HOW TO AVOID"THE MERMAIDS" IN EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The paper belongs to the same set of reflections about curriculum. The pages start with some ideas about the core questions about the place and the role of the education in this new millennium, old questions but with new answers nowadays. They continue with another facet of the reflection opened and continued in other papers about the ambiguities and false and real controversy exiting in Curriculum Theory. The genuine need of convergence in this field is another part of the paper. The core issue presented is represented by one aspect of this needed convergence: that between the philosophy of curriculum focused on students' competencies and the lesson types; highlighting the obsolete wording of these types is the starting point for some explanations about a new suggested terminology.*

Key words: *curriculum, competence, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, learning situation, learning activity, learning opportunity, learning activity, lesson types*

1. Strong lines of new conceptions in curriculum

1.1. Introductory considerations

The new trends in education seem to be a kind of fashion. Each century, each decade of a century used to have their" *new trends*".

The actual time of the third millennium came with some core concepts and connected philosophies with genuine or more often false contradiction among them.

Curriculum with its new philosophy based on focusing the formal education on competencies represents a thorny field. But, step by step, in spite of differences more in words/ terms than in essence, the things seem to go towards a quasi unity. Unfortunately, the literature and the methodological approaches still keep a strange agglutination of traditional views with modern ones. This is what can be called as *mermaids* in education.

Each learner of this century wants, for his/her own training and development, a continuous and consistent process of education, built as a series of *learning situations* out of which the learner can achieve *learning experiences*, that encapsulating a high level of desirable competencies for this new historical time.

Education, as an *informal* one, has been done from the beginning of the humans' history. *Nonformal* and, then, *formal* ways of education can be detected along the centuries as long as the need of education became more and more sophisticated. This genuine need for education had different meanings during the history. The *permanence of education* is a truth of *phylogenetic* perspective.

The education also has always been and remains a necessity in *ontogenetic* plan, understood as *permanent education or lifelong learning*.

A number of questions became more and more obvious, with specific roots in different historical moments. There are the questions about *who needs education, where this need comes from, and why this need is important*? The given answers along the history have been different, or with shades of difference; they were in accordance with the social, political and economic context, and accompanied by the level of cultural development of each moment. The truth is that anyone (and anytime) needs education, because education is the foundation of even genesis of human personality. Education is the coordinating and integrating factor of the other two ones, which exert influence on personality development: heredity and environment.

"How long throughout his life does a human being need education?" It is a question that gets a much different answer in the current millennium than during the previous centuries. The need for lifelong learning throughout the ontogenetic trajectory is no longer a novelty, and it has exceeded by far even the initial perception of " being in fashion". Furthermore, the research surveys in the latest decades have brought stronger and stronger arguments concerning the need to lower the starting point of lifelong learning, from birth moment back to that of procreation. Thus, prenatal education is increasingly based on arguments and has more credible supporters.

All these issues met some controversial answers in time, with some consensus eventually. However, nowadays there are some other questions without answers based on a common philosophy:
o **What** *does a human being need to learn,* **nowadays***?*
o **How** *must he/she learn, or how should the act of learning be led?*
o **What means** *should be used in education?*
o **What** *would be the* **optimal hierarchy of educational effects** *in general, for each level of age, etc.?*

o ***What kind of methodology*** *should be used to assess the effects of education? etc.*

These questions are specific for the formal education. A considerable number and range of responses had been done; the role of the successive levels of the educational system has been highlighted. Barnett, R. (1997), for example, has realized a critical analysis of the Dearing Report, the document which highlights the role of higher education within a society of learning and knowledge. The mentioned work refers only to the level of higher education, but it should not be forgotten that this level is built on, and, thus, dependent on, everything that students have obtained during their previous education along schooling period.

Unfortunately, even in this issue, a *mermaid* could be detected. It seems to be *politically correct* to appreciate, in words, each level of education but, on the other side, professionals from upper levels still consider themselves as superior comparing to their colleagues teaching on previous educational levels. A proof for this idea (at least in our educational system) is representing by the philosophy about the necessary level of training for preschool and primary teachers compared to the manner of training of teachers for junior and high secondary schools. Until the years 90' of the previous century, a high-school level training, within a pedagogic high-school, was considered enough for the first category, while the second category was trained on the university level. Since a last new law of education was implemented, the gap was moved at two different levels of tertiary education: the first category, teachers for pre-school and primary schools are to be trained through license studies; the second category is to be prepared by a master program (didactic master), one still unclear defined.

