

# A QUESTIONNAIRE-BASED INVESTIGATION ON DIDACTOGENICITY IN THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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## Abstract

*Our study is part of a research began in the latter half of 2014 aimed 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 paper is a continuation of the theoretical background presented in our previous article (Boghian, 2014). It is a questionnaire-based investigation aimed at finding answers to questions such as: Is didactogenicity present in the Romanian educational system? If yes, to what extent and who are those most responsible of this phenomenon? Is didactogenicity more present in the rural than in the urban educational environment? The research study, conducted in the second semester of the 2014-2015 academic year, involved applying a questionnaire with 22 items to a number of students from “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău. The findings of our investigation reveal the fact that didactogenicity is present to a certain extent in the Romanian educational system.*

**Key words:** Didactogenicity, manifestations of didactogenicity, sources and effects of didactogenicity,

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## Introduction

In our theoretical paper (Boghian, 2014) we tried to outline the concept of didactogenicity, its sources, effects and possible ways of controlling or eliminating it. This paper presents a questionnaire-based investigation regarding the phenomenon of didactogenicity in the Romanian educational system. We believe such an investigation is necessary because, in Romania, the most

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frequent reports of cases of didactogenicity come from the media and online discussion forums.<sup>2</sup> In our investigation, we tried to find answers to a series of questions related to didactogenicity in the Romanian educational system, namely: Is didactogenicity a real phenomenon of the Romanian educational system? If yes, to what extent? Is the phenomenon of didactogenicity more prolific in rural than in urban schools? By answering such questions, we aimed at shaping a more accurate image of the phenomenon of didactogenicity in the Romanian educational system.

### **Method and participants**

The investigation was conducted March-May 2015. The main methods used in our investigation were the questionnaire and qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The group to which the questionnaire was applied comprised 54 current and former students from the specializations The Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-School Education, the Faculty of Sciences and the specializations Foreign Languages (English – French, English – Romanian, French – Romanian) from the Faculty of Letters, “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău. The investigated group comprised 44 female students and only 10 (5,4%) male students. The investigated group comprised 27 students who attended middle school in the rural environment and 27 students who attended middle school in the urban environment. The former students of these specializations are now teachers themselves. The questionnaire comprised 22 items: 13 open-ended items and 11 closed items with True/ False answers. For the open-ended items, the respondents were not imposed any limits, for example, regarding the number of disciplines they should mention. The items (See Annex 1) represented questions related to aspects of didactogenicity and implied that the respondents refer to their middle-school years (grades 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> in the Romanian educational system) when giving their answers. Some items were designed to refer to didactogenicity directly (for example, Item 6. I felt humiliated by the teacher of ...; or Item 18. Some teachers used an offensive language – irony, labelling, abusive language, indifference etc.) or indirectly, by asking the respondents to refer to sources and/ or effects of didactogenicity (for example, Item 8. I imagined ways of revenge for the suffering caused by the teacher of ...; or Item 14. My palms sweated during the classes of ... more than during the other classes at school). The content of certain items was repeated by the content of other items in the same questionnaire, to help identify whether the students’ reluctance or dislike in relation to a certain school discipline was caused by the teacher teaching that subject or was simply a matter of the student’s preference: for

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

example, Item 2. If it had been my way, I would have skipped the classes of ... and Item 6. I felt humiliated by the teacher of .... If the answers for these two questions are the same, then it means that there is a connection between the teacher and the student's dislike of the respective classes/school subjects. Whereas items 1 – 17 were designed to refer to didactogenicity indirectly, to support the respondent in identifying aspects related to the concept of didactogenicity, items 18 – 22 function like a conclusion: these items refer to didactogenicity in its purest and most extreme forms. The questionnaire was designed to refer to the middle school age, namely 10 to 14 years of age. The respondents attended middle school in the interval 1991 – 2011, which means that our investigation may be said to refer to two decades from Romanian education.

### **Findings**

The findings of our investigation may have the drawback of the small number of the respondents involved in our study. However, they may provide an indication of the phenomenon of didactogenicity in the Romanian educational system. Our questionnaire also wanted to highlight the students' positive attitudes towards the Romanian educational act (for example, through items 1, 3, 5, 7).

For item 1 (I liked the classes of ...), there was revealed the students' obvious preference for the study of Romanian language and literature, with 49 students mentioning it in their answers followed, at some distance and with equal scores, by English as a foreign language (19 options) and History (19), Geography (16), French as a foreign language (15), Mathematics (13), Biology (11), Drawing (8), Music (7), Physical education (6), Chemistry (6), Physics (5), Religion (3), Technology (2). Other subjects were also mentioned only once: Education for health, Latin, Informatics, Plastic education. The results show the students' interest in a wide range of subjects and their preference, as of this age, for some of them (Romanian, History, Geography, Foreign languages), that belong to the curricular areas of Language and communication (Romanian, English, French) and, respectively Man and society (History, Geography).

