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## RESHAPING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONS IN THE DIGITISED SOCIETY

Remodelarea relațiilor profesor-elev în societatea digitalizată

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## RESHAPING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONS IN THE DIGITISED SOCIETY

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### **Abstract**

This article highlights the need to redefine teacher-student relationships according to the generations of students' characteristics (Generation Z, Generation Alpha). Each generation has a specific way of learning and interacting with peers or adults. The theoretical premises of the study are to be found in the recent work of psychologists, sociologists, and specialists in educational sciences on how social characteristics influence the life style of people belonging to that generation. The school with all its structure, content, and relationships cannot but be affected by the changes imposed by technology, globalisation, and social dynamism. This study used qualitative methods (interviews and observation of teachers' classroom behaviour) carried out in the school year 2022-2023. We have taken a constructivist-interpretive approach in conducting the research. A number of 60 participants (20 teachers from primary, 20 secondary, and 20 from high school level) from Braşov were involved in the study. Five teachers from primary schools were observed in the classroom. The results revealed that there are still teachers who have a classical view of relationships with pupils but who are making efforts to understand, accept, and adapt to the generations of pupils. One of the conclusions of the research is that teachers need to restructure their conceptions of the teacher-student interaction to suit the way students in the society of the future will learn and, more importantly, live. In fact, this teacher-student relationship is based on the values of accepting the diversity of students, personalising learning, motivating, and empowering students while ensuring their well-being is the basis of quality education.

**Keywords:** digitalisation, teacher-student interaction, Z generation.

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**Rezumat**

*Articolul de față subliniază necesitatea redefinirii relațiilor profesor-elev în acord cu caracteristicile generațiilor de elevi (generația Z, generația Alpha) care au un mod specific de învățare și de interacțiune cu colegii sau adulții. Premisele teoretice ale studiului se regăsesc în lucrările recente ale psihologilor, sociologilor și specialiștilor în științele educației privind modul în care caracteristicile societății digitalizate își pun amprenta asupra stilului de viață al persoanelor care aparțin acestei generații. Școala, cu tot ceea ce înseamnă ea, de la structură, conținut și relații, nu putea să nu fie afectată de schimbările impuse de tehnologie, globalizare, dinamism social. Cercetarea calitativă, realizată într-o paradigmă constructivist-interpretativă, s-a desfășurat în anul școlar 2022-2023, pe baza interviurilor cu 60 de profesori (20 din învățământul primar, 20 de la nivel gimnazial și 20 de la nivel liceal). Cinci profesori din învățământul primar au fost observați la clasă în timpul activităților didactice. S-a evidențiat că există încă profesori care au o viziune „clasică” asupra relațiilor cu elevi, dar că depun eforturi să înțeleagă, să accepte și să se adapteze promoțiilor de elevi. Una dintre concluziile cercetării este aceea că profesorii au nevoie de o remodelare a concepțiilor despre relația profesor-elev adaptată modului în care elevii din societatea viitorului (peste 15 ani, când actualele generații de elevi din gimnaziu vor intra pe piața muncii) vor învăța și, mai ales, vor munci. De fapt, această relație profesor-elev bazată pe valorile acceptării diversității elevilor, a personalizării învățării, a motivării și a responsabilizării elevilor, concomitent cu asigurarea stării de bine, stă la baza unei educații de calitate. Aceste valori ale educației sunt prioritare și sunt în acord cu caracteristicile elevilor de azi și ale societății.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** digitalizare, generația Z, relația profesor-elev.

## Introduction

One of the most challenging questions for the teacher training system is: What kind of competencies should future teachers have? We refer here to those teachers who will work in the education system 15 years from now when the current generation of students will enter the labour market. What kind of school are we preparing teachers for?

These questions are legitimate at a time when recent OECD studies (2018, 2020) and UNESCO (2015) initiate the idea of the need to redefine/reframe the role of schools and teachers according to societal changes while shaping a different psycho-individual profile of the “digital native” learner (Prensky, 2001), exponent of Generation Z or even the Alpha generation, who will operate in a labour market much different from what teachers or adults with decision-making power know.

In fact, the main issue is about how to communicate, relate, learn and work in a digitised society where different generations co-exist.

Moreover, the OECD (2020) proposes four scenarios for the future of schools with major implications for teacher education:

- schooling extended - an intensification of the current front-end, massive schooling model;
- education outsourced - an outsourcing of schooling and resulting surge of learning markets;
- schools as learning hubs - a re-purposing of schooling and transformation of schools;
- learning-as-you-go - the end of school-based learning and the demise of schooling.

