative thinking, problem solving, empathy, teamwork. Astereki, Mehrdad, & Ghobadiyan (2021) consider competence to be an essential tool for planning, organising, and training the workforce. They are of the opinion that the lack of strategic thinking skills leads to the adoption of quick methods and inappropriate solutions that lead to the failure of the organisation's objectives.

In addition, Alishev, Ustin, & Sabirova (2020) identified teacher qualification as a contributing factor to the success or failure of educational activity. The level of professional skills of teachers and the effective application of educational methods and techniques in the teaching process have a significant impact on the stimulation of students' cognitive and communication activities and their participation in the educational process.

The authorisation, accreditation and external evaluation of the quality of educational activities within pre-university education institutions or other educational institutions (centres, clubs, palaces, etc.) are handled by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP). In order to correctly identify progress and performance, as well as to continuously improve the educational process, a review of national standards for assessing the quality of education. Thus, the institutional evaluation activity must start from the results of national and international evaluations and be orientated towards the following directions:

- focussing educational activities on the continuous improvement of the educational process and promoting the well-being of students;
- valorisation of human resources in the education system;
- promoting social responsibility;
- improving collaborations between the educational institution and the other actors involved: local authorities, parents, employers, and the whole community;
- promoting equal opportunities within the educational act.

In this case, the new ARACIP evaluation standards must focus on 11 essential aspects in ensuring the quality of education within the educational institution (ARACIP, 2023):

1. Communication with direct and indirect beneficiaries of education (students, parents, institution staff, related institutions, the community).
2. The results of the educational act obtained by the students.
3. The well-being of the students and staff of the educational institution.
4. The results of the educational act for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (economic, cultural, ethnic conditions, etc.).
5. Results of the educational act for students with special educational requirements.
6. The results of the educational act for students who have the ability to achieve better performance.
7. The professional capacity of the teaching staff.
8. Managerial and institutional capacity.

9. The European dimension of the educational act.
10. Preventing and combating discrimination of any kind and ensuring the rights of minorities.
11. Equal opportunities in teaching the educational act.

Compliance with standards and the application of correct leadership principles and methods contribute to achieving success in school management and provide the opportunity to improve educational management. Principals are encouraged to use the most appropriate management strategy so that the effectiveness of educational management includes the improvement of individual and collective performance in the educational process (Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015).

5. Conclusions

Continuous and significant changes in the content and mechanisms of the educational process characterise the modern education system. The effectiveness of professional activity is measured by the success of the students who participate in the educational process. Thus, the professional performances of educational managers, but also of teachers, are determined by the results of its activities, namely the training of young people according to European standards.

For an effective educational management that leads to superior performance by students, it is necessary for the educational manager to have several roles, among which the most important are defining the objectives of the educational institution, observing the teaching process in order to provide adequate feedback to the teaching staff so that they improve their teaching methods and techniques, as well as supporting them in their professional development, and last but not least, maintaining permanent communication with actors involved in the education process.

Thus, through a reform of the Romanian education system, the professionalisation of educational management is desired, which has as its main objectives the establishment of professional standards for the position of manager and the improvement of the initial and continuous training of educational managers. Although Romania is making significant progress in modernising the education system, it is faced with students who advance through the education ladder without possessing basic skills and students who leave school before completing compulsory studies. These key challenges are closely monitored, and their resolution represents the goals of the educational reform strategy.

Therefore, the pre-university education system in Romania is in an extensive process of modernisation and improvement, starting from the identification of deficiencies and the causes of the reduced effectiveness of educational management and the establishment of directions to follow for its professionalisation. Within this process, the principles of social responsibility are considered, and educational managers committing to a system of public responsibility for their actions.

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