The law also highlights the necessity of early education (from birth to pre-school) but the professionals for this level are considered as enough trained within a post-high-school course. A question arises in my mind; *why*, when it is about education, a toddler can be educated by someone with a short training, as long as, when it is about the health field, nobody would accept to go with a sick toddler to a nurse, instead to a pediatrician. This amalgam of *modern in words* and *obsolete in law and practice* is another *mermaid in education*

The educational systems of the third millennium became concerned in an explicit or implicit way that appropriate and efficient conditions must be offered to the students, from the point of view of determining a high quality development of a desirable personality for this new time. This personality must be able to cope with the extremely dynamic world in change, with the challenges of a planet with less and less defined boundaries between its traditional segments, a planet which, in these days of a 2017 year of the third

millennium, seems to be confronted with a real re-arrangement of the entire world. The children and young people of the Blue Planet must be shaped in such a way to stimulate maximally their potential; they must become actively engaged in their own training. The development of their competencies should not be just a nice purpose   written in curriculum design documents, or used in speeches of all kinds. (Niculescu, R.M. 2010:5). Genuine and adequate competencies must be genuine achievements.

1.2. Curriculum Theory – ambiguities, false and real controversy

The ambiguity of the specialty language spoken in Curriculum Theory is the source of a kind of obstacle in front of such an important goal. This ambiguity implies in a way a difference of meanings determined by the use of different languages. Sciences of education in general and theory of curriculum particularly seem to confront with an important number of conflicts of meanings. In reality, most often, behind of apparent differences of pedagogical meanings, it is about the different ways to express them by using terms in different languages.

Or, other times, it is about analyzes done from different perspectives to issues which are essentially the same. The vehement seclusion in these unique perspectives, the lack of flexibility can be causes of difficulties to overcome conflicts.

The educational reforms, all over the world, and particularly in Romania, should use a corpus of concepts sharing the same meanings from the decision-making level of the educational policy to implementation level on different grades. This should be put into a wider perspective, adequate to the globalization phenomenon which has its impact in education as well.

Reading the recent literature in the field, we are witnesses at a real "flow of words, long speeches and a lot of written documents coming from authorities who consider themselves experts in education. Unfortunately, the expertise is considered in terms of competence of decision-making given by status, not in terms of professional pedagogical competency. All these lead to a"pedagogical" context where the unity of concepts, the clarity of philosophy still is only a wish.

 "The planetary village" has created another important problem, generated by the free movement of ideas, not only the written word on paper but also electronically written one. The access to information is, undoubtedly, a huge positive potential but, like every medal, it has two sides. A series of confusions are generated with unexpected effects in the educational practice field, because of, on one hand, the superficial translations of texts from one language into others, and, on the other hand, the lack of unity in using terminology and the plurality of meanings given to the same word, the

imprecision of some concepts. And these are kept even in the official documents, in official curricula. (Niculescu, R.M. 2010:.5)

Thus, key concepts in educational reforms occur in specialty literature or in documents with targeting value for the educational reforms, as having either different significances, or used with wrong meanings. This does not represent a positive starting point for the approach represented by educational reforms, with unpredictable and perverse effects for the implementation of reforms. It is important to not forget that the educational reforms have huge importance for humanity. Examples of such concepts are: knowledge society, knowledge – understanding, curriculum, skills, goals, finalities, learning experiences, etc., and concepts involved in the specific fields of the ideal and real curriculum. Some aspects of this last area of ambiguities are the focus of the further presentation.

A number of questions arise; a number of clarifications are required.

The literature uses the term **knowledge** with the meaning given by Bloom as *memorized information*, but also as a phenomenon implying *wisdom, intelligence, understanding* and *prudence*, as well. That is why, excepting the restrictive meaning of memorized information, the wider concept of *knowledge* includes *understanding,* and it becomes obsolete to use the wording *knowledge and understanding*. Knowledge, in a wide sense, involves assimilated information, decoded with previous knowledge, and put into action by cognitive capacities. It means that the understood information has as effect or purpose to change and accommodate the structure of old knowledge, in order to prepare adequate answers to different specific tasks.

