

DIDACTOGENICITY AND THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

There are few studies on didactogenicity at the global level (Cukier, 2004; Davitz&Ball, 1978; Nelsen et al., 1997; Hyman&Snook, 1999) and even fewer at the level of our country (Sava, 2001; Sava in Boncu&Ceobanu, 2013). Our paper aims at rendering the concept of didactogenicity more visible in relation to the Romanian educational system, as well as at promoting awareness of the impact of teacher behaviour upon children. This article represents the theoretical background for a research study we shall conduct in the second semester of the 2014-2015 school year that will involve applying a questionnaire to a relevant number of students from several schools in the county of Bacau. The findings of the respective study shall be revealed in a future paper. Our hypothesis is that didactogenicity is a more or less recognized issue of the Romanian educational system and that more thorough work should be conducted to diminish and control its occurrence in Romanian schools and impact upon the students' development.

Key words: didactogenicity, impact, teacher's roles, teacher as model, school inadaptation

1. Introduction

There are numerous studies on the relevance of a good teacher-student relationship (Brok et. al., 2005; Yucel, 2007; Babad, 2007; Pössel et. al., 2013). On the one hand, the teacher, as a good professional, is able to raise generations through the impact of the educational work conducted in class and outside it. Some teachers even turn into life models and contribute seriously to building the student's personal and professional life. On the other hand, there are teachers who do not manage to, or simply will not, consider the students' interests and needs. Whether teachers make use of inadequate measures to discipline students, based on inducing fear or intimidation, or

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favouritism in giving marks, or sarcasm and public ridiculing, such behaviours may negatively affect the teacher-student relationship irremediably. When the teacher's inappropriate and involuntary conduct generates negative psychological, pedagogical or medical consequences in relation to the student, then we are dealing with didactogenicity (Sava, in Boncu & Ceobanu, 2013: 231).

Etymologically, didactogenicity comes from the Greek term *didakteon*, which designates the person who teaches somebody something. Our finding that there are not many studies focused on teacher misbehaviour has also been highlighted by Sava (apud Boncu & Ceobanu, 2013: 232). However, the literature abounds in studies focused on good teachers struggling to find the best teaching and classroom integration methods for students with various problems (aggressive or disobeying students, with special educational needs). The descriptive rather than causal, explanatory studies on didactogenicity is also pointed out by Boncu & Ceobanu (2013: 234), as well as the fragmentary nature of the knowledge on this educational aspect.

In English, the literature makes use of related terms rather than of the term of didactogenicity itself. For example, the terms of *school phobia* (Bergin apud Davidz & Ball, 1978) or *classroom-induced school phobia* (Nicoll apud Nelsen et al., 1997: 32) designate excessive and constant anxiety in relation to the school, inhibition and fear of being humiliated or embarrassed by the teacher. This anxiety, generated by teachers, may be accompanied by a series of psychological, pedagogical and somatic manifestations, such as headaches, stomach aches, low level of school adaptation and school performance, nightmares, insomnia, depression. When maintained for a longer time span, these manifestations may turn into a constant traumatic state identified as Adult Children of Dysfunctional Classroom: adults suffering from this disorder become agitated when faced with new tasks or challenges, have painful memories related to school failure and humiliation, and experience feelings of inferiority, misfit or anger.

Psychological maltreatment (Hyman & Snook, 1999) is another term related to didactogenicity, highly related to emotional abuse. The difference between psychological maltreatment and emotional abuse is that the former is the result of involuntary behaviour, whereas the latter may be the result of both voluntary and involuntary conduct. Psychological maltreatment occurs in situations such as: control and disciplinary techniques based on inducing fear and intimidation, reduced interaction between teacher and students, limited opportunities for students to build self-esteem, the use of motivation techniques based on critique and exaggerated demands, use of sarcasm, ridiculing or denigration. According to the same authors, intense stress in the classroom induced by the teacher may trigger a serious disorder called Educator-Induced Posttraumatic

Stress Disorder, characterized by the following categories of symptoms: depressive mood accompanied by avoidance of school and the ‘aggressor’; behavioural issues and high level of aggression at students; avoidance of the persons or activities that remind the affected person of the embarrassing, traumatic events; somatic disorders such as headaches and stomach aches; repetitive thoughts in which the person relives the negative, triggering event; pessimism and lack of hope; nightmares and unpleasant memories connected to the traumatic situation.

There are yet other studies that approach the connection between *teacher behaviour* and the students’ development: but, in some cases, the title of the articles are misleading, when teacher behaviour is used to refer to the teacher’s professional conduct, training, desire to improve teaching strategies and techniques (Kyriakides et. al., 2009).

