

It's the educational system, isn't it?

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Abstract

The Romanian education has always been a controversial subject. Since I have knowledge of myself, the majority of the things I have heard about it in the media were focused on its weaknesses: the failures of many high school students at their final exams and the innocent students paying for the frustrations of the unsatisfied and poorly paid teachers. Before leaving to the United States I could also have listed many problems related to this educational system, such as the teachers, and the big amount of information expected to be learned, or too less training for the national team representing Romania at the International Mathematical Olympiad.

However, switching to such a different educational system as it is the American system and being in touch with other ones such as the Brazilian one, I have realized that many of the aspects of the Romanian education that I used to consider disadvantageous were not necessarily detrimental. The truth is that the Romanian school manages to create people who can handle not only situations that appear in the textbooks. The competition that exists at all times makes it clear that, for better or worse, someone will win and other one will lose. Not everything in life is sunshine and rainbows and that's probably the most important lesson that I've learned in Romania, though I have become aware of it only after going abroad.

Romanian educational system through my eyes

One of my favorite writers used to say that there's nothing new under the sun and that the story of a person is the story of the entire humanity. He might have been wrong but for sure my story was quite classical. When I was a kid I started learning mathematics because I had to but what probably makes my story different from others is that I was fascinated by it. Those digits seemed to me mysterious and magical. I was so attracted by them that I started to study more and

more. However, even though my interest in math was genuine, my family had a lot to do with it too. It was from my mother who is an elementary school teacher that I learned how to study efficiently and to love doing it. She has always told me that without studying I won't obtain what I crave for and, consequently, she always tried to make me be ambitious and responsible in relation with whatever was related to school. On the other side, my father's influence was a little more subtle. He was an officer in the army (now he's retired) and the greatest lesson I learned from him was how to be disciplined and patient. He has always tried to make me improve myself, to want more and more and to have the strength to fight for it. However, nowadays I don't know if I became as good as my parents wanted me to be and I'm not even sure I made out of their attitudes what I should have but that's definitely how they remained in my memories of those days.

As time passed by, my passion for mathematics grew more and more. I began to participate at the math Olympiad since I was in the fifth grade, when I was 12, and what can I say? Things were working out; I got to participate to the national math Olympiad since then and even to gain some medals. It was awesome because I loved it. I was solving more and more problems, every day, trying to be better. Faster. And even faster. My goal? Just to improve myself. Until the seventh grade when I learned about the international math contests. I still remember the first test for the selection of the national team for the Junior Balkan Mathematical Olympiad (JBMO). I wasn't planning on taking that test. When I learned of it I was just very surprised and even shocked that I qualified for it but back then it seemed just out of my league. I thought that I just shouldn't go. However, the other students from my district and especially my roommates at that national Olympiad insisted on it. And so I decided to go. After a couple of months and other tests I was part of the second Romanian team for the JBMO. I couldn't believe it. And it was then when I realized that I wanted more than participating at national Olympiads and just winning some medals there.

The same summer my parents and I decided that I should transfer to one of the best schools in Bucharest where the majority of the top students at the math Olympiad were studying, the International Computer High School. That decision was the start of one of the most beautiful and challenging periods of my life: living in the capital city and not in a small town. To find out what it feels like to work to be among the best. I basically had everything I could possibly have

needed to be successful. In my class I had several colleagues who were trying to do the same and the rivalry that appeared among us was probably one of the biggest forces that pushed us forward. However, besides this competition that existed from the moment we met some of us even became good friends. Honestly all was propitious for us. We had enough time for problem solving, and a lot of training. I'll always remember our math teacher. His classes were not only useful but also fun. Only God knows how much we laughed with that man! Besides him there was also another teacher who inspired many of us with his personality and intelligence. Unfortunately he passed away immediately after I had graduated from high school and he didn't get to know that my dream of winning a gold medal at the biggest contest for high school students in the world, the International Mathematical Olympiad, came true. Sometimes I wondered at what he would have told me if he had still been among us. But who knows? He wasn't predictable at all.

