

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS APPLIED TO EDUCATIONAL POLICIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE CONTEXT OF ALIGNMENT WITH EUROPEAN UNION STANDARDS

Liudmila CUROȘ, PhD Candidate, Moldova State University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3668-047X>

Professor of Informatics and Information Technologies, Higher Didactic Degree

Alexei Mateevici College, Chișinău

Abstract. The transformations of the educational system of the Republic of Moldova are largely determined by the pace of European integration processes and by the alignment with educational policies promoted at the level of the European Union. Adaptation to European values—such as equity, inclusion, digitalization, quality, and efficiency—requires not only institutional reforms, but also a profound understanding of the way in which these policies are designed, implemented, and perceived at the national level. The research involves the use of qualitative methods that may be applied in the analysis of the evolution of the educational system of the Republic of Moldova. Alongside quantitative methods, the qualitative methods examined contribute to the construction of a dynamic, statistical, and interpretative framework capable of describing the rapid alignment with the educational policies of the European Union.

Keywords: educational policies, qualitative research, Europeanization, adaptation, Republic of Moldova, educational reforms, research methods.

METODE DE CERCETARE CALITATIVĂ A POLITICILOR EDUCAȚIONALE DIN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA ÎN CONTEXTUL ADAPTĂRII LA STANDARDELE UNIUNII EUROPENE

Rezumat. Transformările sistemului educațional din Republica Moldova este determinat în mare măsură de viteza proceselor de integrare europeană și de racolarea la politicile educaționale promovate la nivelul Uniunii Europene. Adaptarea la valorile europene – precum echitatea, incluziunea, digitalizarea, calitatea și eficiența – presupune nu doar reforme instituționale, ci și o înțelegere profundă a modului în care aceste politici sunt concepute, implementate și percepute la nivel național. Cercetarea presupune utilizarea metodelor calitative ce pot fi utilizate în analiza evoluției sistemului educațional din Republica Moldova. Metodele analizate pe lângă metodele cantitative configurează într-un cadru dinamic, statistic și interpretativ pot descrie alinierea rapidă la politicile educaționale ale Uniunii Europene.

Cuvinte-cheie: politici educaționale, cercetare calitativă, europenizare, adaptare, Republica Moldova, reforme educaționale, metode de cercetare.

Introduction

Within the methodology of scientific research, the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods represents a fundamental reference point for selecting an appropriate research design. These two paradigms reflect different epistemological perspectives: one oriented toward measurement and generalization, and the other toward interpretation and contextual understanding. However, in broad terms, they are not in a relationship of opposition, but rather one of methodological complementarity. The use of

mixed methodological approaches is therefore recommended, as it allows the rigor of measurement to be correlated with the depth of interpretative analysis, thus ensuring an integrated and comprehensive understanding of educational phenomena.

As a rule, quantitative research is grounded in the positivist paradigm and has as its main objective the testing of hypotheses and the identification of causal relationships between variables, using standardized instruments and statistical analyses in order to produce generalizable results. Qualitative research, however, is situated within the interpretative paradigm and aims to explore and understand the meanings and experiences of social actors. It is conducted in natural settings and places emphasis on context and meaning.

In this context, the qualitative investigation of the obtained results becomes essential, as it provides appropriate tools for exploring the complexity of educational phenomena and for interpreting social, cultural, and institutional dynamics.

Methods and Materials Used

This article analyses the relevance and applicability of qualitative research methods in the study of educational policies in the Republic of Moldova, in the context of the Europeanization process and alignment with European Union standards.

Qualitative methods represent a set of scientific approaches aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of educational phenomena, institutional contexts, and reform processes through the analysis of the experiences, perceptions, and practices of the actors involved in the development and implementation of educational policies. In the context of the Republic of Moldova, these methods are particularly relevant for investigating the process of harmonizing the national educational system with European educational standards and policies. They allow for an in-depth examination of reform processes, of the relationship between European policies and national realities, as well as of their impact on educational actors and educational institutions. The present article highlights two main methods - documentary analysis and the semi-structured interview - as well as their role in achieving a profound understanding of educational reforms, supported by concrete applied examples.

Documentary analysis constitutes one of the most important qualitative methods used in the study of educational policies. It involves the examination of normative acts, educational strategies, institutional reports, and relevant European documents in order to identify the convergences between the legislative framework of the Republic of Moldova and the European *acquis communautaire*. The use of this method allows for the identification of the main directions of the Europeanization of education, the analysis of legislative compatibility, as well as the highlighting of European principles regarding quality, inclusion, and the digitalization of education. As a result, the article will present a

taxonomy of educational policies in the Republic of Moldova in relation to those of the European Union, as well as an analysis of the publicly declared positions of political decision-makers in the Republic of Moldova.

