# Values And Trends In Educational Communities

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## Abstract

This study draws our attention to the existence of educational communities that allow teachers to continuously develop their abilities and work together in order to face the challenges presented by the educational system. We will discuss three case studies – ANPRO, Aspire Teachers, Merito – and the information obtained in an empirical evidence, to highlight the dynamics and variables at work in these communities in Romania.

## Introduction

We are in a time that is constantly talking a lot about change, reform, transformation, the need for something else and which, at the same time, diminishes the power of people to operationalize, to set goals, practices and procedures to infuse a re-designing dynamic. However, the difficult course of the education system and the corroboration with a psycho-cultural profile, which is limited to passivity, contentless forms, closed mentality, lack of vision and regenerative or creative optimism, as well as an obvious lack of authenticity, led to attract in the system some "magnetic forces" directly interested in extending the role of classroom teachers to society and creating favourable contexts for innovation and rebuilding. Thus, educational learning communities have been created for teachers, socio-professional staff that respond to the need of those in the system to learn ideas, to act and react in tandem with the needs and aspirations of a natural evolution in the knowledge society. We aim to present the role of teachers' educational

communities, to X-ray their effervescence in Romania and to present three case studies, oscillating between experience and information, in a discourse that imprints the idea of co-participation, but also of detachment to understand the effect of a system. So far, there are no longitudinal studies aimed at the role of educational communities in Romania and, in this sense, there are very few studies, including at international level. Therefore, we propose a descriptive approach, sometimes lax or lacking in completeness, being a dynamic, oscillating professional front, in many variants and variables, which tries to place the teacher at their place, at the horizon of consistent progress.

## (Teachers') Educational Communities

The educational communities of teachers appeared, on the one hand, from the lack of action of the institutions that lie in ideologies not anchored down the centuries in education and, on the other hand, from the teachers' need to find out current ideas and ways of being a teacher, combined with the desire to improve in a space with ethos and similar values. In these communities are attracted teachers with availability, predisposition for search and discovery, the feeling of belonging to a space imprinted with a culture of education having a special importance for many of them. It is well known that, professionally, belonging to a group and the connection ensures performativity and creativity, while representing resources to find alternatives, forms of survival or emancipation.

Educational communities can take different forms and can be continuously reconfigured, being a multifaceted process (Conley, 2019), which offers the possibility to mirror and find teachers in a register of shared values and ideas. In addition, by preparing the teacher as an active element of education, productive and responsible, by outlining these groups, osmosis between the community and the school takes place. Civic, cultural and educational activism develops through belonging to a modern, supportive and performing community. That is why professional safeguarding is often achieved through intercultural openness, through an experiential involvement that leads to transformation. Teachers' educational communities need a coherent framework, as they need to constantly update their knowledge in their field and in the way it influences the development of society and educational policies. At the same time, they readjust their strategies and methods, in order to be able to conceptualize and acquire knowledge from

recent research in education. In this sense, teachers who are part of educational communities get to analyse more closely their behaviour in the classroom, the quality of design and the relevance of the scientific content presented, or they have a critical and reflective attitude on their own activity, learning through collaboration (Avidov-Ungar et al., 2019).

## Attempt to X-Ray the Dynamics of Educational Communities

In recent years, many people outside the education system have turned their attention to education, launching initiatives specific to its positive development, and at other times, teacher-leaders have managed to gather and build around them living communities that work dynamically and interactively, in order to make more sense and create activities with impact for their students, for school or even for social groups in which their effect can be felt. We will list a number of educational communities that function effectively at present, in order to understand the diversity, variables and areas in which such communities can be created. In this regard, we cite: *Asociația Română de Literație [Romanian Literacy Association]*, *Asociația „Lectura și Scrierea pentru Dezvoltarea Gândirii Critice" ["Reading and Writing for the Development of Critical Thinking" Association]*, *Laborator de educație media [Media Education Laboratory]*, *Școala de Valori [School of Values]*, *Academia Heidi [Heidi Academy]*, *Minds Hub*, *Inițiativă în Educație [Initiative to Education]*, *Simplon România [Simplon Romania]*, *Smart Lab 4.0*, *Centrul educațional Intelligence Center [Intelligence Center Educational Center]*, *Teach for Romania*, *Cluj Makers*, *Țara lui Andrei [Andrew's Country]*, *Raiffeisen Comunități [Raiffeisen Communities]*, *Junior Achievement*, *United Way Romania*, *Școala pentru comunitate [Community School]*, *Școala Viitorului (EduApps) [School of the Future (EduApps)]*, *Digitaliada*, *eTwinning*, *EduNetwork*, *Asociația OvidiuRo [OvidiuRo Association]*, *FRCCF*, *Fundația Noi Orizonturi (Clubul Impact) [New Horizons Foundation (Impact Club)]*, *Fundația Motivation Romania (Acces la educație) [Motivation Romania Foundation (Access to education)]*, *Educație financiară [Financial education]*, *Gala Societății Civile [Civil Society Gala]*, *Comunitatea „Educație pentru Științe" ["Education for Sciences" Community]*, *Comunități virtuale Intuitext [Intuitext virtual communities]*, *Finnish Teacher Training Center*, *Merito*, *SuperTeach*, *Aspire Teachers* etc.

