THE CHALLENGE OF HUMAN BEINGS` EDUCATION IN THE NEW MILLENIUM

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Abstract:_The paper represents the result of lengthy research and reflections on the thorny and controversial curriculum issues. The necessity of considering the idea of curricular reforms as a core issue of the educational policy in an era of changes is the first assertion of the paper. This should be based on the acceptance of the specific challenges posed by the contemporary world nowadays, when a new society requires a different kind of man than that of the previous millennium. Then, key aspects of curriculum theory are summarized continuing the issues already approached in previous publications. Curriculum and its analysis plans, curriculum hypostases, twin concepts in curriculum can be specified. The distinction between curricular design and implementation of curriculum, the different products of each sequences of this continuum process are highlighted. The involvement and the hypostases of evaluation in various points in the process of planning, implementing, and curriculum development are also analyzed. Terminological inaccuracies and controversy are presented. The paper tries to give arguments for idea of inconsistency of these controversies.The final of the paper presents considerations about the need for a unified, logic, consistent and coherent curriculum reform everywhere in the world in order to answer the challenges of the new millennium for the educational field.The whole paper intends to be a challenge to reflection on curriculum issues, a field still unknown in its deep meanings and under an incredible dynamic but probably too much involved into endless and sterile debates. All these aspects are fundamentals for the idea of the new challenge of human's education._

Key words:_curriculum, learning situation, learning opportunity, learning activity, learning experiences, curriculum reform, contradictions in curriculum theory._

1. A new world asking a new human being and a reconsidered educational reform

The just started third millennium has brought to mankind a new world, a world of technology that advances with dizzying speed, a world of communication without almost no barrier, a world of movement from one meridian to another, a parallel to another without difficulty and the same great rapidity.

This world in motion asks that the man himself to fit it, to be able for a self adaptation to a unprecedented dynamics. The new world is a constant challenge; the Man, as a central element of this world, becomes a real challenge and to develop the human being's construction through education becomes a perpetual challenge, as well.

This is, no doubt, the main reason of the ongoing educational reforms that are observed all over the world. A significant number of diversified elements are to be found in these reforms. They are determined by the local cultural, geographical, social and political specificities. However, within this outstanding diversity of educational reforms, common elements can be found. The particular concern for developing national curricula is obvious; it is consistent both with the meanings of the theoretical aspects of international debates, unfortunately only partially shared, and with the national specificities.

2. Curriculumtheorya perpetualchallenge

An accepted definition of curriculum is necessary for carrying on further the analysis. An in depth study has been done, conducted over several years, focused on all four plans mentioned above, and making reference to several meridians of the world. It has led us to the conclusion that, in fact, profoundly, there is a unity of views on defining curriculum as essence. This happens despite the different perspectives of analysis, of how a wide variety of terms is found.

A metaphor built with the students helps to understand this essentially unity within diversity.

A huge diversity of fruits can be found on Earth; all have seeds even if they appear in so varied forms: single or multiple, tiny or huge, visible or hidden. But always the seeds are there.

*In the same manner, all approaches of curriculum as concept refer essentially at the idea of the **learning situation**. It is designed as such, based on a certain conceptual approach,(here being one of the involved differences). **The learning situation** is implemented as **learning activity**(in*

*formal or non-formal education), and it is lived or not as a **learning opportunity** by learners (depending on their effort and degree of awareness); the learning situation can simply exist, as incidental learning, in informal education. But, in any of these situations, the result is always a **unique learning experience** to each learner.*

It is true that these ideas are explicitly or implicitly presented but they exist, even if sometime the formulation is not very clear or the terms are used with different meanings.(Fig.2. Essentials of curriculum concept)

I intend to try a reiteration of defining curriculum, as I have suggested in previous publications.

The starting point is the idea that the learning situation is the key concept of curriculum, no matter if curriculum is seen as structure or from the perspective of its development and assessment.

Thus, the curriculum can be understood as *a set of more or less extensive learning situations designed specifically for formal and non-formal education and naturally existing in day to day life, that can be aware and voluntarily lived by those involved in the act of learning, becoming learning opportunities for them.* Whether they are turned into learning opportunities to learners or remain simple learning situations involving superficial participants, their products are represented by unique learning experiences of each learner.

A specific implementation process is the next step of a learning situation design. The implementation is done within learning activities where active or passive learners use them or not entirely, as learning opportunities. These learning activities mean not only the core structure of a learning situation put in practice, but they gather other aspects of the educational context: eg. didactic means, specific human relations, all focused on the necessity to resolve learning tasks.

