

Education System in Bulgaria: System Error

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Abstract

The paper discusses the problems in Bulgarian education system. Nowadays Bulgarian teacher faces many obstacles in performing his duty. Besides his main duty to teach, Bulgarian teacher has many other as well. He has become not just an educator, but family consult, security guard, administrator, social worker and many more. The new system of funding schools empowered the students and made teachers helpless to impose discipline in or out of the classroom.

Keywords: Bulgarian education, teacher, delegated budget, school.

The present article is attempt to describe the nowadays situation in education, especially in high school education in Bulgaria. Before I go into deep discussion and analysis on the reasons caused the present education in educational and social system, I attempt to describe the system error on a personal point of view by sharing my experience in educational system and point the flouts as I see them.

I work in a literally "gipsy" (Roma) school. Some may say that fact clouds my judgment and it will be just opinion based on anger and unsatisfaction. They might be right, but the fact that there are so many articles written by teachers who work in "not gipsy" schools contradict to the opposition. Base on that fact I state that the depiction of the work environment, I will share has high degree of objectivity regarding nowadays education.

This is my fourth year as a teacher. Some may say that it is not enough experience to have opinion on such matters, but I think that sometimes a fresh look at a situation is needed so the flows to be detected and possibly explained. Anyway, as I said, this is my fourth year as a teacher and bravely can state that the situation in the education getting worse and worse with every passing year. I am not talking only in the school where I work, but the system as general. The main problems that occur are attendance, discipline and respect toward teacher. These problems form a complex situation that make difficult not just the work and duty of teachers but effect their personal life as well. According to a recent study every second teacher suffer of depression and burn out, which recently become a big problem even was recognize as psychological problem. These issues are not limited to my workplace, but as I said it is common for all schools. The difference is that the problems manifested themselves in different level or degree in different schools.

For the purpose of the article I will try to divide the schools into three general groups in order to explain how the system works. The division is hypothetical and is based on common opinion about one school's prestige. First there are "elite" schools, which everyone considers the best and respectively everyone wants to send one kid to study there. Then there is the average or "normal" schools that are not considered the best, but good enough for most of the kids including those who weren't accepted in the elite schools. At the end I put the schools like the one I work in – they are with bad name or reputation on people's opinion, regardless of the skilled pedagogical staff working in. I don't want to sound racist, but most of the time the name or the prestige of one school is based not just on the quality of education provided, but on students' characteristics that enroll in it. Sometimes these characteristics are based not just on the intellectual capacity, ambition or desire to learn, but on social background or even race as well. I will try to explain that by manifestation of the problems listed above at every type of schools.

The first type of schools I mentioned are "elite" schools. They have the best reputation. The students that get enrolled supposedly are the smartest, skillful or most ambitious one with twice as many ambitious parents. The level of attendance and discipline are highest, because the kids understand what it takes to get enrolled and foresee the benefits of the education. The schools provide a competitive environment that pushes the student to expect more from the teachers and from themselves by establishing high standards. These schools don't have problems with candidates for enrollment, because they are the most wanted. However, not everything is so bright and even there has some negative sides. On one hand the students with too high self-esteem caused by different factors, could be means toward the teachers, especially if the student thinks the teacher is not enough qualified. That attitude in many cases is dictated by the behavior of the parents, especially in families with higher financial or social status, that create an irrationally high self-image in the child. On the other hand overly ambitious parents, irrespective of their social status, are in the habit of trying to influence the teacher in order to increase their child's grade.

The second type of schools is "normal" ones. By normal I mean the average school. The students that get enrolled are on one hand kids, which score on the national exam was not enough to get in the "elite" schools and on the other kids that are not so ambitious and understand that every school could give them good education. In these schools the attendance rate gets low and the discipline becomes a problem. The respect toward teacher and student's arrogance and bad behavior in and outside class become problematic, but still in some average levels. Parents are interested in their kid's development in school and attend teacher-parents meeting, but do not bother the teacher with house calls in attempt to influence his or her decision on kid's grades.