However, getting where I wanted wasn't quite an easy target. Solving lots of problems became actually a problem after a time. I was spending a lot of time doing it and still I wasn't good enough. I didn't feel I was. Something wasn't going right. And it was two years after I moved with my brother in Bucharest that I had to start learning how to find a balance between problem solving and my leisure time which at some point ceased to exist. And besides these technical difficulties, there was also the issue of the other competitors. There are lots of well prepared people and too few places in the national teams. And did I mention that they were basically all guys and that I was a girl? That was another detail that I had to take care of in those five years. Lots of adjustments but time can definitely make wonders.

Romanian educational system VS. American educational system

In my last year of high school things were really different. All changed or I did, who can tell? Yet, it all went quite smoothly. The experience I had accumulated reaped its fruits. I went for the fourth time at the European Girls Mathematical Olympiad and I gained my fourth gold medal which made me remain the first in the hall of fame of the contest. I participated for the second time at the International Mathematical Olympiad and I finally got a gold medal. Therefore, in the middle of July after finishing high school I felt fulfilled. From the academic perspective I got all I had dreamed of. I basically obtained all the medals I longed for at the math

competitions and I was on my way to pursue further my passion for mathematics at one of the best universities in the world, Princeton. I was thrilled for this new opportunity which at the same time was such a challenge. Though it was painful thinking that I should leave behind the life I built in Bucharest, I was sure it was for the best. Not seeing my friends as often as I used to it was just a small sacrifice for this incredible chance to be part of one of the best educational systems of our contemporary society. No more indifferent teachers. No more learning useless stuff. “Goodbye, Romania!” and “Hello, US!” There for sure I will have the time of my life. No doubt. Right?

Well, that wasn't really how things went. After one year at Princeton not only my opinion about the Romanian educational system changed but also the one about the American one. The first days that I got there I was overwhelmed by an incredibly big number of help resources. All that I was hearing about was that everything was going to be all right and that if I would ever have a problem, I shouldn't doubt to ask for help. And I shouldn't let too much time pass by until I do so because this could worsen things. Got it!

At the beginning it was sweet, maybe even reassuring. Indifference was no longer an issue. All the students were worried though most of them seemed to be relieved when they remembered or were reminded that help was available at all times and that therefore, everything was going to work out. However, after a time I have to admit that I got sick of it. All that I was hearing was how to search for help when I was in trouble and that for sure I was going to need help because things were about to get really complicated. We weren't in high school any more. Things were about to get tough.

Well, if they were about to get tougher than in high school that might have been something. But they didn't. Time was passing by, week after week and still I wasn't thinking of asking for help. Actually things were getting along very smoothly. In spite of the initial rumors that in college students get to sleep very few hours, I was sleeping as I used to in the last years especially when I had my exams, a period which was announced by many elder students to be translated by 3 to 4 hours of sleep per night.

For sure there have been moments in which I felt challenged by some homework but in all those moments my first thoughts were to spend more time on those parts in order to overcome those little obstacles. I've never thought of asking for help. Methought that the office hours in

which the professors usually help their students clarify what they didn't get in class were somehow superfluous. But clearly they weren't for many other students around me. One of my roommates told me that she used to go every week at the office hours of her physics professor and that it was a real help for her. I was glad for her and I'm sure that she wasn't the only one for whom this sort of assistance indeed made a difference but even with that confession of hers I couldn't understand why they were necessary.