Our pyramid approach of the cellular structure of curriculum - learning situation – can be considered as belonging to models that are concerned with a structural approach of curriculum.

A special concerned with curriculum development strategy may be found in our theoretical and practical activity. Twin concepts should be highlighted in curriculum analysis. Fig. 1 presents the relation between learning situation (a design plan for formal and nonformal education and incidental aspects in informal education) learning activities where learners involves themselves in their own manner, and the results of all these at students' level.
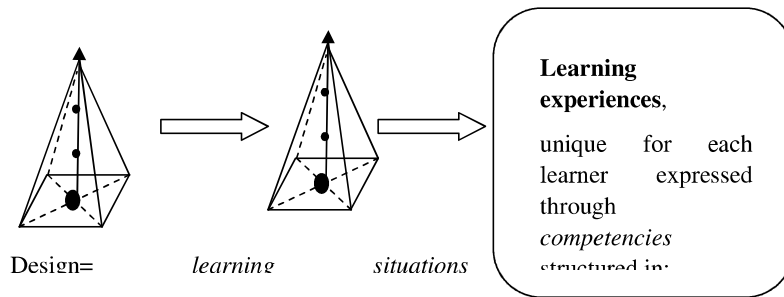
Fig. 1 Essentials of curriculum concept

Curriculum Theory speaks strongly about the structure, development and evaluation of curriculum, even if these issues are presented on a diversity of voices. Concepts have been defined, more or less differently, philosophies have developed, controversies were born, various models were built and have been criticized, all focused on curriculum complex issues. But, along all this time, generations of people were educated; they were involved in learning activities connected to diversified curricula based on different philosophies.

Ungureanu D. (1999: 16) points out the existence of four plans as benchmarks of the dynamics involved during construction, implementation and evaluation of curriculum. Going further with this interpretation we complete our previous approach (Niculescu R.M. 2010) with new considerations according to recent studies and reflections.

The four plans described by the quoted author are the following (Ungureanu D., 1999: 16): the first plan is *the basic theoretical philosophy* (*curriculum representation*) involving curriculum concept, structure, field, interpretations; the second plan refers to the *representation of action*; it represents the approach of curriculum design, when national (state or provincial curricula, as appropriate) curricula are developed; the third plan is the "*action itself, the implementation* of educational curricula in the field of each area of reference; the last plan, an opener to a new spiral of evolution, is that of the *assessment of the products* of curriculum representation, of representation of the action, and of the results of curriculum implementation ; the objects of assessment are the specific products of each plan. Thus evaluation reveals itself as a basis for the further development of the three planes, previously presented. *(*Fig. 2: Curriculum and its analysis plans).

Ungureanu D (1999) provides a definition of the curriculum, placing it in the intersection of the first three plans. The author graphically depicts all

144

intersections between plans, explaining each intersection area and highlighting its role in the overall functioning of the curriculum

Thus, the first zone of intersection between representation curriculum (theoretical stance) and curriculum action (practical stance) comprises that part of the theoretical approach that has practical purpose is "to be done, feasible" (Ungureanu D., 1999: 16). One finds here, in essence, the theoretical foundations of the educational process as it runs.

The second zone shows the theoretical foundations of the curriculum design. National curriculum, syllabi, textbooks, other support materials are not drawn at random, but based on a certain theoretical conception.

The third zone is one that provides the conjugation in harmony of design with the implementation. The educational process takes place in the context of a concrete reality. The process run is "loaded" by the influences of this reality, but not carried out at random; still it has as fundamentals a rigorous, responsible design. This design took into account the realities, at least at the level of probability.

The fourth zone is, as the author says, a "crossroad intersection"; here the theoretical foundation, meets representation of action and the action itself in an interesting inter-determination. In this area the author places the profound meaning of the concept of curriculum, understood as a "trinity: conceptual, prescriptive and active, all three being undissociated" (Ungureanu D., 1999: 17).
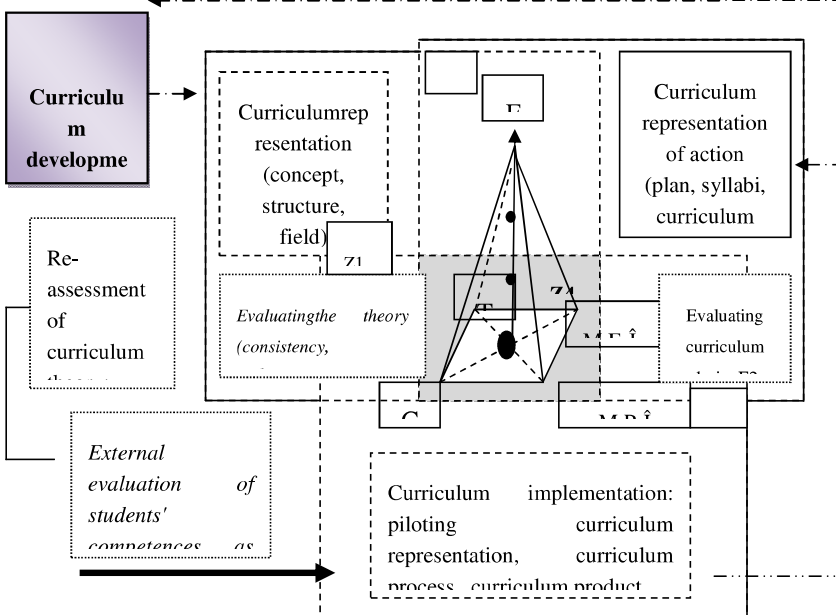