The last type of schools is the one with bad reputation based on different reasons. On one hand the public opinion on questionable quality of education, on the other hand the high rate of students with problem behavior, bad social background, race difference, etc. In these schools' problems such as attendance, discipline and respect toward teachers are in highest percentage. The cases of aggression (verbal and physical) toward schoolmates or even teachers are something common. The attendance is usual practice or in cases of attendance the discipline in class is almost impossible. All that makes teacher's job so demotivated and almost unbearable. Most of the students enrolled in these "bad" schools are Roma students or some other minority ethnic origin, which add even more problems to already hard, difficult and complicated situation. Of course, students of that background and origin are enrolled in other schools as well, but they are not their majority group. However, the facts are facts and they show that sometimes bad names and low prestige of one school are based on what type of students is enrolled.

Although I will focus on "bad" schools, because my experience comes from working in one such school, I can assure the reader that the situation is the same at other schools as well, just the degree of occurrence varied. At the high school I work in the enrolled students are 100% of Roma descent. That leads to very difficult work environment due to cultural difference, language barrier and poor discipline. This is common for most of the schools which enroll mostly Roma

students. I hope I won't be wrongly understood or accused in racism, just the facts are like that. Of course, there are many not Roma students that cause a lot of problems and have poor behavior, but the common troublemakers at the schools of second and third type are indeed Roma students. Personally the race does not matter to me. It is more important the human values one carries and the behavior one shows toward others than the skin color or social status. Unfortunately, I have to admit that my experience so far shows exactly the stereotypes I try to avoid when it comes to perception towards people – most of Roma students are indeed bad seeds, troublemakers, disrespectful, aggressive.

My days at work and I'm sure the same is valid for many other teachers, who have to work with that kind of students, most of the time are almost unbearable. Walking through the hall or entering the classroom can be a challenge, because the students refuse to follow simple rules like not using cell phones, turn down the music, not shouting or screaming, not fighting. Nowadays Bulgarian teachers have been stripped off from most of the rights they once had. The teacher daily encounters ignorance, aggression or bullying, arrogant behavior, and physical altercation, which make him to feel hopeless, powerless and at the end of the day he or she is totally burnt out, so stressed, nervous and angry to the whole world. Unfortunately, this is a teacher's destiny nowadays in Bulgaria. There are many reasons for that situation.

The language is so big an issue nowadays that it found its way into the news. A recent news report stated that over 20% of enrolled students for this school year do not speak Bulgarian and the tendency is for this number to increase in the near future. Another issue is cultural difference – Roma minorities in Bulgaria mainly live in compact communities located in ghettos at the end or outside of town. Living by their rules and traditions that most of the time contradict with main principles in society. For example, most of them do not work, but live on social aids, child support and other forms of social benefits. Their custom is for girls to get married (or as they call it: to get a man) in early age – 11-15, and to become teen mothers. Their parents refuse to let the girls go to school, because a girl's responsibility now is to take care of their children and their new families. The couples do not get married legally, but just live together so the kids that would be produced do not have the name of the father on the birth certificate, which will let them to receive more money from child support. In addition to that they have many kids so to use them as leverage for getting more benefits. As I mentioned many of them do not work, so the finance they have comes mainly from social benefits, criminal activity. Because that is the example the parents give to their kids it's not surprising that the kids behave the way they do.

At this point the reader might ask him/herself why the situation is like that. Who allows it to come to that level? What does the government do to fix the problem? Well, on one hand the government caused some of the problems by changing the working educational and social system only because it was created by a communist political system. On the other hand, the things are so out of control right now, that no matter what reforms will be made the situation probably won't get better. The education is tightly connected to other systems that define our life. One of the major resources for the education system is the human one, so the demographic rate is very important.