Our conclusion is that irrespective of the terms used to refer to didactogenicity – school phobia, psychological maltreatment, educator-induced stress disorder – the factors highlighted as generating these effects are fear, intimidation, lack of interaction and communication between teacher and student, low self-esteem of students as a result of teacher’s use of sarcasm, critique, offensive language. The psychosomatic effects of these stress disorders caused by teacher behaviour are also similar: headaches, stomach aches, depression, pessimism, lack of hope.

2. Didactogenicity: a teachers’ ‘disorder’

The teacher’s roles

The teacher as model

In order to better understand the issue of didactogenicity, we should reconstruct the profile of a(n) (ideal) teacher. The competences needed for exercising the teaching profession are (Ureche & Nicuta, 2012: 8):

- the *scientific competence*: the consolidation of specialized training, the ability to use scientific concepts, to transfer knowledge, experimentation skills and initiative, objectivity in evaluation;
- the *managerial competence*: implies planning and designing skills, exploitation of the acquired theoretical training, organization and coordination skills, knowledge of the school documents which substantiate the organization and conducting of the teaching process;
- the *psycho-pedagogical competence*: the ability to determine the difficulty level of a certain content and to render information accessible, the ability to know students with a view to particularizing and customizing the teaching process (the principles, finalities, content, methods,

means, forms of organization, system of evaluating school results), the ability to display empathy, pedagogical tact, self-evaluation and integration of the result of self-evaluation into the personal projection of professional development;

- the *psychosocial competence*: the ability to relate to students, parents and peers, skills in making proper use of authority and balancing the authority/freedom relation.

The role represents, socially speaking, the set of behaviours implied by the quality of member of a group. The teacher's roles are built based on his interrelation with various reference groups that impose distinct demands. We shall here describe a teacher's roles in direct relation with his students. From the perspective of different approaches to the pedagogical action, J. J. Gallagher (1991) identifies:

- the executive teacher, concerned with putting into practice the teaching objectives through the most efficient means;
- the empathetic teacher, interested in the students' emotional and motivational issues;
- the teacher as liberator of the students' mind, an active factor in the students' harmonious cognitive, emotional and moral development.

In relation to the educational place or process, Woolfolk (2001) identifies the following teacher roles:

- the teacher as expert of the teaching-learning act, who may take decisions regarding everything that may occur within the educational process;
- the teacher as motivating agent, triggering and maintaining the students' interest;
- the teacher as leader of the group of students, exerting his power over the main phenomena that occur inside the group;
- the teacher as counsellor, observer and sensitive guide of the students' behaviour; the teacher as a positive model for students;
- the teacher as reflexive professional who studies and analyses the psycho-pedagogical phenomena with which he is challenged;
- the teacher as manager of the class of students.

Both the teacher's competences and role are crucial for the efficiency of his educational interventions and extremely relevant for his students' personality, future members of the society. The discipline taught by a teacher is more or less relevant to each student, according to the student's professional interests. But, a teacher's personality is important for a student, irrespective of whether the student likes or dislikes the discipline taught by the respective teacher. It is important because, the teacher performs and conducts his lessons acting, voluntarily or involuntarily, as a model for his students for several hours a week.

Sources and effects of didactogenicity

Didactogenicity is defined by Cukier (2004: 20) as the pathology induced by teaching. There are several factors identified as causes of didactogenicity, when the teacher is regarded as the source of it: the teacher's pedagogical style and personality, the organizational context and lack of classroom management knowledge. Potolea (1987, 1989 apud Boncu & Ceobanu, 2013: 233) has identified two major axes of pedagogical styles: the teacher's *permissiveness* (variations in the degree of guiding learning) and *socio-affectivity* (variations in the intensity of emotional closeness in relation to students, various measures in using approval, encouragement, disapproval, critique). Although, basically, we cannot talk of styles that are better and styles that are worse but, we should consider the relation between a teacher's pedagogical style and the type of teacher-student interaction. According to Bredekamp (apud de Kruif et al., 2000: 250), the evaluation criterion for this relationship should be the degree of facilitating the students' psychological and pedagogical development. The teacher-student relationship is positive if it is suitable for the students' development. In order to reach this desideratum, the teacher should interact with students directly, honestly and cordially, provide a diversity of open-communication opportunities and mutual learning, take into consideration the students' feelings and interests when building instructive activities. Based on these requirements for a positive teacher-student relationship, Boncu & Ceobanu (2013: 234) deduce two major sources facilitating the occurrence of didactogenicity: *psychological distancing* and *erroneous manipulation of authority*.