The answers for item 2 (If it had been my way, I would have skipped the classes of ...) support our assertion that as of the age of middle school, students should be given the possibility to select at least part of the disciplines they study at school, on the basis of their talents, interests and needs. The disciplines that middle-school students would have intentionally skipped mainly belong to the curricular area of Mathematics and Sciences: Mathematics (23 options), Physics (15), Chemistry (14), and the list continues with Physical education (5 options), Romanian language and literature (4), History (4 options). From the 54 students who answered the

questionnaire, 5 of them responded, at this item, that they would have skipped no classes intentionally.

For item 3 (If all the disciplines from the high-school entrance examination had mattered the same, I would have chosen to sit in for the disciplines ...), the students gave the following answers: Romanian language and literature (31), English (12), History (10), Mathematics (9), Geography (8), French (5), Drawing and Biology (4 options each). These answers complete the information provided at item 1, as most of the disciplines mentioned most frequently (except Mathematics) for item 3 belong to the curricular areas of Language and communication and Man and society. Although a relevant number of students would have skipped the classes of Mathematics (23, 42%, almost half of them), this discipline has nevertheless gathered 13 points as a discipline that students like to learn, and 9 points as a choice for examinations. This reveals the fact that although Mathematics may be perceived by students as quite difficult or unappealing, they are nevertheless quite aware of the importance of mathematical knowledge in their life.

Mathematics was also the students' number 1 'boring' discipline, with 15 options, as shown by the answers for item 4 (I was quickly bored during the classes of ...), followed rather closely by Physics (11 options), Chemistry (8) and at some distance by History (6), Physical education (5), Music (5), Drawing and Romanian (4 options each), Geography and Biology (3 options each).

Romanian language and literature comes first again in the students' answers for item 5 (I liked learning during the classes of ...), with 27 options, followed by Mathematics and History (15), English (14), Geography (12), French and Chemistry (6), Biology (5), Drawing (2).

The difference between this item and item 1 (I liked the classes of ...) is the fact that by item 5 we wanted to reveal the students' perception regarding the learning process, a process guided and conducted with the help of a teacher. So, indirectly, we wanted to see whether the teacher could make a difference between what discipline a student likes and how much a student may learn for a respective discipline in relation to the teacher's role, irrespective of his own preference for the discipline. Comparing the results from item 5 with those from item 1, we may conclude that: students like the discipline of Romanian itself more than they like learning it (49 vs 27), but these scores are quite similar for some of the other disciplines mentioned (English, Geography, Mathematics, Chemistry). Regarding other disciplines, students do not like learning the discipline although they say that they like the respective discipline: French (15 options for the discipline vs 6 options for learning it); Biology (11 options for the discipline vs 5 for learning it).

We may thus conclude that, indeed, the teacher plays a certain role in how much a student learns for the respective discipline.

For item 6 (I felt humiliated by the teacher of ...), only 27 students answered that they never felt humiliated by a teacher. The answers of the other 27 students, who felt humiliated by a teacher, were as follows: 12 felt humiliated by their Maths teacher, 3 by their teacher of Physics, 3 by their teacher of Music and 3 by their teacher of Romanian, 2 by their Chemistry teacher and 2 by their teacher of Physical education, 2 by the Biology teacher, 1 by the Teacher of Religion, 1 by the Geography teacher, 1 by the History teacher. This sums up to 30 options, which means that at least one student felt humiliated by several teachers, not just one. It is worrisome that half of the students admitted to having felt humiliated by at least one of his/ her teachers. This reveals a shameful reality: 50% of the students represents a serious amount if we think that we are referring to children with ages 10 – 14, still undergoing the process of building their personality and systems of values.

For item 7 (The teacher who inspired my self-confidence was the teacher of ...), the students answered that they felt most inspired by their teacher of Romanian language and literature (19 options), followed by: the teacher of Mathematics and the teacher of English (8 options each), the French teacher (6 options), History (4), Chemistry, Biology, Music and Geography (3 options each), Physics, Drawing and Civics (1 option each). One student responded that no teacher inspired him, one student responded that all the teachers inspired him and 3 students responded that they were inspired by their class master. These answers only reveal, once again, the importance of teachers in supporting students build their self-confidence and develop at the personal level, not just at the scientific level. It also highlights the teacher's part as role and life models for students, almost irrespective (with the exception of the teachers of Romanian) of the disciplines taught. The answers also reveal that one student had more than just one teacher as model and inspiration.

The answers for item 8 (I imagined ways of revenge for the suffering caused by the teacher of ...) are also rather worrying: 23 students answered that they did not think of getting revenge at teachers, but 27 answered by yes. Although 27 students answered by 'true' to this item, not all of them mentioned the respective teachers. Some of the teachers in relation to which students imagined ways of revenge for the suffering caused are those of: Mathematics (6 options), Chemistry (5), Romanian (3), Physics, History, Biology, Physical education, Religion, Latin, Music, English, Logics (1 option each).