The high birth rate during the communist era in Bulgaria caused classrooms to be filled with students and the attendance rate to reach nearly 100%. Rates like that had been kept even after the wind of political change, at least at the first decade. In 1998 enrollment in the primary grades was 93% of eligible students, and enrollment in the secondary grades was 81% of eligible students. The communist standards regarding respect, obedience and high moral values, although highly criticized today and depicted as false, illusory or lacking true spiritual ground, caused teachers to have a lot of rights and secured stable and peaceful work environment. Students had the tendency to behave in and out of school and the occasional deviance behavior was fast and effectively dealt with. School uniforms were mandatory and daily checked. Any mismatch or misplaced part of the uniform that could cause inappropriateness in a student's look was strongly criticized and even punished. For example, if a student forgot his/hers hat or came to school with

dirty shirt, or improperly dressed he or she was not allowed to enter the school facility and return home to change and come back in proper look. That may sound ridiculous and way out of normal order by today standards and views, but in a community where the communist idea for exemplary society is the main vision, that kind of control is normal. In fact, every citizen knew and followed the rules, sometimes gladly sometimes no, but that was the reality at that time.

The change in political system caused many struggles in social and education system. The new government intended to reform everything from the communist system, proclaimed it as old, corrupted, bad and unsuitable with the new capitalist vision and goals of the country. Bulgaria's birthrate became lower every year, which led to decreasing of total primary- and secondary-school enrollment in the post-communist era, causing reductions in teaching staff and facilities. Ministry of education and culture launched a pilot program to handle the problem with missing students. The system of delegated budgets was introduced experimentally in 1995, initially at 4 municipalities in the country. Later number of municipalities in which a delegated budget was implemented gradually increased and since 2008, the system became mandatory for all schools in the country (Gancheva 2017). That led to principles' unwillingness to expel students on behave of their behavior, especially if they are minor. For that there are mainly two reasons. On one hand the system of funding the school budgets depends on the number of enrolled students, on other hand is the state policy for total enrollment of students, especially those under 16 years old.

However, these same reforms have resulted in closing of many primary and secondary schools, the drop in teacher positions and the loss of jobs. The introduction of a delegated budget whose idea was to give schools autonomy as well as competition between them in order to increase the quality of the offered education caused results that were more negative than expected. Indeed, the first years, when birthrates have not turned into the serious problem that is today, have led to a delegated budget being a good one for schools. In the last years of communism and the first years of democracy, the destruction of school buildings was observed and desperately needed repair activities for which the schools did not have enough money. Since the introduction of the delegated budget, that has changed and principles have been able to afford to renovate the buildings and increase the payment of their staff. Unfortunately, the government did not realize that this measure was only temporary; in view point of the negative trend in birthrate. On the contrary, the government continues to believe that this type of funding for education is successful in the long-term and continues to refuse changes at that direction.

Many schools are forced to compromise with low success, poor discipline, arrogant behavior in class and fake sick days excuses just to keep their students at all costs. Some of the undisciplined students, knowing their financial significance for the budget of the school, abused their bad and arrogant behavior in class (Ivanova 2016). This leads to a certain type of behavior with a sense of impunity. One major problem arises – students can afford more free behavior. Teacher-student relationship is distorted. Many teachers are compromising their own dignity and self-esteem. Even at best, they cannot punish the student by moving to another school because the school will lose money and that's not good for the budget. For the same reason, despite the poor success of some students, they all pass class after class with no problem, even without having mastered basic knowledge.

The problems of school discipline or violence that were hardly attended in the era of communism, or who were not so well known, or suffocated in the embryo, are now in full force. The devolved budget system created the conditions for the teacher's total impotence to introduce any discipline at school. Although written on paper, the rules of conduct are totally inapplicable in practice, leading to major difficulties in the performance of the teacher's duties. He is too busy to be a drop, a security guard and even an administrator, but not an educator. Cases of gambling, drug use and violence becomes the teacher's daily routine, and the rights and tools to deal with them are extremely limited. Instances of threats and assault by a student towards a teacher or a parent against a teacher also increase. In recent years it became common for the students to show

up at school drunk or high after parting all night. Many of the more aggressive students coming in school with knuckles, knives or other weapons. Teachers are doing all they can to prevent accidents, but their right or abilities to overcome or overpower the aggression are limited. The delegated budget system and the students' "freer behavior" caused the working environment for teachers to become tenser and very tiring.

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