

# MANIFESTATIONS OF THE NEW PARADIGM OF EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ROMANIAN EDUCATION REFORM

Liana TĂUȘAN, Ph.D  
Technical University of Cluj-Napoca  
lianatausan@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** *Among the lines taken into account in the reform of Romanian education, the reform of the curriculum is an essential segment and this is now a distinct theme in the sciences of education. The Curricular reform program represents a coherent approach to the educational national policy, designed and developed in line with current European trends and practices. The new approach to the National Curriculum has generated a different type of culture curriculum characterized by: centering the process of teaching on skills training objectives and skills; focusing on transforming the school teacher in a school by promoting student-centered interactive learning methods; cultivating students' creative skills and the creation of various learning situations; an inter and trans-disciplinary approach to school curriculum; the curriculum approach correlated with school performance and evaluation issues of initial and ongoing training of teachers. Following the major reform of education, adherence to the principles of the new educational paradigms – which appeared and were developed in answer to the need of adapting education to the challenges and changes of our contemporary world – is increasingly present in the educational process in Romania.*

**Keywords:** *education reform, curricular reform, constructivist paradigm, humanistic paradigm, postmodernist education*

## 1. Introduction

The evolution and development of society, of the contemporary world, depends on the way in which the educational system meets the socio-economic requirements, through their transformation into educational approaches, and the extent to which it produces competences and develops human resources, both from the perspective of professional formation and the perspective of the development of creative, self-formative abilities which

will allow the integration and continuous adaptation of the labor force to the scientific and technological evolution. The measure of a society's development can be rendered not only through economic indicators but also through those that refer to education, to its quality and to the way knowledge and learning are organized. The democratization of the Romanian education system, the improvement of the quality of education, the valorization of the social role of education, the development of Romanian cultural values, the promotion of Romanian cultural identity in world culture, the formation of active, responsible citizens, contributing to the development of a democratic society, are priority objectives of the Romanian education policy and these have been highlighted after 1990, being convergent with the objectives of the European dimension.

## **2. Current paradigms and orientations in education**

The third millennium education projects aim at transforming traditional educational practices to practices based on new principles specific to the contemporary education and pedagogy: global education, lifelong learning, inclusive education, education for all, equal opportunities, partnership in education. In-depth learning, based on action and empowerment of the learner, vocational skills, integration of application knowledge structures, interactive teaching, inter- and transdisciplinary curriculum are just some concepts and ideas on which modern pedagogy has been based. These have been generated by switching European societies towards globalization and the knowledge society, by the need for synchronization between society and the development of education, by the new assessment results in the education systems, by the need of education integration and globalization.

In a comprehensive book that examines and presents the results of recent assessments in education systems, V. Chiş (2005, p. 32) summarizes the following characteristics and future trends in education: focus on performance, organization according to goals and results ; deep intense learning, special accent on the process of learning and on learning skills, learning problem solving, critical thinking, monitoring performance, success, design and management in school-community partnership; study at any time and any place at the recipients' option, education centered on students/adults; rhythms and varied learning styles, personalized instructional and educational activities, adapting school to the student's characteristics, inclusive education, integrated education for all. The author classifies and describes two categories of modern educational systems: educational systems hierarchically organized, following the principles of the centralized management and those organized on the network model, based on the principle of autonomy. The differences between the two great categories can

be found in the management, curriculum policy, and they reflect the principles of the companies and communities the school serves.

As such, hierarchically organized systems are characterized by the following: the vertical placement of the elements (the vertical succession of educational cycles, from elementary education to higher education, with the segregation of the components – preschool, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education); overloading the school programs; the uniformity of entries and exits in the system; the obligation to study a common curriculum; the need to ‘adapt the pupil to the requirements of the school’ and a strongly centralized management. All these characteristics generate countless dysfunctions or blockages that manifest as: an increase in the rate of learning difficulties, a gap between the requirements and students’ learning abilities, an increase in the dropout rate due to the imposed standard requirements, the lack of options when it comes to alternative schools or educational methods, and the implementation of decisions taken without consideration for the reality of education. In contrast to these characteristics we find the particularities of the education systems organized on the network model: the development of the system on the horizontal (by multiplying the types of school at each level/cycle of education) and, consequently, diversifying the entries and exits in the system; diversifying the curriculum by supplementing the compulsory curriculum with the school-based curriculum; the paradigm of ‘adapting school to the learning possibilities of the students’, manifested through a variation of learning experiences with the purpose of conforming to the principles of ‘inclusive education’, ‘education for all’, ‘integrated education’; decentralized management, based on the principle of autonomy (L. Tăușan, 2016, pp. 35-38).

