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Dear Reader,

As the end of the year approaches, we are prone to review where we have been and where we want to go. What more appropriate time, then, to think of those who will inherit our planet, our society with its shortcomings and blessings? What if we could help our kids and teenagers shape a more engaging educational process, in collaboration with parents and teachers? As author Riane Eisler notes, the most important product of humanity is our children, yet we tend to pay inadequate attention to caring for the younger citizens of the planet.

This month we feature the amazing story of twelve coaches transforming high school education in Romania.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

# LIM News

# Coaching For Change

Issue 148

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## Coaching For Change

### An Experience in Romanian High Schools

*Interview with **Simona David-Crisbășanu**,*

*initiator and coordinator of the Zburd-Education Through Coaching Project*

**LIM News: How would you describe the initiative in one sentence?**

**Simona David-Crisbășanu:** We are working with high schools with very low performance, looking for results in both the mid- and long-term. It is a project about giving a voice to everyone, about bringing hope and empowering people to take responsibility for their lives. We all learn to work together for a better future. It is also about learning to be patient, to have faith and compassion.

**LIM News: What do you actually do?**

**SDC:** We bring together students, teachers, parents, and representatives of the business world in order to work together to create a better school. They learn to listen to each other and to work together to create a better education for the children. As elsewhere in the world, in Romania the children are forgotten: parents are too busy earning their living; teachers merely teach the curricula and mark papers; the business environment pays the dues, but does not intervene without being invited. Thus, the public school system is disconnected and does not actually prepare young people to face the world out there. Through our initiative, we make the whole community contribute and be aware of their role in education – the school should not be isolated, because learning occurs everywhere.

***LIM News: What is your aim?***

**SDC:** Our intention is to bring back the focus on children, as it should be, and this why we called our initiative Zburd-Education through coaching (zburd = to romp). One of the results should be a more attractive and meaningful learning process, by adding creativity and joy and involving children, because this is what they naturally bring into the world, we just need to create a context where we can allow this to happen. The term “Zburd” in Romanian is used when children are playing outside, freely and joyfully. This is what we want to bring as values in education, by focusing on children and working together as a community. Even if it is obvious that children are not educated only in schools, we don’t do much about it as a society. Today, the system does not answer their needs, and that’s why many children think that learning in the school does not make any sense and, as a result, they don’t show up at classes especially in high schools. Currently, the school stops children from romping and then it often makes them grow unhappy as adults. I believe that we can change that and find the right balance, if we work together.

***LIM News: What events in your personal history resulted in you becoming interested in this topic?***

**SDC:** This is a long story. When I was a child I wanted to become a teacher at some point, but I gave up quickly because I thought it must be boring to teach the same things all the time. In addition, my mother was a teacher, so I was very familiar with all the school problems. For me, my high school and the university years were not so fulfilling – I did not follow my soul’s desire, which was focused on poetry, writing and arts. I dreamed of becoming a journalist in high school, and I followed my dream. When I was a journalist, and afterwards when I worked in communication for different corporations, I tried to contribute to various social projects that had a significant impact. I went, myself, through a long and rather painful personal development process as an adult. Some years ago, I discovered coaching and started to apply its principles as a manager working with my team. It brought amazing results – I literally saw very young people blooming professionally, if they were allowed to fly. So, the idea of bringing those principles into schools grew inside me.

***LIM News: What made you feel this was the right time for it?***

**SDC:** I started to talk to different people about this idea of bringing coaching principles into schools in order to allow children to fulfill their potential as adults, to think for themselves, to trust themselves and to take responsibility for their lives. For us, in Romania, coming from the communist era (which ended in 1990), this is a major transformation in our culture – to take responsibility for our own life. There were many coaches interested in contributing since I started to talk about this idea (at the beginning of 2011), even before we had formulated the project. Then, in August 2011, I met Ernie Turner, the president of LIM. I was looking for the right way to intervene and he was the right person at the right time. His experience in education and the ARL methodology were exactly what we needed. So, in November 2011 we had the first workshop to train the coaches, and in February 2012 we started the project in 5 high schools which had a low level of performance, and in which the majority of the students came from an underprivileged environment.

***LIM News: What pushed you to go from the idea to action?***

**SDC:** I think it was the strength of this idea that grew daily first in me and, then, in others around me. There are so many people who had the idea of contributing to education, but they did not know how. I had a vision that became clarified over time. First, I knew what I wanted --coaching in schools – and then it took some months to find out how that could happen. Then, when I found out the “how” from Ernie – the project came together very quickly. My prior experience in both the private and the public sectors helped to put things together; I determined to have this approach of starting with a pilot-project, and not to be overawed by the size of the challenge. The key words are – vision, courage and optimism. What also helped was my stubbornness – when I want something and I feel that it is the right thing, I go for it!

***LIM News: Who helped you, and what roles did they play?***

**SDC:** First of all, the team of coaches. We are now a team of 14 coaches who have volunteered for this project - 15 with Ernie as our mentor – and new volunteers are joining us. The core team has stayed together since the beginning, and I am lucky to have the support of Ernie Turner and Oana Stoianovici, an executive coach with international experience and my partner in this project. The project is implemented by ROI Association ([www.ROI.ro](http://www.ROI.ro)), where both Oana and I are members.