These scenarios are useful for reflecting on the possible problems as well as on the way to prepare the teachers and managers for the future. Even if some of the scenarios are not very possible, they are useful because they force the educational system, teachers in particular, to change the way they relate to students, to learning and school.

The idea of rethinking education and all that it entails (content, learning, relationships) in line with the needs of individuals and society is highlighted

in various recent educational policy documents such as UNESCO (2015) and OECD (2018, 2020).

## **1. A new school involves a new kind of teacher-student interaction**

### **1.1. A new model of school**

Senge et al. (2016) describe the industrial school model which dominated until the 20th century. The model of education specific to the industrial era, which was based on learning transmitted in school by teachers and which provided knowledge and skills for predictable work, no longer corresponds to social trends and students' needs, such as diversity, digitalization, personalized learning, critical thinking, and well-being. Therefore, a new model is tending to replace the industrial model: the ecological model.

The ecological model advocated by Robinson and Aronca (2015) and Senge et al. (2016) is based on the idea of an organism that develops, changes, and transforms and is based on the following four principles by analogy with organic farming: health, positive interdependence, fairness, and care.

The principle of health promotes the development and well-being of the pupil as a whole, intellectually, physically, spiritually, and socially.

The principle of ecology emphasizes the interdependence of all aspects of development for the individual pupil and the community.

Fairness addresses the individual talents and potential of each learner regardless of their circumstances and respects the roles and responsibilities of those who work with them.

Caring aims at optimal conditions for student development based on "compassion, experience and practical wisdom" (Robinson & Aronca, 2015, p. 85).

These principles bring about changes both in the education curriculum, in the educational processes (teaching, learning, assessment) and teacher-student interaction.

The development of students' creativity, critical thinking, empathy, and social responsibility requires a certain social framework, in which teacher-student relationships are based on the following 21st century values: freedom of expression, personalization, respect for diversity, social inclusion, and ecology.

The behavioral patterns of parents and teachers are no longer effective because they have been trained according to other principles, specific to the industrial society, in which routine, the linear unfolding of all processes and events, respect for authority and hierarchies were the key to success (Shapiro, 2021). However, we note the efforts of parents and especially teachers to adapt to the needs of different generations of students.

In order to bridge the gap between the values of the generations of teachers and students, it is the teachers who hold the change in their hands, as Fullan (1993) points out - teachers are agents of change.

A new kind of teacher-student interaction is needed, in which teachers also learn from students how to remain open to change, accept diversity, and create a welcoming atmosphere (a tribe, in Cozolino's conception) in which students' personalities develop: "Classrooms need to be redesigned as common workspaces." (Shapiro, 2021, p. 167). In this case, teachers need to become guides, who are available to mentor students through project-based learning activities which are led by themselves.

## 1.2. The school as a bridge between generations

The characteristics of young people in the digital age are highlighted by psychologists, sociologists, and educators as Veen and Vrakking (2011), Prensky (2001), Shapiro (2021), Elmore (2023), and even psychiatrists such as Gold (2016) who point out that today's students and children are very different from their parents and teachers: the biggest difference is the way the information is processed.

The widespread use of technology and the internet have created a new culture based on values specific to today's generation - dynamism, diversity, globalisation - while increasing concern for individual and social well-being, ecology, and sustainable development.

Understanding the different generations means knowing the values that motivate their behavior and are reflected in the way they relate to family, profession, education, etc., White (2015), Bonchiş (2021), and Elmore (2023) describe the different generations:

- Baby Boomers generation (born between 1946 and 1964) have a proactive attitude, are competitive, and value their work as much as their family life.
- Compared with Boomers, Generation X are more likely to prioritize a work-life balance, and to value independence. They are more comfortable using modern technology. They place more emphasis on personal freedom, and many aspire to work for themselves.
- Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1997) was the first to grow up with reliable access to computers and the Internet. Compared with previous generations, they are happier to multitask, to get involved with multiple projects, and to take a flexible approach to work if the situation demands it. They see work as a route to personal fulfilment and think that it's acceptable to change jobs and careers often to pursue their happiness (White, 2015).
- Generation Z (born from 1998 onwards) have come of age in a digital culture, and are comfortable with the idea of working remotely, working online, and working for a diverse range of clients and companies. They love social media and cannot fathom life without smartphones, but they know that everything you post online lives forever. They value independence, innovation, and creativity.