As mentioned before, communities are also formed around teacher-leaders (Avidov-Ungar, 2018) who can gradually infuse the *new* in the classroom due to the way the teachers themselves improve. For example, there is Ana Maria Rusu and *More music education in schools and kindergartens*, Ema Winter and *Ema at school*, Laura Piroș and *My classroom*, Mihaela Bucșa and *Journal of Physics*, Simona Birgean and *Materials for school*, Andrada Mazilu (Sorca) and *Inedu*. Definitely the examples are more numerous, but it is essential to remember the diversity and pulse of this world, as reliable as it is strong, creating connections and a motivation that return in the classroom, before the students. In addition, if the communities of preschool and primary school teachers have a dynamics and a positive attitude, which unites them more, and those dedicated to a single subject are led by the same belief, in terms of communities with teachers from all subjects and tracks, unity and consistency must be sustained and relaunched, as they need it to print a dynamics of several vectors and consistent projects, which will determine the respective teachers to share and train by understanding a defining didactic and pedagogical otherness, in order to have confidence in an *outside the box* attitude (Johnson, 2015).

Empathy and sympathy help teachers share the same ethos. Thus, teachers have assumed, within these educational communities, that knowledge is built and not received, that mental schemas change slowly, but certainly, consistently, that it is effective to create an optimal space for authentic critical learning. They also realized the relevance of increasing the student's degree of curiosity, developing self-awareness about the process of thinking and solving problems, as well as the need to create diverse learning experiences, to engage students in multiple / inter / trans-disciplinary processes, involving the cognitive, non/cognitive and metacognitive. In addition to all this, teachers who coagulate in communities understand that personal success is nonsense, as long as in society they fail to create the premises for an honest and intelligent man, adapted to the complexity and dynamics of the contemporary world. Therefore, the impact of teachers' educational communities is felt in the dissemination of beliefs and good practices, in the inter-active way of understanding the world and through the ambition to evolve, far exceeding the victimizing self-pity.

## Case Study 1: *ANPRO*

A page in the history of Didactics of Romanian Language and Literature is certainly written by *"Ioana Em. Petrescu" Association of Teachers of Romanian Language and Literature*, which has managed in the last 20 years to create a favourable context for both research and training of Romanian language teachers. A community was formed over time, for which professionalism in the teaching career was essential. To this end, through all members of the community, practices of teaching the Romanian Language and Literature were disseminated in accordance with the new trends in education, access to recent information related to the teaching of the subject was ensured, a favourable environment was created for research in the field of the subject didactics and relied on improving inter- and intra-subject communication. At a macro level, projects were carried out in collaboration with all stakeholders in education, thus providing an organized framework for expression, and, at a micro level, the impact was felt in the way the community members personally and professionally developed in the context of a society of knowledge.

In addition, the teachers' community has provided a model of scientific conduct over time, carrying out relevant activities and publications in the field. For example, the community came together in the national symposia, held consistently since 2000. The aim of these events was that, based on a theme proposed each year, it be debated in relation to syllabi and handbooks, from a synchronous and diachronic perspective. The goal was also to outline strategies for teaching the subject, meant to form the aesthetic taste, to maintain the joy of reading and to train autonomous readers. It was intended to create a common space for reflection, in order to contribute to the realization of viable connections between participants and new possibilities for professional collaboration. In this way, a profile of community members was created, which tried to provide a certain pace and consistency to the rhythm of change for the Romanian language teachers.

We also remember how, through *Perspective [Perspectives]* journal, a large audience was reached and an over-dialogue was created between the members of the association, who spread their desire for change through the multiplication technique, reaching many teachers of Romanian Language and Literature in lower and upper secondary education (members and non-members of the association), but at the same time opening up to didacticians, students of the Faculties of Letters, primary school teachers and other professors who teach humanities. Oriented thematically, since the first issue, the journal aimed to resize the study of Romanian

Language and Literature in school, depending on the imperatives of the curricular reform and the current trends of modern teaching. In this sense, the jurnal *Cercuri de lectură [Reading Workshops]* was published, which became the *Consilierul de lectură [Reading Counsellor]*, collective volumes (*Lecturiada*) were published and an activity was organized to promote another way of reading for young people.