The paradigm of postmodernism in education, materialized in new perspectives and solutions in educational theory and practice, developed according to the line of continuity and restructuring of the paradigm of modernity, has been designed taking into account new directions and educational projects, as a response to the need to adapt the school to changes and to the problems of the contemporary world.

E. Păun (2002) outlines the following characteristics of postmodernism in education, in a study dedicated to the analysis of the theoretical developments from the perspective of the paradigm of postmodernity: Learner-centred education, the student being seen as a person with individual, differentiating characteristics that should be valued and capitalized to the maximum (an idea situated at the centre of the existential-humanistic paradigm, subsumed under the postmodern perspective); The revalorization of the subjective-affective dimension in the educational relationship, of the actions and behaviours of subjects that have a unique,

situational, and contextualized character; Considering the educational relationship as an interaction where the teacher and student are engaged in a process of cognitive and emotional investment, and in which the teacher works alongside the students with the purpose of their development and the building of their status as students; Creating a balance between promoting competition and cooperation in school; Promoting new types of education, inter-disciplinary ones; Outgrowing the prescriptive, normative and formalized view on curricular theory and integrating it into the classroom (cultural space), with the purpose of analysing the cultural contexts in which the curriculum is structured and continuously developing and processing it.

In the context of post-modern vision on education, on pedagogy, constructivist approach to knowledge and learning has also its place, being considered a post-modern paradigm in education. Orientation towards the individual and his values, subjective way of individual knowledge, personality development in an authentic social context, his own construction of knowledge by developing various meanings and significances, by interpretation, by reasoning according to a cognitive own experience, are some of the constructivist dimensions that are also found in postmodernism.

N. Vințanu (2001) identifies a number of constructivist openings in education: diversifying the sources of information, the ways of knowing; reengineering the curricula by giving up well-defined contents for the possibility of differently building concepts; focusing teaching and learning on stimulating students in building their own understanding of concepts, scientific truths, and then their generalization; using the new informational technologies.

Constructivist paradigm rehabilitates the student's role in learning, knowledge being specific to age, but also based on the own way in which the student integrates, explains and interprets reality, based on his own cognitive experience, in a first step, and then, moving toward objectification, based on collaboration, cooperation with the others (E. Joița, 2006). Constructivist approach of knowledge and learning aims to achieve two types of objectives: students' understanding of highly-abstract concepts from different areas, but also the implementation of formative and educational dimensions (learning abilities, motivations, interests, attitudes, will).

Adherence to the constructivist principles of instruction and learning is increasingly present in the Romanian education, after the major education reform, and it requires the knowledge and the implementation in educational practice of some basic dimensions of constructivist learning, which emphasize the student's central role and the structuring of teaching-learning-assessment, starting from the students' needs, abilities and experiences (E. Joița, 2006):

- It favours the organization of information in structures, systems, depending on the individual experience and particularities;
- It aims at building new knowledge through direct mental and action involvement and not their acquisition by hearing and receiving;
- It is a process of introspection of the way of knowledge, and the understanding is experiential, subjective, interactive;
- It is an active learning based on search, processing, prediction, critical analysis, interpretation, own argumentation, and then collaboration;
- The constructs resulted are based on the students' experience, facts and own interpretations;
- Adapting the goals and the different ways of supporting learning through differentiated treatment depending on the individual characteristics in learning;
- The constructivist theory practice places the student's learning in the centre and not the teacher's teaching;
- Students learn to organize and perform their own learning, knowledge, in a personalized way, reaching the goal of "learning to learn, to know, to experience";
- Experiences should facilitate addressing the problems from different angles and perspectives, allowing the exploitation and affirmation of the variability of students' features and learning styles;
- It is accompanied by emotionality, motivation, attitude, in order to support active participation, successes' experiencing, difficulties' overcoming;
- Students' interests, desires, needs are met.

Constructivist paradigm approaches school learning to humanistic approach, a series of constructivist principles being found as requirements of the humanistic theories of learning. Student-centred education, as a person of individual, differentiating characteristics, which have to be maximal valued and used in education, is a basic idea of existential-humanistic paradigm, subsumed to the post-modern perspective.

Humanistic education's purposes in accordance with the requirements of today's world are: "learning how to learn" and training individuals to effectively, intelligently, adaptively get involved in changing (I. Negreș-Dobridor, I.O. Pânișoară, 2005, p. 120).