Psychological distancing generates emotional coldness and insufficient communication between the two parts, which affects the students' school motivation. In fact, the greater the perceived psychological distancing, the lower the students' motivation (Christophel, 1990: 334). The concepts connected to psychological distancing found in the literature are (Boncu & Ceobanu, 2013: 234): *nonimmediacy* (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1996; West, 1991); *lack of responsiveness* (Wanzer & McCroskey, 1998); *lack of affinity-seeking* (Frymier & Thomson, 1992); *lack of helping attitude* (Marcus et. al., 1999); *lack of social support* (Bru et. al, 1998). Distancing is often analysed in opposition with the concept of teacher immediacy: closeness means decreasing physical as well as psychological distance between interlocutors. Immediacy is manifested through communication from smaller distances, smiling more often, maintaining visual contact, retaining the interlocutors' names, relaxed gestures, mimicry that denotes involvement and enthusiasm. Lack of such manifestations generates distancing. Immediacy may also be associated with students. For example, students who take the seats closest to the teacher's desk are regarded as more attentive and willing to participate in the lessons, more congenial by comparison to

students who prefer to occupy the seats at the back of the classroom. The students' erect body posture accompanied by slight nodding of the head as feedback to the teacher's explanations, direct eye contact from the part of the student are manifestations associated by teachers with a positive perception regarding competences and motivation. Baringer & McCroskey (2000: 180) have shown that the positive feedback from students is perceived by teachers as motivational, enhances the teacher's desire to increase immediacy and influences positively the trust of the teacher in the learning potential of the respective students.

The erroneous manipulation of authority represents a way of controlling the class of students that has a negative impact upon essential elements from the teacher-student(s) relationship. It means that punishment and critique are the main working tools. The concept of erroneous manipulation of authority also includes the cases when the teacher displays a quite relevant amount of lack of authority in class. In both cases, the impact upon student motivation is negative.

The answer to what determines teachers to adopt either the distancing or the closeness behaviour may be found in the concept of pupil control ideology, introduced by Willower, Eidel and Hoy in 1967 (apud Boncu & Ceobanu, 2013: 237): it designates the teacher's way of relating to the class of students, on a continuum between the humanistic and the custodial approach. The humanistic orientation emphasizes the relevance of both educational partners – teachers and students – and building an educational climate that may support the students' needs. Communication is a two-way process, the leading style is democratic and student autonomy is enhanced. Disciplinary control from the teacher is replaced by the student's self-discipline. The custodial orientation is rooted in the traditional educational system: it holds that maintaining discipline and order, strict and rigid rules are essential for building a learning climate. Students should accept the teacher's decisions without questioning them. Teachers with this control ideology do not make efforts to understand the students' particularities and take the latter's indiscipline personally, as an offense to teacher authority.

There may be yet another source of didactogenicity: burnout. The concept of burnout, introduced by Maslach and Jackson in 1981, involves three fundamental dimensions: emotional burnout, characterized by loss of interest in people and the taught discipline, loss of trust in people and of the motivation to go on; depersonalization, manifested like an intense negative emotional response towards other people; a feeling of professional inadequacy regarded as loss of confidence in one's competences and the desire to give up or change one's job. Such manifestations negatively affect the teacher-student relationship by lowering involvement and satisfaction in the teacher's professional activity, which further reflects upon the students.

Lack of classroom management knowledge is another source of didactogenicity: it means teacher misbehaviour as a result of the prevailing use of punishment in class, lack of knowledge about the impact of classroom furniture arrangement upon the teacher-students relationship, lack of social psychology knowledge. Poenaru (1980: 53) has identified as the main cause for didactogenicity the lack of knowledge of the techniques and psycho-pedagogical information needed to work with children.

The concrete manifestations of didactogenicity take the following forms:

- ridiculing the student in public; use of irony, discrimination, labelling, indifference, aggressive and offensive language from the part of the teacher;
- favouritism and unjustness in giving marks; underestimating or overestimating the students' real capacities; subjectivity in evaluation;
- illogical and unattractive presentation of the lesson content; rigidity of learning rhythms, implying forced assimilation of contents in unique temporal units irrespective of the differences in the students' learning pace; abstract language used in teaching, unsuitable to the students' age;
- authoritarianism; the teacher's lack of competence; incoherence of tasks and oversized homework.