The need for the knowledge, seen as general term or phenomenon, to act for a better world put wisdom into action; the risks assessment and approaches designing (using knowledge as well), finding solutions with minimal risk, put prudence into equation; this involves an *attitude born out of knowledge*. (Niculescu, R.M. 2010:.18)

Thus, the three components of competence: knowledge, capacities (including the cognitive ones), and attitudes become obvious.
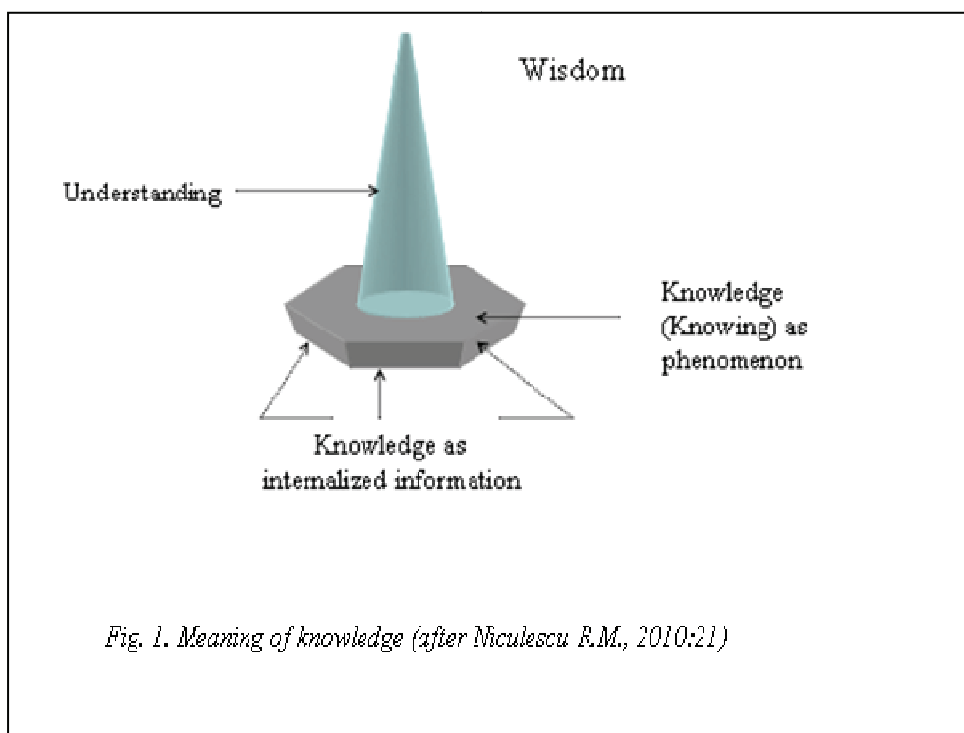
Fig. 1. Meaning of knowledge (after Niculescu R.M., 2010:21)

”Nowotny H. (2003) warns about the necessity of understanding correctly that "nobody has managed to preserve knowledge for long anywhere". We agree with Nowotny H. to the idea that knowledge and production of knowledge is a new area which should be reconsidered. In general, the great debates on this topic are focused on research field and they seem to be correct as long as the beginning of this millennium requires solving some problems with a high degree of complexity (Nicolescu, Greenwood, Davydd, Julie Klein, Plöger, Brenner, Voss, Debono, apud Nowotny, H. 2003).”

In the light of the issues previously presented, Nowotny’ ideas can be a foundation for the statement: ”*this new perspective should also be considered in the context of educational process*” (Niculescu, R. 2010:21). I want to go further and deeper inside of the educational process with the following analysis.

1.3. Curriculum theory -- an area with genuine convergence needs

The need of *competent personalities* is a normal request of the new society. But even the meaning of this competent personality has specificity nowadays and it is far different than what centuries before was requested as being *erudite*.

The school itself should change its philosophy, from the decision makers to the last teacher who implements a curriculum all over the world.

As long as everywhere the wind of reforms blows in education and the focus is strongly established on developing appropriate competencies of students and graduates of successive educational levels, the traditional way of thinking about the educational process and educational activities should be made in line with this new philosophy.

This paper intends to look attentively only at one aspect of the formal educational process: the **traditional types of lessons** and their correspondence with the so called *competences centered curriculum*.