Fig. 2: Curriculum and its analysis plans

145

Considering the area of intersection, an area about what Ungureanu D. (1999) says it is the place of manifestation of the curriculum, involves, of course, explicit reference to formal curriculum and, possibly, to non-formal education. But the Man of the future is the product of all three types of education, alike. The possible negative effects of informal education, unfortunately too often encountered, can be limited only if the learning experiences as results of the learning activities implemented in formal or non-formal forms are represented by real and effective competencies of the learners. They must contain well-structured knowledge, efficient capacities, and positive attitudes, able to filter through their sieve the influences coming from informal channels.

It is important to emphasize that the secret of the curriculum effectiveness consists in the in the internal harmony of this intersection area. The semantic unity of the concepts defined by curriculum theory is an imperative; this unity must be a frame, the fundamentals of curriculum design (as representation of action), and the foundation of perceived curriculum by the leading actors of implementing curriculum – the educators. Without this harmony, the curriculum perceived by practitioners will be distorted, no matter how good the curriculum design is, and the effects of this distortion will be the most unexpected.

The possibility of taking the analysis further than Ungureanu did, towards a fifth plan is released from even the quoted author's presentation. This fifth plane is actually relative to all the other four: it is the plan of curriculum development with deep roots, firstly, in the evaluation plan, and secondly in all the previous ones.

The evaluation moments are important and the following presentation keeps the logical order of their occurrence

The first evaluative moment (E1) should be related to the coherence and consistency of curriculum theory, of the fundamentals that will underpin the curriculum design. This assessment will be reflected in a document called in Romania as frame of reference. Consistency, coherence and conceptual unity must be the fundamental characteristics of this document. It should reflect a curricular reform strategy with an unequivocal clarity, a strategy built on defined milestones, well drawn and distributed to serve later as valuable tactical benchmarks. It is essential that these attributes to be assessed by both the national curriculum designers and by practitioners, because each category requires a theoretical unequivocally foundation.

The second evaluative moment (E2) relates to products of curriculum design: National Curriculum, expressed by the general frame, syllabi, textbooks, and other support materials. Evaluation is done in the first instance by those who

146

make the decision on acceptance of documents at the official level. They should establish if: *the design had clarity, it took account of a complex and dynamic reality, took into account possible factors favorable and disruptive*, etc. But, those who are to implement the design documents do their evaluation, as well. Thus, the practice, action, implementation are what validate the National Curriculum as a whole and its components, understood as products of curricular design. Evaluation process goes further on the spiral of curriculum development.

An internal evaluation (E3) is carried out during and at the end of each sequence of curriculum implementation. It is related to the representation of action: How and with what quality was achieved the intended results? What were the factors that contributed successfully? What caused the failure? And so on.

Each school cycle will evaluate (somehow external) the previous one; finally the socio-professional life will evaluate the finished products of implementing a curricular design in a generation. The graduates' competences will be validated by the life itself (E3).

Evaluation in this last plan implicitly leads to the reconsideration and a re-evaluating process of the theoretical foundations (E4). Reconsidering the theoretical foundations will cause a new cycle of assessment and will influence the next stage of curricular design, and, thereby, of educational practice.

Literature and various debates at international conferences have involved much energy to elucidate the contradictions between the different models of curriculum, between various approaches focus either on competencies, either on objectives, student, or on activity and problem solving.