The semi-structured interview is used to collect data on the perceptions and experiences of the actors involved in the process of educational reform, such as political decision-makers, school managers, teachers, education experts, and representatives of international organizations. Through this method, it is possible to analyse the level of implementation of European policies, the difficulties of legislative harmonization, perceptions regarding the effectiveness of reforms, as well as the impact of digitalization and educational inclusion. The advantage of this method lies in its flexibility, the use of various techniques, and the possibility of obtaining detailed descriptive and interpretative data. In this article, as instruments of qualitative analysis, the questionnaire and the in-depth individual interview will be described, the results of which have enabled the analysis of the level of implementation of the competence-based curriculum, the degree of digitalization of the educational process, and the application of quality assurance standards.

Results and Discussion

Qualitative research is oriented toward the exploration and interpretation of the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of the actors involved in the educational process, constituting an appropriate methodological framework for analysing educational policies from a contextualized and comprehensive perspective. In this regard, the qualitative approach facilitates the investigation of:

- the processes of policy development and implementation;
- the dynamics of interactions among educational actors: decision-makers, teachers, students, and the community;
- the influence of contextual factors on reforms;
- the degree of alignment with European standards and practices.

John W. Creswell emphasizes that qualitative research “focuses on exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” [1], highlighting its inductive and flexible character. Similarly, Sharan B. Merriam defines this type of research as “a process of understanding constructed on the basis of participants’ perspectives and the context in which they act” [10].

Furthermore, Elena Joița underlines that the qualitative approach “allows for the identification of the deeper dimensions of the educational process through the analysis of the experiences and interactions among participants” [8]. In the same vein, Constantin Cucoș emphasizes that educational research should make use of interpretative methods that “provide the possibility of a nuanced understanding of educational phenomena, beyond the mere quantification of data” [2].

In what follows, the two qualitative research methods will be presented briefly, together with real examples used in the analysis of educational policies in the Republic of Moldova regarding their adaptation to the European legal framework, within the research topic entitled “Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of the Adaptation of Educational Policies in the Republic of Moldova to the European Legal Framework.”

Documentary analysis also represents a qualitative method that involves the systematic examination of official documents, such as educational strategies, laws, public policies, evaluation reports, and relevant European documents, including competence frameworks and recommendations of the Council of the European Union. The main purpose of this method is to identify convergences between national and European policies, to analyse political discourse and strategic priorities, and to assess the degree of alignment with EU standards. In this context, the European Union recognizes the strategic importance of the digitalization of education for economic growth, competitiveness, and social cohesion. In this regard, a series of policies and initiatives have been developed, or are currently undergoing extended implementation, with the aim of supporting Member States in the digital transformation of their educational systems, including the Republic of Moldova. The Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027 establishes a common strategic framework for the digitalization of education in the European Union, with an emphasis on the development of digital competences, the effective use of digital technologies in teaching and learning, and the provision of equitable and inclusive access to digital education. [6].

A concrete example is the development of a taxonomy of educational policies, which represents an innovative conceptual and applied instrument, as it facilitates the structured comparison of European and national educational policies; supports the identification of areas of convergence and divergence between the European regulatory and action framework and that of the Republic of Moldova; provides a methodological basis for analysing the adaptability and transferability of policies in the national context; and supports the substantiation of educational policy decisions based on evidence and European best practices. The developed taxonomy is structured according to four fundamental criteria, each reflecting an essential dimension of educational policies, in accordance with the following basic aspects:

1. Fundamental objective – distinguishing between normative, strategic, and operational policies;
2. Level of application – ranging from macro-level policies at the European level, to meso-level policies at the national level, and micro-level policies at the institutional level;
3. Field of intervention – covering key areas such as inclusion, digitalization, competence development, early education, etc.;

4. Instruments used – including legal, financial, and monitoring instruments, as well as “soft law” guidelines / non-binding legislation [3].

Both the European Union and the Republic of Moldova promote transformative educational reforms centred on four strategic pillars: educational inclusion, quality assurance, the digitalization of the teaching and learning process, and equity in access to education. In this context, it is necessary to formulate an innovative taxonomy of educational policies that reflects the convergences and differences between the strategic directions promoted at the European level and those implemented in the Republic of Moldova. This taxonomy proposes a multidimensional classification structured according to criteria such as: the fundamental purpose of policies - normative, strategic, and operational; the level of application - macro, meso, and micro; the field of intervention - inclusion, digitalization, etc.; and the typology of instruments used — legal, financial, and evaluation instruments [3].