The non-directive therapy system developed by Carl Rogers, called 'client-centered therapy', was the basis for building his learning theory – student-centered education. The educator, considered by Rogers to be a facilitator of learning, must provide a welcoming, positive climate where self-acceptance is encouraged, with the ultimate goal being that of preparing the pupil to learn on his own, without the help of others. Learning, founded

on situations that allow for a certain freedom to learn, must be based on an experience of discovery and not on the transmission of knowledge.

Roger's approach concerning the facilitation of learning is presented in the form of numerous rules, learning methods, and attitudes that must characterize the facilitator (educator) in his teaching profession (C. Rogers, 1969):

- The educator is responsible for creating a climate dominated by trust in the persons that constitute the group and who will be taking part in the learning experiences;

- The educator will help with establishing and clarifying the individual objectives of every member of the group and also the general objectives of the group. Some of these objectives may be conflicting, contradictory, or complementary, but the important thing is the manifestation of the pupils' sense of freedom through the unrestricted expression of what they would like to do.

- The educator will capitalize on each pupil's desire and motivation to achieve the goals that are important to them.

- The educator will organize and provide pupils with a broad range of pedagogical resources that will be used by the pupils for learning.

- The educator will consider himself to be a flexible resource that can be used by the group (teacher, counsellor, experienced person, etc.).

- The educator must be open to the requests of the class – both those of an intellectual nature and the affective or attitudinal ones – and recognize the importance that the requests have to each individual or the group as a whole and pay attention to them accordingly.

- The educator must become a member of the group and a participant in the learning process, expressing his own opinions.

- The educator must have the initiative to express his own feelings and thoughts in order to support the pupils, without imposing on them, thus the learners being able to freely choose whether they accept them or not.

- The educator must be mindful about manifestations of powerful feelings in class (which denote conflicts, anger, contempt, rivalry, pain, etc.) and approach them with understanding, respect, and trust.

- As a facilitator of learning, the educator must recognize and accept his own limits.

All these directions for the restructuring of the educational reality, which emerged and were developed as answers to the challenges of the contemporary world, are reflected in the principles of the new educational paradigm synthesized by Bruno Wurtz (as cited in C. Cuceş, 1999, pp.32-33): emphasis is placed on access to information, lifelong learning, establishing connections, receptivity to new concepts; learning is regarded as

a process; promoting anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritative principles and encouraging individual, alternative ways of thinking; the teachers and the students see each other as persons, not just as their roles; the structure of the instructive-educational process is flexible, with optional subjects and alternative teaching strategies; the learning pace of each student is respected; valuing the individual and placing emphasis on the development of his personality; engaging and developing the imagination is promoted, highlighting the importance of the inner experience; taking advantage of the entire intellectual potential by combining rational strategies with those based on intuition; labels are limited to an auxiliary, descriptive role; consideration towards the pupil's academic performances in relation to his own potential; combining theoretical and abstract knowledge with experiments undertaken in class and outside of it; consideration towards ergonomic criteria (the lighting, chromatic, physical comfort, the possibility of interaction between the pupils); the proposals put forward by the group are encouraged and taken into consideration; education is future-oriented, it is a lifelong endeavor; the flow of information is bidirectional, encouraging the reciprocity of learning.

### **3. Directions for adapting the Romanian education reform to the new educational paradigms**

Education adequate to modern democratic societies must be based on the idea that school is not only a tool for transmitting knowledge, but also a social institution in which students build up their knowledge and social skills that will allow them to integrate and successfully adapt to changes in society. It is a place of social learning and personal development that take place in close contact with family, local community and society as a whole.

After 1990, there were a lot of changes within the Romanian education, which referred to the shift from an authoritarian and centralist education system to a democratic system and the connection to the European education. As a result, the reform priorities in school education, after 1990, focused on the following dimensions: Reforming the curriculum (focusing on skills, abilities, flexibility and individualization of educational paths, adapting the educational offer to individual needs, matching content with social and economic needs); Creation / development of continuing education for adults; Restoring links between school - community, school - the economic environment; Improving access and quality education for groups at risk; Increasing participation in education; Matching education in Romania with European standards and objectives; Development of guidance and counseling systems; Decentralization (L. Tăușan, 2010).

The compatibilization with the European structures and systems involves the following courses of action (Marga, 1999, p.10): Reducing the amount of information of the education programs in the European curriculum

and their compatibilization; Converting reproductive education into creative education; Improving infrastructure and widespread electronic communications; Creation of productive partnerships between the educational institutions and the economic, administrative and cultural environment; Educational management oriented towards competitiveness and performance.