It is easy to see that in school today, we meet almost all generations, and the biggest challenge is how to communicate effectively with people whose values are very different from our own. Elmore (2023) underlines that in contemporary society we meet a new kind of generational diversity which is sometimes difficult to manage. According to Elmore, we need to see the school as a bridge between different generations. We need to see the new school as an open space for learning and experimentation, where different generations will come together to negotiate the values that make human development and fulfilment possible.

We underline the idea of redefining the roles of teachers according, on the one hand, to the psycho-individual characteristics of the students of the present generation and, on the other hand, according to the trends of evolution in society.

## **2. Research methodology**

### **2.1. Research questions and goals**

This is an empirical research of a qualitative nature, conducted within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Patton, 2002). According to the constructivist-interpretivist perspective, we were interested in finding out teachers' perceptions of various aspects of their work with students in the current social context (school in a digitalized society). This research was based on the premise that teachers' representations of the school and their professional roles in the future, their expectations of students, shape their classroom behaviour, as highlighted in the literature (Senge et al., 2016). Knowledge of the teachers' views and representations is an important source for understanding their behaviours.

The aim of the research was to identify "teachers' representations" of the school in the digitized society, the profile of the Generation Z student and teacher-student interactions.

The questions that guided the investigative approach were:

- a. What are the teachers' perceptions of the school in the digital society?
- b. What are the characteristics of Generation Z students, in the view of teachers, who represent Generation X or Y?
- c. What are the teachers' views on teacher-pupil interactions?
- d. Are there differences between the representations of teachers at different levels of education about the future of schools, the students' characteristics and teacher-pupil interactions?

### **2.2. Research methods**

In order to identify the teachers' perceptions regarding the students and their relationships with them, individual interviews were conducted with teachers, based on an interview guide structured into three main themes: opinions on the school in the digitalised society, characteristics of students, and relationships with students.

Another method used was the observation of the behaviour of five primary school teachers who were interviewed, based on an observation grid, which followed the teacher's behaviour in relation to students (stimulating student



communication, positive verbal feedback, using the group as a form of activity, nonverbal behaviour, positive classroom climate, use of digital resources, self-assessment of teaching behaviour). Behaviours were coded according to their frequency of occurrence (very often ++; often +; absent -).

Classroom observations were made with the agreement of the teachers and the Braşov County School Inspectorate.

### 2.3. Participants

The participants were teachers from pre-university education, 20 from primary education, 20 teachers from secondary education, and 20 from high school, from schools in Braşov County. All the subjects have more than 3 years of teaching experience, aged between 25 and 49 years, exponents of generation X and Y respectively.

### 2.4. Results and discussion

The content analysis of the interviews revealed the following themes and sub-themes, as those are presented in Table no. 1.

**Table no. 1. Theme of interviews**

| Theme                         | Sub-themes                                                                  | Frequency |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1.The future of the school    | 1.1. School will play an important role                                     | 24        |
|                               | 1.2. The school will digitise (changes in content, teaching and assessment) | 21        |
|                               | 1.3. It will not change significantly                                       | 15        |
| 2. Student's Characteristics  | 2.1. Creativity, intelligence, performance                                  | 37        |
|                               | 2.2. Superficial, little effort, comfortable, impatient                     | 23        |
| 3. Relationship with students | 3.1. Challenging, constructive, transformative                              | 36        |
|                               | 3.2. Difficult, demanding (requires effort to adapt)                        | 24        |

The answers to the first question, regarding the future role of school in a digital society (15 years from now), underline that the majority of teachers, irrespective of their generation, say that school will continue to play an important, decisive role in shaping the students' personality. Even if they

accept the idea of change (“In the future, school will probably change, it will not be as we know it, but it will still be important for children because they need to meet other children” - A.P., Math teacher, secondary level), this change concerns more the curriculum (content) and the teaching strategy (methods, materials) under the influence of the development of technology. Fewer teachers anticipate broad changes to the structure of the school or the structure of the teaching process: “Even if teaching will change, assessment is not likely to change fundamentally, because the labour market will still be based on exams/certificates”. (M.M.- Romanian language teacher, secondary school) as can be seen in Table no. 2.

**Table no . 2.** *Teacher’s perceptions regarding changing in school in the future*

| Teacher’s perceptions regarding school in the future | Primary level | Secondary level | High-school | Total       |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|
| Curriculum changes                                   | 12            | 10              | 18          | 40 (66%)    |
| Changes in the teaching process                      | 18            | 17              | 16          | 51 (85%)    |
| Changes in assessment                                | 12            | 14              | 11          | 37 (61,66%) |
| Changes in teacher-student interaction               | 15            | 16              | 12          | 43 (71,66%) |

As for the second research question, concerning the characteristics of Generation Z students, in the view of teachers, representing Generation X or Y, the answers were concentrated in two categories. Some teachers put particular emphasis on the positive traits of Generation Z, with characteristics such as creativity, performance focus, intelligence, curiosity, digital, and quick reaction.