The results of these actions may fall into the following categories:

- pedagogical effects (lowering of school motivation, absenteeism, school failure etc.);
- psychological effects (low self-esteem, elective mutism, anxiety, frustration etc.);
- somatic effects (headaches, gastric acidity, bowel disorders etc.).

The overall result of didactogenicity, the student's school inadaptation, represents the student's inability to achieve assimilation and accommodation processes, acquire the information taught in class, establish relationships with teachers and the other students.

3. Didactogenicity in the Romanian educational system

In Romania, the most frequent reports of cases of didactogenicity come from the media and online discussion forums. For example, a parent complains, on an online discussion forum, about a teacher who uses the medical information about a child to denigrate him in front of the class,

calling the child names and using offensive language when addressing the child.² As a consequence of the teacher's behaviour, the child refused to go to class again and needed psychological counselling to want to go to school again. The mother asks for advice on how to deal with this matter. The advice received from other users of the respective online forum includes taking legal measures against the respective teacher. Other pieces of advice such as talking to the principal of the school or the school inspector are regarded as inefficient because, unfortunately, the public opinion does not believe that the problem may be truly solved in this way.

Unfortunately, the media also reports on cases of what we may call extreme didactogenicity, namely, teachers physically abusing students.³ A survey of such reports shows that cases of didactogenicity are more frequent in the rural environment, most probably because there is lower involvement and interest of parents in the school activities, hence teachers are less likely to be held responsible for their acts.⁴ Although there is a law meant to discourage inappropriate teacher behaviour and therefore result in fewer cases of didactogenicity, the same law is criticized by teachers because it stipulates no obligations for students who misbehave in class.

Law 257/ 2013 that amends and supplements Law 272/ 2004 on children's right, issued by the Romanian Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly, forbids kicking students out of class, putting them to corner or having them stand during class as punishment. Such treatments are regarded as degrading. The same law introduces sanctions for teaching as well as administrative staff who insult, discriminate or humiliate children. Violation of this law is punishable through fines between 1,000 and 2,500 lei (approximately between 280 and 700 Euros). The law stipulates that teachers will not be fined for insulting the child once, but when it is found that such actions affect the child psychologically, in terms of school performance or behaviour within the family. Article 48, paragraph 2 from Law 257/ 2013 establishes that: "in the instructive-educational process, the child has the right to be treated with respect by teachers, auxiliary teaching and administrative staff and to be informed of his rights and how to exercise them". Physical punishments or other degrading treatments during the instructive-educational

² <http://forum.softpedia.com/topic/958214-comportament-inadecvat-al-profesorilor-faa-de-elevi/> , accessed February 18th 2015.

³ <http://www.sportnews.ro/un-elev-batut-crunt-de-profesorul-de-sport-copilul-fractura-cranio-faciala-141175.html> , accessed February 18th 2015.

⁴ http://miedolj.isj.edu.ro/documents/studiu_violenta_scolara.pdf, accessed February 18th 2015.

process are forbidden. There are also forbidden “any kind of insult, discrimination, forcing the child to stand and any action that humiliates the child”.⁵

However, the law is regarded as discriminatory because by forbidding teachers to kick students who misbehave out of the class, it violates the other children’s right to education, since the student who misbehaves negatively affects the educational process of his classmates. The law is also criticised because, education being compulsory until and including the 10th grade (that is, until the ages of 16 or early 17), teachers are left with no legal measure for controlling problematic students but by means of lowering the mark for behaviour. Sometimes, other measures are taken, for example forcing misbehaving students to change schools and attend, for example, schools or high-schools regarded as having lower educational performance and poorer overall status. In any case, kicking students out of the class is not a solution for dealing with misbehaving students.

4. Treating the ‘disorder’ of didactogenicity

The school institutions play an essential role in preventing all sorts of violence (be it verbal or physical) in schools, both with regard to teachers and students. The schools’ attributions and responsibilities are explicitly stipulated in the national legislation in relation to children’s rights and the control, prevention and intervention ways for cases when minors are either victims or authors of various acts of violence.

A first step in raising awareness of the impact of teacher behaviour upon the students’ development implies making the legal frame for teacher conduct known to the teaching staff. This may be done by the school principal, preferably during the first teaching staff meeting from the beginning of each school year. Surprisingly, some teachers may not be even aware of the fact that teacher misbehaviour is punishable by law. Although it is not desirable that teacher behave properly in class due to law constraints, knowing that inappropriate conduct is punishable by law may reduce such behaviour and implicitly its effects, didactogenicity.