The founders, prof. Alina Pamfil, Ph.D. and teacher Monica Onojescu, managed to reunite the pre-university and university environment, to provide coherence to specialized research, corroborated with active research, to guide many teaching staff members, who gradually came to refine the style of writing and to contribute to the activities of the association. The ANPRO community has become solid over time, consistently, not abdicating the values promoted from the beginning and thus managed to become a real benchmark among professionals and to have an impact. Romanian Language and Literature teachers no longer felt isolated, the ANPRO community succeeding in erasing barriers and inviting all members of the community to an open, sincere, critical and effective collaboration and communication for the specific field of activity.

## Case Study 2: *Apire Teachers*

*Aspire Teachers* is a community of primary school teachers and upper secondary school teacher from all subjects, which emerged in 2011 from the desire of young people outside the system to lay the foundations of a strong community of teachers, school and community leaders, research experts and innovators in education. Since 2016, *Aspire Teachers* has become an independent organization, which carries forward values such as continuous evolution, excellence and involvement in the community, through programmes adapted to the needs of teachers and students in Romania. The *Aspire Teachers* community includes 136 teachers - alumni of *Aspire Teachers Academy* intensive pedagogical module, which have developed continuously through activities and events, such as *Aspire Teachers Caravans*, webinars with top professionals and researchers, meetings and workshops with top trainers.

Darling Hammond and McLanghlin (1995) captured the idea that certain educational communities become a collaborative space through which a model specific to the learning organization business world is transferred to the educational environment. The case of *Aspire*

*Teachers* was similar, involving over 20 pro-bono consultants - people who supported the community through thousands of hours invested in organization, mentoring and training.

Thanks to the activities of the four years, it has reached a number of over 2,000 teachers and 10,000 participating students and parents from all over the country, the whole mechanism of this community following the belief that "the sustainable change of the educational system in Romania is centred on high-quality teachers, who act as leaders both in school and in the community. Teachers who bring not only content anchored in the present, but also motivation and inspiration for their students and colleagues; who work to get students to think creatively and broaden their horizons; who connect, share knowledge and cooperate with their colleagues to continue to learn and develop on their own". At the same time, regional hubs have been developed - local communities made up of alumni and teachers who apply the principles of *Aspire Teachers* and are continuously developing, through training workshops, exchanges of good practices, webinars, classroom work with *Aspire Teachers* and partners' elective courses - and school and extracurricular events.

The *Aspire Teachers* educational community supports the high-quality training of primary school teachers and secondary school teachers in Romania, offering applied training programmes with a multidisciplinary curriculum, with impactful pedagogical practices, adapted to the realities of the 21$^{st}$ century. In addition, members sought to develop communities of good practice and validate educational content focused on the skills of the future in 2030, for a generation of children and young people adapted to the global economy. In this regard, in 2019-2020, two elective programmes were created - *Journey into the World of Emotions*, for the primary cycle, and *Aspire Talks*, for the middle school.

What Marzano points out in his book*, What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action* (2003), has also been strengthened by the *Aspire Teachers* community, but an environment in which nuances and perceptions of the system are imprinted remains polymorphic and risks losing essence, if community values are not followed *consistently* - an essential word when the impact is felt beyond personal ideology. Among the *Aspire* members, through cooperation, the development of other dynamic communities was encouraged, both among educators and partners in the educational ecosystem in which we operate, cultivating a mentality of active involvement.

## Case Study 3: *Merito*

Communities coagulate, over time, by sharing the same values, by focusing on a common interest, by collaboration and by a reflective dialogue. In this sense, *Merito*, launched in 2015, managed to impress on the Romanian society another way to relate to a good education: with more optimism, but realism, with admiration, but lucidity, with confidence, but also functional wisdom. *Merito* is a project in the field of education, which belongs to the *Romanian Business Leaders Foundation* (RBL) and which aims to rebuild the social prestige of the teacher/professor profession. The project consists in searching, identifying, documenting and awarding teachers with a vocation in Romanian education, those people who "produce a grassroot change, without anyone knowing them and who become role models for their students".

The *equilibrium islands* of a system are moved by external forces and in this case, as a mechanism for the mass propagation of universal educator principles: vocation, passion, enthusiasm, quality, innovation. Măriuca Talpeş, the initiator of the idea, *Bitdefender* co-founder, stated in this sense that "we cannot have a rich country without being competitive with Romanian products and services on the world market - we cannot be competitive without very well educated, creative, performing young people, passionate about the field they choose. Together with the family, the teachers educate our children, train our future colleagues, our future entrepreneurs, lay the foundations for tomorrow's generation. We want to discover the valuable teachers in Romania. We did not thank them enough for the role they play in society: they are trainers of people. It is time to correct this - to show them our gratitude, our respect, because they are part of the elite of Romanian professionals. Only with a good and high-quality education can we be a country respected, appreciated and in control of its future". The *Merito* community thus responds to the OECD's arguments that only higher educated people will be able to cope in the global labour market, people who in turn need teachers to guide them correctly, coherently and in line with current knowledge. Therefore, the goal of the *Merito* educational community is for Romania to become a better country for responsible business and, in this way, for all Romanians.