***LIM News: If you would describe the initiative in stages, what are those stages, and in what stage are you now? Can you briefly describe the goals and challenges of the different stages?***

**SDC:** Our pilot project started in high schools in February 2012 and we plan to conclude this stage in September 2013 with a model that can be replicated in any other school, not only in high schools. At this point, we have a vision of how we see education in 2015; we know what our values are and we are close to becoming a high performing team of coaches. Regarding our efforts in the high schools, we are at various stages – somewhere between storming and performing, depending on the school. It is an interesting endeavor, because even if we apply the same methodology, we find that there is no single recipe, and that each high school needs to look at its specific issues, define its own objectives and find its relevant solutions. This is a major challenge for the high schools – they are not used to come with their own ideas, usually they are told what to do by the superior bodies in Education. It took several months for them to understand that we, the coaches, don't have answers and don't take actions for the team, but we encourage dialogue and support them to think for themselves, plan and act.

***LIM News: What were some unexpected obstacles you came across and how did you overcome them?***

**SDC:** We also learned during the project and made some major shifts. First, we realized that we, as coaches, should not go into these high schools with the intention of “saving” anyone; this is a trap and if we do that, we risk to become very quickly overwhelmed by the never-ending problems, frustrations and resistance to change especially on the teachers' side. If you want to teach somebody how to fish, you have to believe that this person is able to do it, and is not helpless. This seems obvious in coaching, but sometimes we face difficult situations in the field such as poverty and violence. The attitude is very different when the coach goes into a school with the idea that there are in fact good things happening already and we just need to become aware of them, to learn from each other, and then capture and expand these best practices. So now, we are in the stage of discovering these jewels in the dirt and making them shine. What helps greatly in dealing with the issues is the fact that we work in pairs – so two coaches work with each high school.

***LIM News: What do these coaches actually do?***

**SDC:** With the support of the principals the coaches first help the principal form a group of the key constituencies who have a vested interest in the success of their school: administrators, teachers, parents, students and members from community organizations. Our coaches then help this group become a team using the team coaching practices, processes, concepts and tools that they learned from the team coaching program co-designed and co-led by Ernie and Oana. Then it is up to the

team to figure out what they want to create or change in their school , because ultimately the school is theirs. We simply help them turn their dreams into plans and then actions. On some occasions we help them find resources for some of their dreams. Our role is to simply facilitate the change process that they own.

***LIM News: What were some unexpected surprises that made you feel blessed and supported you in continuing your dream?***

**SDC:** The project, which is based on volunteerism, started to have a life of its own. In the field, it is like an expedition or like a roller coaster. I am coordinating the project, but I also work with one of the high schools in Bucharest – where only two students passed the final graduation exam this year out of 120. I was amazed to meet a couple of very passionate and dedicated teachers, who really care about their students but who are not sure there is a way to change the current situation. In addition, the children are very smart and creative and once they feel somebody cares about them (and they feel it immediately), they are willing to come up with ideas and get involved if their teachers support them. I get a lot of energy from interacting with the dedicated teachers and the children.

***LIM News: What is the impact you see happening now from this initiative?***

**SDC:** We have already seen improvements in the results of the students and in their self-confidence, attitude and behavior. The relationship between teachers involved in the project and the students has improved. It is impressive to see that at the end of a coaching session which is focused on “How we can create a better school?” students say that they learned how to respect and listen to each other, how to act as a team, that they can be like a family. One of them told us last week that he learned that he can have trust. I think this is critical in today’s world for everybody – not only for young people. What matters for them more than anything is to feel understood and encouraged, because it means that they are not alone. In their world, where many young people are abandoned or excluded from school, this kind of support is very important.

***LIM News: You have your feet firmly on the earth, Simona, but you are also a dreamer. What is your dream about the future of this initiative?***

**SDC:** My dream is to make our experience and this model available to any school – not only in Romania, but internationally. I dream of having a movie made about this initiative that will be known in the whole world, so that more people find out about the impact of such a project – one that builds teams/communities and empowers them. Also, it is better if such a project is applied when children are even younger. We decided to start with the high schools just because the issues become more serious when children become teenagers and they start to face more risks. My vision is to create in a few years an International Centre for Research and Training in Education.

***LIM News: What do you need for the dream to come true?***

**SDC:** To have faith that I will find the right partners and the necessary resources. To be healthy and to be patient. And, yes, we need financial support to implement all the above, including the production of the model and of the movie. So far, our project has been based on volunteerism, but in order to multiply our efforts, it is clear that we need significant resources to ensure the management of the project, to support and promote what we do. So, any offer from people inspired to invest in education will be highly appreciated.

Right now, I am thinking of what we need to do to make the project successful in the high schools. What it takes from all of us as coaches is to be very open-minded, to have a big heart, the ability to listen, to manage negative feelings, and to have courage and patience. In addition, it is critical that the coaches have self-confidence in the process and in their abilities to use the various tools, and to transfer their knowledge to the school team. It is a tough job – we are required to use both our mind and our hearts, in a project where we are all volunteers. We will be successful

when the high school team does not need our support any more – and we estimate that this might happen in 1.5 - 2 years in each school where we are present. Obviously, we need a strong partnership with the business community and the authorities in order to be able to roll out the project.

***LIM News: People from all over the world will be reading this interview. They will get inspired, and perhaps motivated to participate in something similar. What advice do you have for them?***

**SDC:** If your dream is generous enough and you like to share it with others, then you will find the right people to join you in your adventure. Give your dream a voice, then plant it and allow it time to grow – it's like taking care of a seed. Also, it is not so much about doing. In our project, it is more about being present and supportive. Often, we must refrain from giving advice and from taking the actions ourselves. As I said, our role is to support the teachers, the children and the parents to make progress; the steps they take may seem small for some, but they are huge for them. This is why I'm talking so much about patience.

***LIM News: Where can we find out more about this project?***

**SDC:** Our website is [www.zburd.ro](http://www.zburd.ro) and I hope that soon it will be available in English as well.

For our Facebook page click: [here](#). Also, I would gladly answer any questions. My e-mail address is: [simona@aroi.ro](mailto:simona@aroi.ro).

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