And it was approximately then when I realized that in spite of what I initially had in mind I would never be capable of taking advantage of all the particulars of the American educational system as Americans do for the simple fact that I didn't grow up within it. I didn't and I still don't feel comfortable with asking for help of any kind and especially when it comes to my studies. I have lived my whole life believing that if I want something, I should fight for it on my own to get it. It is my responsibility to struggle to understand what I didn't get in the class or in the homework or for the exams. Nobody can explain that to me. The classes should be enough for me to build a basis which I could use to learn on my own what I need and what I want to keep in my mind. To me a professor should only teach his or her classes and the student would have to figure out his or her doubts with what he or she learned in class. Besides, we are not talking about children but about people of at least 20 years old who should be able to handle these things on their own. Or at least I consider that they should.

In spite of this, all the people I talked with about this subject were surprised by my reaction and many of them told me that I was being harsh. Maybe I am because I still consider that having access to all that help is detrimental in the long run. Methinks that it offers a romanticized vision of how life works in general. Life is quite tough. One can't always get what one wants. We cannot be all winners. Some of us are better and other are worse. This is a reality. Trying to say it as smoothly as possible is unnecessary in some cases as it is in college years and usually in general. Well, I would rather stop here in order not to get too severe.

And since I was talking about what professors do or don't do, I still remember my meetings with my writing seminar professor. (This class is basically about how to write at an academic level in college and in which one has to write essays on some specific topics.) His feedback always started with some positive comment such as "it's a great start" followed by a "but". A quite long "but" part generally on good reasons: I've never been a great writer and

English is definitely not my language. Therefore, all his comments about what was wrong in my essays were more than true and reasonable. But what about all those adjectives such as great, good and so on, what were they doing there? After some time I was growing annoyed because I had to read those parts which were neither true nor helpful to me. I would have preferred to have just the comments, the real ones. I wasn't getting it. Were they supposed to make me feel good? Maybe to help me not to get depressed? I guess so but they didn't really work on me because I was and still am used to hear the truth and I prefer it to a sweet and even innocent lie.

For example, in high school I was always criticized no matter what my results were. If they were good, why weren't they better? And if they were bad, why were they that bad? And this sort of criticism was what made me improve my skills. This was what actually the educational system did for me. It made me go beyond the limitations I had at certain moments. I learned the hard way that out there wasn't actually a fairytale and that if I wanted to be better I had to work on my own for it. This may seem insane to many people and not only to Americans who grow up with this culture of searching for help but also to Romanians who start to compare themselves with the latter. Definitely some help can't hurt anyone! The professors and the teachers should do more for their students. There may be teachers who apparently don't deserve to be called so but even they play a critical role. They make the students learn and study on their own because these students have no other choice. And this makes them stronger. It helps them get used to solve their lives on their own and to be aware of the reality. Yes, there is a lot of injustice in this world. Many things don't work how they are supposed to but maybe they won't get fixed ever. We have to learn to live with them.

Yet this difference in the way of teaching could be seen more concretely on how the students acted in their classes. I was honestly surprised to hear all the questions that were asked in my math classes because most of them would be considered trivial in Romania and for the ones who weren't one could have quite easily have found an answer just by a simple reasoning. I was shocked because those students were supposed to be among the best of the US at math. However, in time I realized that this asking of anything vaguely unclear is almost a reflex to them. It's the most natural thing in the world to do when they have doubts.

Every time someone asked some naive question I used to imagine how the people back home would react to it. During the training we had for the international contests as the national

team, there was always someone who would ask an innocent question. And sometimes not even for the eldest of the team, who usually were the best, those questions were trivial. But as long as the question could have been answered using some elementary facts it was considered trivial by our professors and teachers and the culprit was looked at as someone somehow terribly ingenuous and inexperienced. Or in the best cases, if it was someone who had a certain reputation, that is who was among the best, it was assumed that he was having a bad day and that he was very tired. That's probably why we always tried not to put questions to our professors but rather to discuss our doubts among us or to try to figure them out by ourselves. It may seem tough but that's how I and many others learned more about mathematics.

Yet is this the right method to teach or is it wrong? I don't know but the truth is that it's very hard to get used to a completely different environment than the one we are accustomed to. Or at least for me it was and it still is. Even now I prefer to answer my questions by myself or at least to try this first and afterwards to ask someone else. Even when I'm at Princeton where people are used to ask and get asked about the tiniest things.