Furthermore, for item 9 (I feel sadness/fear/ panic when I remember the classes of ...) 44 students responded by 'True'. This means that 81% of the students investigated felt, at one point or another, sadness, fear or panic in relation to certain teachers, as follows: Mathematics (11), Chemistry (10), Romanian (8), Physics (5), Physical education (4), History and English (3

options each), Geography and French (2 options each), Latin, Biology, Music and Logics (1 option each).

For item 10 (I thought about/ expected the classes of ... with a certain amount of anxiety/ nervousness), 48 (88,8%) students reported feelings of anxiety and/ or nervousness before certain classes, as follows: Mathematics and Romanian (12 options), Chemistry, History and Physics (6 options each), Physical education (4), English, Geography, Music and Biology (2 options each).

For item 11 (I was seized with a certain amount of panic/ nervousness/ anxiety before the classes delivered by the teacher of ...) that attempts to draw a connection between the students' anxiety in relation to a certain discipline and the teacher teaching that discipline, 46 students admitted to have felt panic and anxiety in relation to a certain teacher, although not all of them also indicated the teacher involved: Mathematics (12), Chemistry (9), Romanian (7), Physics (6).

The answers for items 12 (Sometimes I was under the impression that I was good for nothing: True/ False) and 13 (Usually, I was full of energy at school: True/ False) were as follows: 21 (38%) students sometimes had the impression that they were good for nothing at school and 10 (18%) students did not usually feel full of energy at school. Regarding item 14, 11 students said their palms sweated during the class of Mathematics and another 11, during the class of Chemistry, 7 of them had this psychosomatic manifestation during Physics, 5 during Romanian, 4 during History classes, 8 during Biology, English, French and Geography (each of these classes with 2 options each), 1 during Music and 1 during Physical education classes. This means 43 students (79.63%).

For item 15 (By the end of the school day, my neck would become stiff: True/ False) there were 17 'True' answers (31.48%), for item 16 (I happened to get sick at school: True/ False) there were 16 'True' answers (29.62%) and for item 17 (I felt very tired after the class of ...) there were 37 (68.51%) 'True' answers, as follows: Mathematics (19), Physics (7), Chemistry (6), Physical education (5), Romanian (3), French and History (2 options each), English, Biology and Latin (1 option each).

For item 18 (Some teachers used an offensive language in relation to students (irony, labelling, abusive language, indifference etc.), there were 20 (37.03%) 'True' answers, as follows: Mathematics (11), Romanian (5), Physics (4), Physical education (3), Chemistry (1), French (1). The types of offensive language used in relation to students was irony, abusive language, swearing and labelling.

For item 19 (Some teachers abused students physically: True/ False), there were 11 (20.37%) 'True' answers: Mathematics (6 options), Romanian (3), Physics, Geography, French and

Religion (1 option each) and History (2 options), with the School Principle mentioned twice (once also as the History teacher and once also as the Religion teacher).

The 25 (a relevant, distressing 46.29%) 'True' answers for item 20 (Some teachers were subjective/ incorrect in giving marks: True/ False) were as follows: Mathematics (10), Romanian (8), History and Geography (7 options each), Chemistry (6), Biology (5), Physics (4), French (2), Religion, English, Music, Civics (1 option each). One student answered that all teachers were biased in giving marks and one student mentioned that the Maths teacher would ask students to go and have private classes in order to give them better marks. For item 21 (Some teachers were involved in police investigations as a result of their misconduct in school: True/ False) there was only 1 'True' answer and no mention of the discipline taught by the respective teacher. For item 22 (The behaviour of some teachers could have been described as the behaviour of a person with mental issues: True/ False) there were 3 'True' answers: Romanian and Mathematics, Physics and French (1 option each).

### **Discussions and conclusions**

Unfortunately, there were found distressing percentages of teachers abusing students physically (20.37%), displaying subjectivity in giving marks (46.29%) and using offensive language in relation to students (37.03%). It is also distressing the fact that according to the answers for item 9, 44 students (81%) felt, at one point or another, sadness, fear or panic in relation to one or several teachers. We consider this a high percentage, since school should be a student-friendly environment, but such answers prove the fact that this is not the case in quite a large number of instances. The answers to other items are also disturbing: 27 students from the 54 investigated ones imagined ways of revenge for the suffering caused by a teacher (item 8); 48 students reported feelings of anxiety and/ or nervousness before certain classes (item 10); 21 students sometimes had the impression that they were good for nothing at school (item 12); 43 students had their palms sweating during one or several classes. We can only conclude that, unfortunately, quite a large number of students experienced psychosomatic manifestations as a result of their perception of school and the educational process as stressful.