Emphasizing one or another of these perspectives caused different interpretations, different models. Our activity with students revealed an interesting and suggestive analogy. It expresses the source of the mentioned contradictions. Thus, the students revealed contradictions about a flower, if this item is analyzed from the perspective of a horticulturalist, a painter, a gardener, and a florist, a man who buys a flower as a gift or that of a person who receives the flower. The essence is the flower itself, which is unique, but seen through so different eyes as windows of different minds, appears probably in contradictory hypostases.

The literature shows a variety of models that address the issues of curriculum; they have appeared over a long period of time from the beginning of the last century until nowadays. Thus, one can mention an evolution from traditional models focused on content/ subjects towards student-centered models (J. Dewey, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel), built under the auspices of various philosophies, or models focused on students'

learning activities, as problem solving can be; it is about life problem (eg Herbert Spencer), community problems, issues of human activities, moral or philosophical issues etc.

Models focused on curriculum development have been also built . They are based on different theory of teaching and learning. Inductive models (H. Taba is the beginning of XIX century) and deductive (Saylor, Alexander and Ralph Lewis W. Taylor) are distinguished in literature.

Models concerned with evaluating curriculum are developed, as well. They are based on different paradigms (behavioral – eficientiste, humanistic, holistic, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed), and they try to detail and argue the role of assessment of products of curricular design and implementation.

Different perspectives of analyses of the same reality are obvious; this unique essential reality is represented by learning situations designed in the formal and non-formal education, and existing incidentally in life (with an informal educational influence).

The designed *learning situations* are implemented as learning activities within the context of institutionalized education (formal and informal). They have preliminary presumed results formulated as objectives, in terms of students' competencies, which can be achieved only through an active, conscious, and voluntary involvement of the learners. The quality of the expected competencies is determined by a significant number of factors and the context is one of them..

Not essential contradictions exist among these models. I have approach this idea in a previous paper (Niculescu R.M. 2015b). Only one issue is to be highlighted here. Curriculum as set of learning situations, must be concerned about the development of requested students' competencies for a specific historical moment. These competencies are encapsulated in students' learning experiences as results of lived learning situations. The quality of the accomplished competencies depends on the degree of awareness and willingness of students' involvement. In other words the degree of using a learning situation as a learning opportunity no matter in what educational context (formal, non-formal or informal) and the capacity of learners to put together harmoniously all their learning experiences are conditions of the quality of education, expressed by the curriculum products: students' competencies.   It depends on their active involvement. Consequently curriculum focused on competencies needs the accomplishment of objectives, for a each specific content unit, requests activism and willingness, it happens in praxis and it represents an ongoing process. Thus, different models of interpretation are put together by the complexity of educational process.

3. Curriculum reform as consistent, coherent and effective approach

Questions and answers were highlighted in our previous publications about how curricular reform should go according to a clear and stabile strategy, through some defined steps. A special attention has been accorded to the effective human resource management in the context. (Niculescu R.M, Norel, M. 2013). A personal opinion on the need for a genuine unit of curriculum management reform has been stressed.

The reasoning may go further, being focused, this time, on the product of curriculum design, the National Curriculum as official document. Our opinion is based on an in depth study of a consistent number of products of curriculum design worldwide. Only one issue is intended to be put into the context of this paper, as an essential request. Our study leads us to conclude that one of the fundamental requirements is that the official curricular document must be a unit well defined, like a block built on a strong foundation represented by early education and the preschool level (Fig.3). All the following floors representing the key-stages of studies must be built based on logic, harmony, and continuity. A horizontal harmony in each floor should be considered connected to the vertical continuity and fluency from one floor to another. Each curricular area, discipline or other content structures are to be designed so that a vertical cut have to retrieve these attributes: fluency, consistency, and internal logic. Also a horizontal cut must reveal harmony between curricular areas, mutual support, logic,   all providing a real possibilities for the mutual support in teaching, assessing, and, obviously, learning process.
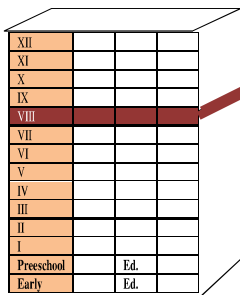

Fig. 3 Curriculum design a harmony block

There are enough good examples worldwide of consistent, coherent curricula, sometimes well enough implemented in order to become effective too.

These examples should be studied, rationally considered and analyzed in their own context, and used as good practices to inspire a new approach somewhere abroad, but always taking into account the context, the culture, the psycho-social and economic specific of the place where the model is to be source of inspiration. To adapt should be the core idea not to adopt a model. This is one of the core conditions of an effective curriculum reform lucidly designed, implemented and evaluated within a peculiar educational system.

The only hope to have a Human able to contribute effectively to the Earth development is to respect by understanding these conditions.

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