In 2007, the *Report of the Presidential Commission for Analysis and Elaboration of Education and Research Policies* puts forward a diagnosis of the key problems concerning the education and research systems in Romania and offers several solutions to them. The four major issues identified within the *Report* are: inefficiency, irrelevancy, inequity, and the poor quality of the Romanian education system. The inefficiency is reflected in the poor performances of our students in international assessments, performances which are far below the international average. The irrelevancy of the education system is related to the economy and society of the future and reveals the incapacity of the system to ensure that Romania is in a competitive position in the knowledge economy. Inequity is another issue of the Romanian learning system, which is apparent in the failure to provide all students with the same learning opportunities, regardless of their social, economic, or cultural background. The victims in this case are generally students from a rural environment as well as other vulnerable minorities: Roma, children with special needs, etc. Concerning the poor quality of the infrastructure and the human resources, relevant are indicators such as: old edifices, lack of school facilities (basic facilities, Internet connection), the increase in the average age of the teaching staff and the decrease of the quality of teaching.

Based on their analysis and diagnosis, the Commission has identified a series of measures for restructuring pre-university education (L. Tăușan, 2012): A new organization of the educational cycles; Paying special attention to early childhood education; Implementing a flexible curriculum, centered on the competences necessary for personal development and knowledge economy; Accelerating the process of decentralization; Adopting a reform of human resources policies; Stimulating lifelong learning through tangible measures.

The need to reorganize the education cycles is justified by deficiencies such as: the disregard towards early childhood education, the fragmentation of compulsory education through an unnecessary examination after 8 years of study, a premature start to the pupil's professional training. Among the effects of the current structure is also the fact that Romania occupies the last place when it comes to the participation of youths between the ages of 15 and 24 in a form of organized education. As a method of solving these issues, a new structure of the education system is proposed, a



structure which would ensure a connection between the pre-university education levels and the *European Qualifications Framework*: the Fundamental Acquisitions curricular cycle (preparatory year, 1<sup>st</sup> grade, and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade); the Development curricular cycle (3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> year); the Observation and Orientation curricular cycle (7<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> year); the In-Depth curricular cycle (10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade); the Specialized curricular cycle (12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> year).

Concerning the need to implement a new curriculum, in the aforementioned document several of the principles of the curricular reform are mentioned that would help counter the information overload, the low relevance of the current curriculum for the labor market and for adult life. One of the principles is aimed at centering the curriculum on key competences resulted from the analysis of *The Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Framework*: communication skills in the native language and two foreign languages; fundamental mathematical, scientific, and technological competences; digital competence; axiological competence; cultural awareness and expression competence; lifelong learning competence.

Among the directions envisaged in the Romanian education reform, the curricular reform is an essential segment, which is now a distinct theme in the sciences of education. The Curricular reform program represents a coherent approach to the educational national policy, designed and developed in line with current European trends and practices.

The current curricular reforms are designed to optimize for a long-term the dynamics of society, the social development in general, accompanied by developing a theory of curriculum and curriculum reform, which allows structuring systematic empirical data and meanings based on their instructional activities and educational guidance. The curriculum reform must reflect the overall objectives of social development because the structures involved, beyond the education system and the medium and long term effects result in changes in all social subsystems.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Currently, the Ministry of Education is continuing the reform of the pre-university education, the policies promoted being focused on ensuring that each child or young person of school age is enrolled in a form of education, on the development of educational programs aimed at adults, on the acquisition of key competences that are necessary to the integration in an information or knowledge society, on basing the educational act on the pupils' needs for personal and professional growth, on improving the educational act in the classroom by increasing the quality of the teaching-learning processes.

The new approach to the National Curriculum has generated a different type of culture curriculum characterized by: centering the process of teaching on skills training objectives and skills, focusing on transforming the school teacher in a school by promoting student-centered interactive learning methods, cultivating students' creative skills and the creation of various learning situations (the teacher is responsible for the organization of the learning programs, student performance efficiency infirming or confirming the teaching activities) an inter and trans-disciplinary approach to school curriculum, the curriculum approach correlated with school performance and evaluation issues of initial and ongoing training of teachers (M. Korka, 2000, p. 35).

The modernity and the innovative character of the National Curriculum can be derived from the following defining features: placing learning in the center of educational approaches, orientating learning to capacity and skills, using interactive methods, development of critical spirit, questioning, stimulating creative thinking, structuring education according to flexible routes for each school by adapting content to the learning interests and to the students' abilities, empowering agents involved in the educational act.

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