Other teachers emphasise primarily the negative characteristics (in the teachers’ perception): impatient, superficial (“can’t concentrate too much” - S.F, Math teacher, secondary level), comfortable (“little willing to work hard” - N.H. - primary school teacher). It should be noted that teachers at the secondary school level focus more on negative traits. One possible explanation could be that the age of the pupils causes them to go through a series of biological and psychological transformations that also influence their behaviour.

High school teachers, and especially primary school teachers, emphasise more the positive aspects: creativity, openness to new things, and the ability to adapt quickly to technology. Answers to the third question, “What is the teachers’

view of teacher-student interactions?” revealed that the majority of teachers stated that the teacher-student interaction needs to be redefined. However, this redefinition differs greatly from teacher to teacher. Thus, some teachers believe that it is the teachers themselves who have to adapt and shape the way they relate to each other: “We are the ones who have to adapt. We have to change our behaviour to help them” (A.V. - Romanian language and literature teacher, secondary level) or “we have to understand that they are not like us” (N.H - primary school teacher) but there are also teachers who, while accepting that today’s pupils are different, with different values, want to maintain “a relationship based on respect for the teacher”. The teacher-student relationship was also further investigated by observing the classroom behaviour of primary school teachers.

From the analysis of the behaviour of the five primary school teachers observed during the activities carried out during one day, we can draw the following conclusions: primary school teachers may understand and accept more easily the characteristics of Generation Z pupils, proof that they use in all teaching activities applications adapted to the pupils’ specificity, digital textbooks, many interactive methods and often use the group as a form of organization of the activity.

The summary data are presented in the table below.

**Table no. 3.** *Teacher’s behavior observed in the classroom*

| Behavior observed                       | S.A. (CP) | N.H. (II) | BG (I) | RH (II) | PA (III) |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|--------|---------|----------|
| Stimulating student communication       | ++        | +         | ++     | ++      | +        |
| Positive verbal feedback                | ++        | +         | +      | ++      | ++       |
| Using the group as a class organization | ++        | +         | +      | ++      | +        |
| Nonverbal behaviour                     | ++        | +         | +      | +       | +        |
| Positive classroom climate              | ++        | +         | ++     | ++      | ++       |
| Use of digital resources                | ++        | +         | ++     | ++      | +        |
| Self-assessment of teaching behaviour   | ++        | +         | ++     | +       | ++       |

We note that digital resources are not only used in the teaching-learning process in the classroom but also at home, as in the case of Mrs. S.A. who

asked the students to make a group project in which the students, using digital resources, made their animations. The request was justified by the teacher for primary education as follows: “We have to look for tasks for their way of processing information. We are the ones who have to learn from them, along with them” (S.A - primary teacher).

The teacher’s effort to adapt to the psychological specificities of their students is reflected in the very good relationship they have with the students and the positive atmosphere based on mutual trust in the classroom.

The fact that primary school teachers frequently use digital resources alongside traditional resources helps them, on the one hand, to see technology as a useful tool in children’s development and, on the other hand, to accept changes more easily, and to adapt to the requests coming from pupils.

## **Conclusions**

Despite the limitations of constructivist-interpretive research, which does not allow for generalization of the conclusions and gives subjective perspectives on the construction of explanations, we can say that we have a deeper understanding of the teacher-student interaction. We can state that teachers try to change their communication style and adopt a new way to approach their “digital” students.

The tendency to redefine teacher-student relationships is present in the teacher’s behavior, but is more “visible” among primary school teachers. One possible explanation could be the age of the pupils, but also the time pupils spend together with the same teacher, who comes to understand, accept and support them much more easily than secondary or high school teachers could do.

Also, the sustained use of technology by primary school teachers may be another explanation for the adoption of relationships designed to help students further develop.

One of the most important conclusions, with implications for teacher training, is that teachers need to understand and accept the characteristics of digital native learners.

They are also the ones who have to find the most appropriate way to harmonise the values of the students with the social values so that there is a continuity between generations and not a gap.

The way to adjust the values of the different generations (X, Y, Z, alpha) is through communication and mutual learning, in a classroom as an open space for experimentation, where teachers learn together with students how to cope with the demands of the society, where social skills accompany digital skills.

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