Regarding the differences rural vs urban, for item 22, from the 3 'true' answers, 2 were from students who had attended middle school in the rural environment. The one case of a teacher involved in police investigations as a result of misconduct in school was also reported in the rural environment. For item 20, from the 25 'true' answers, only 9 of the 'true' answers referred to the rural educational environment, meaning that teachers tend to be more biased in giving marks in the urban environment. We believe that this is happening because, on the one hand, there is

poorer quality of the teaching staff in the rural environment, as well as lower involvement of parents and of students themselves in the educational act. Regarding the other items, there were found no major differences between the urban and the rural environment.

Given the fact that the respondents are current or former students of the specializations of The Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-School Education, the Faculty of Sciences and the specializations Foreign Languages (English – French, English – Romanian, French – Romanian) from the Faculty of Letters, we expected a certain amount of bias in their answers, namely, their preference for disciplines related to the domain of the Humanities. The answers from items 1-17 enabled us to highlight the fact that middle-school students already know their preferences and interests regarding learning and they should be given the chance to select their school disciplines or, at least, part of them. For example, why are there no dancing lessons in schools, in the optional curriculum? Or, why aren't there more drawing lessons in school, also in the optional curriculum? One finding of our investigation is related to Mathematics and Romanian language and literature. It was found that the disciplines of Mathematics and Romanian are more related to aspects of didactogenicity, by comparison with other disciplines. The special place of Mathematics was highlighted throughout all the answers to the questionnaire: whether they like or dislike Mathematics, the students are aware of its relevance for their life and future. Mathematics and Romanian were also the disciplines responsible for most psychosomatic manifestations associated with didactogenicity (sweaty palms, anxiety, panic etc.). We believe that this is, to a certain extent, if not completely, because of the relevance of these two school disciplines in the high-school admission scores.

Our conclusion is that didactogenicity is a reality of the Romanian educational system. Further 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, in order to identify the sources and effects of didactogenicity, as well as ways of controlling and eliminating it. The legal stipulations regarding this matter should also be improved. 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, as an addition to the law in force. On the one hand, school should be an environment free of all stress. On the other hand, most students achieve good results at a number of their school disciplines, but not at all of them. In order to make school a student-friendly environment, free of stress, the focus should be placed on the students' needs, interests and learning style. Teachers should be trained to empathise more with their students and identify the causes of a student's failure to learn at a discipline. There are several reasons for which a student



does not or cannot learn at a discipline. Teachers often blame the students' lack of interest for their poor performances. However, the causes for a student's poor performance at a certain school discipline may include: the student's learning style, the student's type of intelligence that enables him to perform well at certain disciplines and less well at others. Last but not least, teachers should pay more attention to the attitude they display in class towards their students, irrespective of how well the latter perform at their disciplines.

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## **Annex 1. Questionnaire on didactogenicity**

Age/ gender:

You attended the 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grades in the: urban / rural environment (underline the correct answer).

The interval when you attended the 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grades:

The questions below refer to your time and school experiences as a middle-school student (grades 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup>).

1. I liked the classes of ...
2. If it had been my way, I would have skipped the classes of ...
3. If all the disciplines from the high-school entrance examination had mattered the same, I would have chosen to sit in for the disciplines ...
4. I was quickly bored during the classes of ...
5. I liked learning during the classes of ...
6. I felt humiliated by the teacher of ...
7. The teacher who inspired my self-confidence was the teacher of ...
8. I imagined ways of revenge for the suffering caused by the teacher of ...
9. I feel sadness/fear/ panic when I remember the classes of ...
10. I thought about/ expected the classes of ... with a certain amount of anxiety/ nervousness.
11. I was seized with a certain amount of panic/ nervousness/ anxiety before the classes delivered by the teacher of ...
12. Sometimes I was under the impression that I was good for nothing: True/ False.
13. Usually, I was full of energy at school: True/ False.
14. My palms sweated during the class of ... more than during the other classes at school.
15. By the end of the school day, my neck would become stiff: True/ False.
16. I happened to get sick at school: True/ False.
17. I felt very tired after the class of ...
18. Some teachers used an offensive language in relation to students (irony, labelling, abusive language, indifference etc.): True/ False (if you choose True, mention the discipline(s) taught by the respective teachers).
19. Some teachers abused students physically: True/ False (if you choose True, mention the discipline(s) taught by the respective teachers).
20. Some teachers were subjective/ incorrect in giving marks: True/ False (if you choose True, mention the discipline(s) taught by the respective teachers).
21. Some teachers were involved in police investigations as a result of their misconduct in school: True/ False (if you choose True, mention the discipline(s) taught by the respective teachers).
22. The behaviour of some teachers could have been described as the behaviour of a person with mental issues: True/ False (if you choose True, mention the discipline(s) taught by the respective teachers).