Before going there I used to believe that when I would get there I would be able to take advantage of all the opportunities such a university has to offer. However, it wasn't so because in time I realized that I could never study as the American students do. I can't be part of a study group because I simply function better on my own. And I am definitely more efficient on doing my homework alone in the library or in my room than with some other students with whom I could share ideas and who could tell me where I made a mistake. I cannot go to office hours every week because I wouldn't feel comfortable doing it and I would definitely prefer to study for more time by myself than to do it.

Why? Because I simply can't change the way I learn. I've always studied on my own even for the math Olympiad. I didn't like the idea of having private lessons with teachers or professors who could have probably taught me many useful things. I tried once and I felt embarrassed. It seemed like the joy and the satisfaction I used to feel when I was solving math problems or understanding some theoretical fact new to me were gone, though this method of learning worked for many of my colleagues. I'm not saying by any means that learning on one's own is the most adequate and the best technique but it's what worked and still works on my case.

It seems to me that no matter how hard we try to change some of our habits, we cannot do so from a certain point in our lives. Maybe it's because of the age we feel we have.

But returning to one of the initial questions I asked myself when I began to write this article which is just meant to tell a part of my story as a student, that is, what makes the American educational system so great and what makes so bad other ones as the Romanian and the Brazilian one? Because yes, the idea that education in one's country is awful does not exist only in Romania or in Europe. It does also in Brazil. This summer I had the chance to live a month in Rio de Janeiro where I took a Portuguese course offered by my university. Besides the discussions held in class about the Brazilian education, I had also a conversation about it with one lady who is the mother of three children, all of whom are already going to school. She was complaining about how poorly prepared the teachers are in the public schools and how only the private education which is very expensive was worth it, all this while we were having lunch in one exclusive restaurant owned by her husband. Yet also that month I met two persons who had studied in public schools before they went to university and who are now important figures in their fields in Brazil.

However, this comes just as an anecdote and getting back to what I was saying I believe that the answer is just the same that made me feel such a stranger this last year at Princeton: cultural differences. In Romania we are not accustomed to get help each step of the way, we rather know that we have to figure a way out usually by ourselves. In the US, on the other part, people are taught to look for help and they're usually willing to give it themselves if asked to do so. With the education's reputation issue an analogous explanation seems quite sound. Romanians aren't taught to be proud of what they're offered in their own country. They just keep on looking at others and see what great things those persons have and they don't. It's up to an extent their manner of being critical, talking about what doesn't work well at home and about what does work in other places. Americans are almost the opposite. They're very proud of their country and prove it with each occasion. In their opinion what they have is great and therefore, they don't really take too much time to think about what happens outside the borders of the US.

And since we're talking about what is really outstanding, I just remembered my economics course. The textbook was quite thick and the chapters filled with accounts of how appropriately did the US act in the financial crisis that started in 2007 and how Europe was

almost all the time behind it. Or the book I read about the same topic written by the professor who was teaching the course and who is also the coauthor of the textbook, in which it is acknowledged that indeed the financial crisis started in the US, but at the end of the day the US solved its economical issues a lot faster and more efficiently than Europe did.

When I finished that course I started to wonder how an American couldn't feel proud of being American just from hearing such things since the moment he or she was born. That would be something remarkable indeed. Yet I am no one when it comes to judge anyone or to say how things should be done. My belief, maybe a naive one, is that when people will realize that they should rather try to improve themselves than gigantic structures such as the public education their lives will indeed improve and perhaps even the world will make a step forward. And no matter how much of a cliché this may sound, I consider that this is the best that each of us can do. So, my dear reader, if you're interested in getting a more explicit solution for the Romanian education and similar topics, you should ask someone else because I'm just an ordinary person used to fight for what I want but also to wait for it when necessary.