The taxonomy is presented in the article “*Taxonomy of Educational Policies in the Republic of Moldova versus the European Union: Challenges and Standardization Needs*”, published in Didactica Pro... Journal, Journal of Educational Theory and Practice, 2025, no. 5 (153), pp. 12–16.

In this line of reasoning, the analysis of the publicly declared views of certain political decision-makers in the Republic of Moldova is also considered a qualitative research method. The public discourses of political decision-makers in the Republic of Moldova largely reflect the strategic orientation toward European integration and the modernization of the educational system.

- C. Gh., Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration of the Republic of Moldova: “Together with state institutions, with the support of partners and the involvement of civil society, we have managed, in just one year, to take concrete steps on the path toward the European Union. We are approaching the completion of the process of analysing national legislation in relation to European legislation, we have a National Accession Programme, and we are ready to move to the next level in the accession negotiation process. According to the Report presented today, significant progress has been recorded in most areas related to combating electoral corruption and promoting fundamental human rights.” [9].

- C. N., Programme Manager, Embassy of Sweden in the Republic of Moldova: “Today’s event demonstrates the way in which you participate in and guide the development of education and of the educational process in general. The development of teaching and learning methods does not represent merely an evolution of current education, but also entails numerous opportunities for social development as a whole. This means that young people acquire the power to influence the future, which implies better-paid jobs and the creation of the society we all aspire to. Through the EU4Moldova: Startup City Cahul

project, Sweden, in partnership with the European Union, is funding this initiative, and we are extremely proud to be able to contribute to the development of digital solutions and innovative teaching methods in schools. The use of technologies in the educational process provides flexibility and new perspectives, which we need both now and in the future” [4].

- A. C., State Secretary, Ministry of Education and Research: “The effective implementation of digital technologies to ensure the quality and sustainability of education is one of the primary objectives of the Ministry of Education and Research. At present, in the digital era, didactics is being reinvented, a paradigm shift is taking place, and modern technologies are being increasingly reintegrated into the educational process. We are aware that the future belongs to technologies, including in the field of education. Therefore, in collaboration with the National Association of ICT Companies and other partners, over the last five years, several steps have been undertaken in the field of education to implement technology in education, to increase the quality of the educational act and its relevance to the labour market, as well as to ensure equitable access to education” [4].

- G. R., State Secretary General of the Ministry of Education and Research: “Creating synergies between research, innovative technologies, the educational system, and the professional training system for specialists is one of the priorities of the Ministry of Education and Research. I am pleased that, through the platform we are launching today, we will be able to build these connections and contexts for the application of innovations and research results.” [7].

- D. P., Minister of Education and Research, at the “Moldovan Students United” Forum: “We place strong emphasis on the process of modernizing universities. We aim to provide education of the highest quality in the Republic of Moldova, comparable to the opportunities offered by countries in the region—and I believe we are succeeding in doing so. Over the last four years, we have invested almost 500 million lei in the modernization of universities, and these changes are already visible: several laboratories, study rooms, learning spaces, and other facilities have been inaugurated so that young people may benefit from all the necessary conditions for study” [5].

Thus, a consensus emerges that education represents a priority area; however, a closer analysis of these visions highlights both their convergence with European policies and the limits of their applicability in the national context. A complex picture is outlined: on the one hand, there is a strong political will to align with European standards, while on the other hand, the need to strengthen internal capacities and to involve all social actors becomes evident in order for these reforms to be sustainable and effective. The discourses indicate that the modernization of education is not merely a technical matter, but rather a process of structural transformation that requires legislative coherence, substantial investment, and the integration of innovative technologies into educational practice. At the same time, the involvement of external partners, such as EU Member States, confirms that

the adaptation of educational policies in the Republic of Moldova is an integral part of a broader process of Europeanization and institutional democratization.

The semi-structured interview was used for the systematic collection of primary data from a relevant sample of respondents, through a structured investigative instrument. In the analysed research, questionnaire-based inquiry was employed, representing a research technique that may have both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. This instrument enables the identification of the opinions, perceptions, and experiences of educational actors regarding public policies, providing relevant data for the analysis of the investigated phenomena. In the study of educational policies, *questionnaire-based inquiry* facilitates the identification of the level of receptiveness to reforms, the highlighting of implementation difficulties, and the formulation of scientifically grounded conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the promoted measures.