The activities of *Merito* teachers have an impact, on average, on 6,500 students, teachers and parents per year. Community members are active in good practice webinars and workshops, trying in over a hundred activities to directly inspire more than 8,000 teaching staff members.

This project also organizes learning workshops, both for *Merito* award-winning teachers (for example, a *SummerCamp* with trainers from the country and the USA), and for those who follow the same principles in different areas of the country. The expertise of *Merito* teachers, especially the collaboration between them, tries to recreate a model of conduct, involvement and innovation, which can be transferred to any teachers' room in Romania. Individual, subject, or group projects gain depth at the macro level, with an emphasis on the typology of teacher that can help resize education - "At this point, teachers have begun to change the course of history. I would even say that a new species of teacher has appeared, armed against imposture, resistant to forgery, to pseudo-literature, for example. [...] There was a need for elites, and here they are [...] Immune to imposture, creative, with the same smile of those who discovered a secret door. That parallel world, which someone was afraid of, is really being born right now, and the teachers are some of its discreet and daring architects" (Ruști, 2019).

*Merito* teachers aim to contribute at the national level, but also at the level of local communities, creating a collaborative environment based on professionalism and values. They want the foundation of an honest, authentic society, which understands and assumes its shortcomings, in order to be able to intervene later positively, responsibly and efficiently, depending on the psycho-cultural profile. *Merito* community members shape the character of students, their resilience and resistance motivating students to take responsibility in their own learning experience to reach their full potential. By creating a friendly environment at school, adapting activities to the real existence and identity needs of the student, teachers put for students the premises for lifelong learning, for harmony between thoughts and deeds, while imprinting values such as courage, curiosity, integrity and discernment. Therefore, the community of *Merito* teachers represents teachers in Romania who want to transform the education system for the better, it brings together those who have the ability to constantly reinvent themselves and *fight* for regaining respect for the status of teacher and education in general, for the correct appreciation of the teacher's work and for redefining their role in society.

## Conclusions

It is important to remember the socio-educational profile of Romania at this time: it has a kind of passivity, but it is also energized by teachers who actively participate in professional

communities where they want to build a better future for students, teachers and society alike. Thus, the creation of an educational community means a fertile dialogue between its members and requires a permanent re-discussion of how actions become effective, avoiding falling into the area of mannerism. In this sense, finally, we play a dialogue between those who are in turn part of the communities we presented earlier, the testimonies presented being relevant for the diction of the illustrated idea, for the need for authenticity and attitude in the educational environment.

- "First of all, through ANPRO I met extraordinary people, in many areas of the country and in the Republic of Moldova, from whom I learned and am learning not only to be a more attentive teacher or a better reader, but also what friendship and partnership are. Then, ANPRO gave me the opportunity to hear from some specialists who clarified my problems and opened others for me. Above all, ANPRO is about belonging to the profession and the respect we show in classroom through continuous improvement." – Ramona Jitaru, *Vasile Alecsandri* National College, Bacău.

- "Belonging to a group involves the existence of a shared goal of its members. The association with your peers starts from the premise of assuming shared values, of some principles that guide the activity of the group you belong to. Since 2017, I am a member of the *Aspire* community. *Aspire* values are values that I, personally, resonate with continuous evolution, excellence, involvement in the community. I believe that the role of a professional community is to set up a space in which to create alliances of knowledge and professional development. Achieving this goal requires a clear vision, rigorous management and a coherent action plan, designed for at least 10 years to be able to quantify valid and viable results. Any deviation from the original purpose and values will create the possibility of infiltration of opportunists and, implicitly, of diverting the short- or long-term objectives of the respective community. Like any living organism, the *Aspire* community of 2020 no longer has the same profile as that of 2017. The biggest impact in the structural change of the community had the increase in the number of members, by changing the selection criteria. This led to the reorganization of the community into regional hubs and the attempt to align the direction of action of the community with the *trends* of other organizations." – Antoaneta Luchian, National College of Iași.

- "I believe that the values that hold the *Merito* community together are: 1. a passion for hard work. And every member of the community has this side very well developed and, beyond everyone's nature, it is obvious that every *Merito* teacher is a passionate and enthusiastic teacher. 2. the admiration that those who set up this project showed towards teachers in general. It is a core value in communities. In my turn, I was glad to meet such different teachers, but united by the belief for an authentic educational experience, aiming to guide young people through stable value landmarks, which would refine their vision of the world, developing them harmoniously." – Ana Maria Rusu, *Unirea* National College of Focșani.

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