The educator designs the *learning situations* in formal and non-formal education, and the life itself proposes learning situations in day to day life. The learning situations are put in practice as *learning activities*, because they turn from an ideal design into action. This action is lived more or less properly and effectively by the learners. They can use the learning activities, seen as practical facets of the designed learning situations, as learning *opportunities* to achieve competencies. The achieved *competencies* by learners represent their learning *experiences*. It is obvious here the ongoing process and the partnership educator – learner, each of them with specific responsibilities. The process starts from the educator, who designs the *learning situations*; these are put into practice by educator and students within *learning activities*. The learners use the learning activities in lesser or greater manner as *opportunities for learning*. Finally, the effects are registered on the learners' level as *competencies* encapsulated in their *learning experiences*.

The didactic activities in school are done as ***lessons*** and these lessons are conceived and realized in the context of so named ***different types***, *differentiated by the dominant goals and objectives of each lesson.*

The traditional pedagogy in Romania speaks about several types of lessons, usually using old concepts, difficult to put in English because an incompatibility of terms.

The four classic lesson types are the following:

▪ Lesson focused on devolution of knowledge (*transmitere de cunoştinte*), that became in time a lesson for *knowledge acquisition*;

▪ Lesson focused on *automated skills development (formare de priceperi şi deprinderi);* in Romanian the terms are old and with specific psychological connotations, while in English the current language uses as synonyms the terms of skills and competence;

▪ Lessons focused on *consolidation, systematization and review of knowledge and skills* (*recapitulare, consolidare şi sistematizare de cunoştinţe, priceperi şi deprinderi*)

▪ Lessons focused on *evaluation of knowledge and skills* (*evaluare de cunoştinţe, priceperi şi deprinderi).*

Essentially the types are correct but they do not fit to the philosophy and the language used by the curriculum focused on competencies.

A reconsideration of these types in order to connect the finalities (as expected outcomes or results) to the mentioned *competencies centered curriculum* seems to be necessary.

The learner's ***competencies*** are designed as products of the formal education approach; they are the finalities of this process (apud Demeuse, M., Strauven**,** Ch. (2006, 2013).

A normal approach appears to be that of establishing the lessons types according to these finalities (expected results).

Competence, as concept, has a considerable number of definitions and a lot of terms used in connection with it (Lawson, C., 1997). An interesting debate has the subject of competency/ competence structure. It is not the intention of this paper to approach in depth the thorny issues and debates connected to the terms, the meanings or the structure of competence.. Thus, only one definition is selected from the multitude of those existing in the literature:

". . . a competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual's knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating". (The definition and selection of key competencies. Executive summary , 2005: 4)
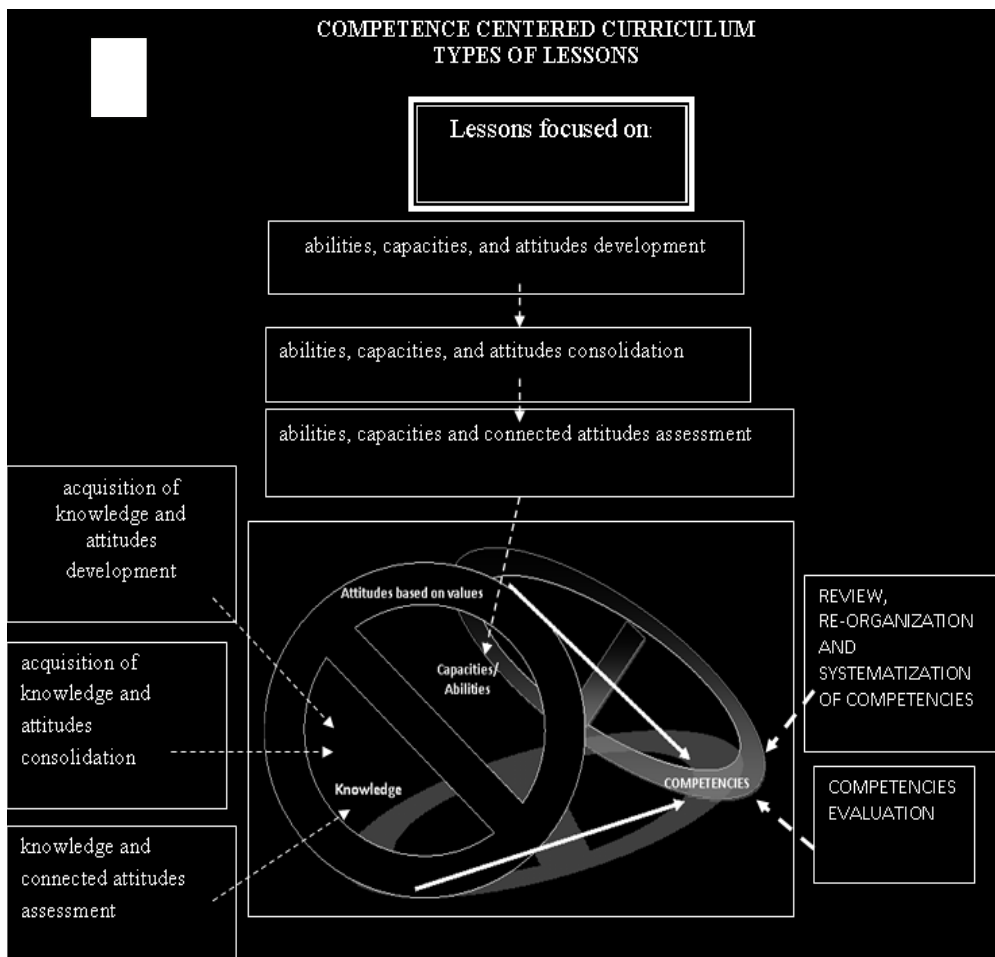
This way to define the competency implies *knowledge and skills* (sometime called capacities/ abilities) but seen as being involved in **solving tasks** together with connected *attitudes. Knowledge, capacities/abilities and attitudes* are the three more often specified components of a competence/ competency. The competency itself is seen as a structure resulting from the synergistic action of the three elements and functioning in a peculiar psycho-social context. This structure is activated with the concrete purpose of solving a task, of meeting a demand.

The learning activities in school are focused on the achievement of the structural elements of competencies, along a lengthy, coherent and consistent educational process. This means that ***knowledge, capacities/abilities and attitudes are gradually achieved, developed, integrated, re- structured and evaluated.***

The learning activities are implemented through the mentioned **lesson types**.

The following figure tries to express the relation between the development and the assessment of the elements of the structure of the competence on one side and the lesson types on the other side.

The figure encapsulates, in the middle, the structure of a competency (components) and suggests, by arrows, the synergy of its elements that determines complex competencies. The structural elements and the final results are connected to different types of lessons.

Competencies centered curriculum. Types of lessons

Thus:

1. *knowledge* as core (but nor unique, and not as a purpose in itself) is to be: **acquired, consolidated and assessed along successive types of lessons** (separately considered or mixed). They also involve connected *attitude*s to the knowledge process, which must be *developed, consolidated and assessed,* as well;

2. *capacities/ abilities* (often being labeled as *skills*) pass through the same process of **acquisition, consolidation and evaluation***,* together with the correlated *attitudes*;

3. as a common complex results (synergistic result of the three components) the **competencies** are **review, re-organized, and systematized** within a specific lesson type and their **evaluation** is the focus of another lesson type.

The differences between the traditional and the proposed approach of the lessons types are not deep, but they are significant because the new philosophy about curriculum put the knowledge in the right place, as core aspects of developing competencies, but not as unique aim of the educational process.

Unfortunately, in my opinion, the new approach of curriculum itself does not highlight enough the humanistic aspect of the education. The learner has not only a mind, but a soul as well, and the component *attitude is probably the engine of the quality of the resulted competencies along the educational process.*

These attitudes must become an aware purpose of the process, not only topics of lectures scheduled from time to time within the school activities. They must be attentively developed, continuously and formatively assessed, nuanced when necessary, especially during the adolescence time. This implies the necessity a new attitude from the educators' side; a new philosophy should be developed, which puts the student seen as a whole in the centre of the educational process, not as a *despotic king* but as an *aware partner* who is genuinely interested for the own development of his or her personality through education.

For doing this becomes strictly necessary to understand the education both as science and art, and the educator as a scientist and artist, as well.

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