The *questionnaire* entitled “*The Efficiency of the Education System of the Republic of Moldova in Relation to Current Educational Policies*” was applied, based on the analysis of the research hypothesis, namely the extent to which the quality of the normative framework and educational policies in the Republic of Moldova, as well as compliance with their provisions, ensure the effectiveness of the education system reform and the subsequent integration of young people into society. The applied instrument consisted of 17 closed and open-ended questions, including multiple-choice items, concerning the efficiency of the education system of the Republic of Moldova at different levels of education. The research sample included 190 managerial staff members and teaching staff from general education, vocational education and training, and higher education.

The qualitative responses related to the question *concerning the difficulties perceived by the respondents, which the educational system of the Republic of Moldova is currently facing*, are presented below. Based on these responses, the main challenges of the Moldovan education system, as identified by managerial and teaching staff, can be inferred. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Difficulties within the Education System as Perceived by the Respondents

Category	Content
Policy inconsistencies	● Constant changes. There is no stability. ● There is insufficient communication between relevant state institutions and teaching staff. ● Poor implementation of educational policies aligned with labour market requirements.
Curriculum	● The curriculum plan needs to be improved, so that students study what is necessary for them. ● The content of the programmes is overloaded with topics lacking practical applicability. ● Outdated study programmes that are not aligned with young people’s needs. ● Teaching support materials are not sufficiently updated in relation to the curricular area. ● Teachers’ opinions are not taken into consideration in curriculum development. ● Lack of effective correlations between economic agents and educational institutions.

	● Students' low interest in learning and the lack of strategies for monitoring their professional pathway.
Human resources and remuneration	● Lack of competent teaching staff. ● Low salaries, reduced motivation, and subjectively assessed performance coefficient. ● Lack of hours within the teaching workload allocated for methodological activity. ● High proportion of elderly teaching staff. ● Insufficient training of young specialists in pedagogy. ● Professional mistrust and underappreciation of teaching staff. ● Shortage of teaching staff; school dropout; weak school–family cooperation.
Infrastructure and logistics	● Poor working conditions: teaching materials, infrastructure, and an overloaded schedule. ● Lack or inadequacy of the material resources base. ● Physical, psycho-emotional, and health-related safety of students. ● The phenomenon of migration, the decrease in the number of students, and school dropout. ● Bureaucratization of management systems.

I would also like to mention the question: *“What mechanisms do you use to increase the involvement of society, the community, and the family in solving education-related problems, while ensuring a high level of civic activism and a positive perception of education?”* Thus, the respondents proposed instruments derived from their professional experience, formulated largely in terms of collaboration, in various forms, such as: involving the family in solving education-related problems; organizing thematic meetings and individual discussions; ensuring communication and information-sharing; holding meetings with parents and various educational agents; and organizing activities on different topics in order to involve members of the community, among others.

Table 2. Proposed measures to address the teaching staff shortage and strengthen teacher motivation

Criteria	Examples of Identified Practices and Opinions
Professional development and continuing training	- Supporting young specialists in obtaining teaching degrees/certification levels; - Practising mentoring and periodic monitoring; - Translating continuing professional development policies into practice; - Retraining teaching staff; - Participation in academic mobility programmes with scholarships in the European Union.
Organizational measures and institutional climate	- Creating a favourable climate based on collaboration and methodological support; - Prompt managerial responses to complaints and notifications; - Efficient distribution of tasks and coordination of activities; - Establishing a supportive climate and promoting well-being; - Involvement in team-building activities and strengthening internal organization.
Staff recruitment and retention	- Recruitment through competitive selection; - Attracting professionals from the economic sector to conduct practical lessons and internships; - Attracting staff from other institutions, especially in urban areas, by offering professional development and project opportunities; - Involving graduates for short periods as teachers; - Using social networks for promotion and recruitment.

Criticism and lack of effectiveness of the applied methods	- Existing teaching staff are assigned a higher teaching workload; - Lack of effective methods; promotion based on favouritism/nepotism; - Promotion of poorly trained staff; - Lack of students enrolled in key specializations in higher education; - Lack of real solutions for disadvantaged areas and subject fields.
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The analysis of the results reflected in the questionnaire enabled us to obtain a valuable overview of the position of teaching and managerial staff in relation to the efficiency of the educational system. A number of premises have been improved; however, the process of optimizing the educational process must be continued, an aspect also emphasized by the country's European path. Nevertheless, it can be observed that there are several aspects—such as the recognition of diplomas, compliance with the provisions of learner-centred education, the encouragement of academic mobility, and the involvement of young people in the decision-making process at the institutional level—that require improvement, first at the normative level of educational policy and subsequently at the level of practical action.