A second step in treating the ‘disorder’ of didactogenicity would be to make teachers aware of the relevant impact of their more or less appropriate behaviour upon the development of their students at a deeper level. This may be possible by organizing seminars and workshops on the topic of didactogenicity, with teachers and parents. The organizers may be the schools, universities and teaching staff centres from the country and, why not, in collaboration with

⁵ http://www.ajps-cj.ro/LEGEA_257_2013.pdf , accessed February 18th 2015.

partner educational institutions from abroad. Awareness of the reality of didactogenicity should be raised by highlighting the characteristics of didactogenic behaviour and its impact upon children. On the one hand, concrete examples of didactogenicity should be given, by means of media reports and videos posted on the Internet. Results of studies on this topic should be circulated. On the other hand, there should also be emphasized (why not, over and over again?) the characteristics of a good and efficient teacher:

- a professional attitude, characterized by inoffensive and unaggressive language and gestures in class;
- the ability to motivate students by means of three major factors: discipline, building the students' trust in their own success and empowering students to guide their own learning;
- efficient classroom management: the teacher should consider the students' behaviour and school performance and make use of a wide range of teaching-learning methods and technologies;
- the ability to maintain a pleasant, supportive and cooperation classroom atmosphere: discipline related issues may be solved in a constructive way; students may be appreciated for their results both in public and private; the teacher should encourage students to cooperate and support each other;
- encouraging students to self-guide learning: instead of indicating students the skills or strategies that may be used in solving a task, the teacher may stimulate students to decide upon these on their own.
- students' feedback: the teacher should take into consideration the feedback from students in relation to the organization of the educational process, the presentation and structuring of themes without, however, compromising the established educational standards and objectives.

The conclusions to one of her studies supported Camelia Condurache, coordinator of the City Centre of Psycho-Pedagogical Support from Constanta, to shape three types of teacher portraits⁶:

- the ideal teacher, characterized by: professional competence, objectivity, fair-play, indulgence, dedication, sociability, dignity, compassion, kindness, decent outfit;
- the real teacher, characterized by: subjectivity, discrimination, authoritarianism, indifference, intelligence, kindness, exigency, apathy, tolerance, verbal aggression;
- the desired teacher, characterized by: compassion, humour, objectivity, respect towards students, professional competence, youth, exigency, general culture, honesty, altruism.

⁶ <http://www.e-psiologie.ro/?p=60> , accessed February 18th 2015.

The study, conducted in May-June 2007, involved 147 students in the 9th, 10th and 11th grades from a high-school in Constanta and was focused on identifying the presence or absence of didactogenicity in schools. The portrait of the real teacher is alarming: seven out of the ten characteristics were also mentioned by us above, among the sources and causes of didactogenicity.

Last but not least, parents should be encouraged to take action when identifying cases of didactogenicity, whether these are related or not to their own children. This may be done by informing parents on the legal stipulations related to teacher misconduct and whom to address in such matters.

Conclusions and future research

Besides the media reports and forum discussions, the research results of the yet few studies (Condurache, 2007; Radut et. al. 2011; Jigau et. al., 2006) support the need for further investigation of this matter and serious promotion of the concept of didactogenicity, with its legal effects upon the teachers themselves but, even more important, with the negative psychological and psychosomatic impact upon the children's development. Other studies reveal the positive effects of appropriate teacher behaviour in class (Yucel, 2007; Babad, 2007). Unfortunately, didactogenicity is a reality of the Romanian educational system. Further research should be conducted in order to highlight the sources and causes of didactogenicity at a deeper level, as well as to identify concrete and diverse ways for controlling and preventing its occurrence in schools. For this, research should be conducted both in the urban and rural environments and involve teachers, students and parents, as well as auxiliary teaching, administrative and managerial staff from schools. Also, the research should include students of all ages. Questionnaires aimed at identifying the perception of students upon their teachers' behaviour in class should be applied starting even with the age of the small kindergarten group (3-4 years of age). The research should also aim at identifying ways to improve the legal stipulations regarding this matter. Schools should be encouraged to draft, discuss and approve their own internal regulations with stipulations related to didactogenicity, as a concrete, practical way of controlling this phenomenon. Teachers should also be made aware of the fact that it is not enough to be charismatic or have a certain inclination towards teaching. But, teachers should be encouraged to understand the fact that teaching is a profession and the teacher is a professional. Like all professionals, teachers should dedicate time and focus to constant personal and professional self-improvement. Last but not least, teachers should become accustomed to the idea of asking for and

receiving feedback from their students and use this feedback in their future organization of the learning process.

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