Another instrument used was the *in-depth individual interview*, employed with the aim of integrating an empirical perspective on the way in which educational policies are designed, interpreted, and implemented by actors with decision-making authority. Thus, it was selected as the main qualitative research instrument, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of the perceptions, representations, justifications, and strategies of decision-makers, aspects that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods or documentary analysis. The sample consisted of eight experts relevant to the structure of the education system and to the policy development–implementation chain, representing key areas such as academic research, educational project management, educational policy consultancy, and the coordination of curricular and institutional modernization initiatives. The in-depth interview made it possible to formulate a comprehensive image of the internal logic guiding the decision-making process, as well as of the degree of institutional receptiveness to reforms oriented toward European convergence. The analysis below synthesizes the experts' responses, outlining a shared vision regarding the need for an urgent, coherent, and systemic reform, adapted to the specific characteristics of education in the Republic of Moldova, while being oriented toward contemporary European standards and practices.

Taking into account the valuable expertise of the interviewees, we considered it appropriate to ask the following question: *What policy measures should be implemented in order to integrate digital technologies more effectively into the learning process?* In this regard, a series of measures were outlined along the same main directions, with a particular emphasis on digitalization, as follows:

1. Equitable technological provision as a basic condition. The need for basic ICT equipment — computers, tablets, projectors, and a stable Wi-Fi network — was constantly emphasized. Particular attention was given to ensuring coverage for all institutions,

including those in rural and disadvantaged areas. This also involves analysing the level of IT equipment provision at the national level and correlating it with school performance and digital inclusion.

2. *Continuous digital professional training for teaching staff.* The lack of digital competences remains a significant barrier. There is a need for training courses adapted to the real needs of teachers, focused not only on theory but also on applied practice. It is also recommended to stimulate teachers with a high level of digital competence through financial, professional, and symbolic incentives. In this context, it is necessary to study the effectiveness of current digital training programmes and to propose a national framework for certifying teachers' digital competences.

3. *Extended access for all educational actors: students, teachers, and parents.* The inclusion of students and parents in the process of digital literacy development is necessary. Emphasis should be placed on developing basic digital competences among the entire educational community. Participatory models of digital training should be developed, including parents as active participants, in order to prevent educational exclusion in vulnerable environments.

4. *Digital educational resources adapted to the curriculum.* Hardware provision alone is not sufficient; coherent and relevant digital educational content is also required, including digital textbooks, interactive educational platforms, and resources adapted to each subject area. It is necessary to analyse the degree of use of digital educational resources in schools and to propose a national model for the development of digital content adapted to the curriculum.

5. *Encouraging participation in European projects, such as Erasmus+ and digitalization initiatives.* The participation of institutions and teaching staff in European projects is perceived as a genuine driver of innovation and digitalization. Such participation needs to be supported through national policies and local incentives. At the same time, the impact of participation in European projects on the digital transformation of schools should be evaluated.

Among the most frequently mentioned problems are the shortage of qualified teaching staff, staff turnover, the lack of genuine motivation - both financial and symbolic - as well as the social devaluation of the teaching profession. In this context, current educational policies do not always manage to provide sustainable solutions, while recent reforms, often rushed and insufficiently grounded in impact analyses, aggravate structural imbalances. The integration of digital technologies into the learning process represents an essential direction for the modernization of education. However, the lack of ICT equipment, the insufficiency of adapted digital content, and the lack of genuine teacher training hinder progress. Actors within the system highlight the need for a coherent national strategy on digital education, supported by funding, continuous professional development,

and European partnerships. Another important dimension emphasized by the respondents is the need to align education with labour market requirements. A consensus emerges regarding the importance of developing transversal competences - communication, digital skills, foreign languages, entrepreneurship, and critical thinking - as well as early career guidance and practical training. The implementation of policies that connect general education with dual education, vocational training, and the economic sector is therefore recommended.

Conclusion

The analysis highlights the relevance of qualitative research as an essential methodological approach in the study of educational policies in the Republic of Moldova, particularly in the context of Europeanization and alignment with European Union standards. The integrated use of qualitative methods, such as documentary analysis and the semi-structured interview, makes it possible to capture the complex relationship between the normative framework, institutional practices, and educational transformation processes.

Although the application of qualitative methods is limited by restricted access to relevant data and institutional actors, the subjectivity of interpretation, insufficient research resources, and the need to strengthen researchers' methodological competences, these methods remain indispensable for understanding educational reforms in depth. They provide a contextualized perspective on the interaction between European requirements and national specificities, thereby supporting the development of coherent, sustainable, and evidence-based educational policies with a direct impact on the quality and relevance of the education system in the Republic of Moldova.

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Email: cpam.curosliudmila@gmail.com