
BUILDING A RELEVANT CURRICULUM: A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE



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Abstract. *The paper aims at re-creating the recent developments in the Romanian education system in primary and secondary levels and discuss the main conditions for building a relevant curriculum, adapted to the specific challenges of the 21st century. This Romanian perspective on current curriculum reform processes mirrors the changes entailed by moving from a knowledge-based to a competency-based curriculum in a process that started in 2011. The analysis uses the reports of wide consultation processes initiated in this area under the co-ordination of the Institute of Education Sciences, as well as on various curricular documents (framework, syllabi and policy documents) and on other relevant resources. The article identifies various conditions at system level, the most important concerning the foundation of a systemic vision, ensuring continuity across different policy mandates, defining a comprehensive view of quality and ensure a continuous focus on inclusiveness. An in-depth research, in a comparative education perspective, could validate these findings and document their importance for other education systems.*

Key words: *national curriculum; Romanian education system; competences; competence-based curriculum; education policies.*

INTRODUCTION. PROBLEM STATEMENT

All innovations in education seems to share a few principles that shape the future of education: the teachers' confidence in their students' learning and competence development; recognition of the meaning of relevance in all the learning issues, assessment included; interest in identifying and developing each student's talents (Veen & Vrakking, 2011; Teșileanu & Fartușnic, 2017). However, transforming these principles in reality entails multiple challenges, and the curriculum area makes no exception.

For example, transferring the competence-based approach from the formal official documents in the classroom practice means to overcome a long habit where bits of information and essential knowledge are the only items that matter in lesson planning. At the same time, it means a specific way in managing the curriculum at school level and a new supporting role of school managers. Having this in mind, we could observe that thinking about the future of the education involves a necessary step in reflecting on specific conditions of building a relevant curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

The paper takes into consideration the outcomes of recent research conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences (2017, 2018) in the process of new curriculum development for the primary and secondary education levels. Other relevant documents concern the methodology for curriculum development, the policy document and other relevant published works. In order to illustrate the development process we have focused on a new subject introduced in lower secondary level, social education, so the analysis uses also relevant resources in the literature dedicated to this area.

MAIN RESULTS

In 2011 the new Law of Education created the context for restructuring the national curriculum in Romania. The level-based approach entailed a step by step renewal that first brought changes to primary education (2012-2014) and later on in lower secondary education (2015-2017).

The new curriculum in Romania is competence-based, as the foundation core in the curricular structure is given by the competences. The concept of competence is the one used at European level in the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC), as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context (Official Journal of the EU, 30.12.2006, L 394/13).

The new curriculum development starts by the design of the framework which stipulates the curricular areas, the school subjects per grade and the number of periods/week for each of these. The general competences are developed throughout the entire low secondary cycle within the study of the school subject. The specific competences are to be structured at the level of a school year/ grade and they are derived from the general competences as stages in their structuring. In the subject curriculum, the specific competences are presented along the examples of learning activities (which are non-mandatory) that show possible tasks to be transferred into classroom practice. The essential knowledge offers the informative means to process/ operate with in order to develop competences. The methodological suggestions offer orientation for the curriculum implementation (Teșileanu & Fartușnic, 2017).

The national curriculum for primary and lower secondary education is focused on developing key competences, whereas the national curriculum for upper-secondary education is centred on the development and diversification of these competences. Starting from this premise, the training profile of the pre-university education graduate is based on 8 key competences, representing a collection of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by any person throughout life:

- communication in the mother tongue;
- communication in foreign languages;
- numeracy and basic science and technology skills;
- digital skills;
- learning to learn;
- social and citizenship skills;
- initiative and entrepreneurship;
- cultural awareness and expression.

The eight key competences recommended by the European Parliament (2006) should be seen in conjunction, not individually, since they are a **complex construct**, with multiple relationships and intertwining areas, consonant with the interconnected society of the European citizens.

The policy document in the curriculum area outlines the prospects for restructuring the national curriculum and its implementation context (ISE, 2016), in compliance with the applicable regulations and relevant national strategies for the development of education. Equally addressed to decision makers, curriculum authors, teaching staff, academics, school managers and other national stakeholders, this policy document proposes a consistent and up-to-date perspective for the development of the national curriculum, ensuring its horizontal and vertical coherence, including between educational levels and routes. The main directions of the development cover:

– **Student centricity** and shifting the focus from teaching to **learning** – promote a flexible curriculum that allows the diversification and adaptation of student learning according to the student’s age/development, interests and abilities, respecting diversity (ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious etc.), as well as to the social expectations; adapt the learning to the students’ interests and development needs, building differentiated learning routes, implementing explicit methods for tailoring the learning.

– **Focusing on competences**, as the central organizing element of school syllabuses for different subjects/learning areas – this involves equal focus on all the components of a competence, not only on knowledge/contents. The competences are the vehicle for transferring and mobilizing knowledge and skills into various life contexts. In the case of technical and vocational education and training, the model used in the development of the school curriculum operates with the concept of learning outcomes.

– Reconsidering the relation between **subjects-based** and **integrated learning** – making use of the advantages (appropriateness for the needs and interests of the contemporary individual; favoring transfer, creative thinking and problem solving; providing a holistic perspective on reality etc.). Furthermore, the focus on key competences involves the recognition of the need to build interdisciplinary bridges.

– Reconsidering the **time budget allocated to learning** from the perspective of the impact of framework schooling plans, curricular contents of school syllabuses and teaching practices on the students’ personal time.

Methodological guidelines and support materials present/support the requirements for implementing and monitoring the curriculum process. Applying the competence-centred curriculum design model requires the development of teaching resources in relation to competences, a concept that operates as an “organiser” based on which the specific contents are selected and the teaching-learning-assessment strategies are organized. All the types of teaching resources developed contribute to the creation of an attractive and inclusive teaching environment, based on respecting and encouraging diversity and supporting new methods of organizing activities, an integrated approach to contents, and problem solving in real or mock contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

More than ever, the majority of educational systems across the globe are embarked in an ambitious and equally profound curricular reform. Despite the fact that the main reasons for promoting these reforms differs, the main question raised in these countries

is how to ensure that we are building a relevant, coherent and innovative curriculum. Moreover, what are the mechanisms to assure authentic, personalised and flexible education paths, in a quality inclusive education approach (Unicef, 2018).

Our analysis reveals several conditions, based on the experiences of creating a new curriculum in primary and secondary education levels in Romania. The most important seems to be the following:

– **Developing a roadmap based on a systemic vision.** A reference curriculum represents today a key document for the curriculum development process; well designed, it could offer the guidance in setting the main development paths of a curriculum and a long-term strategy in implementation. This systemic vision entails also a constructive approach within the broader context of Government initiatives and strategies in the social field (in particular health and social protection).

– **Ensuring continuity across different policy mandates.** The lack of a specific political agreement on major directions of reform and the constant adjustments/amendments introduced could lead to various risks. With mandates of education ministers limited in time, this challenge negatively influences the coherence and the continuity of major reforms in curriculum area.

– **Promoting an authentic practice and reflection community.** An important condition in this process is to involve as wide as possible experts, practitioners, policy makers and curriculum developers with relevant national and international experience and make them contribute to the development of this vision. Too often, these stakeholders are only called upon in the stage of implementing a new curriculum, part of a roadmap. If involved, they could make the process more complicated, slow and sometimes less innovative. However, this is the best approach to ensure that the process is sustainable, irrespective of the political changes in the Government. The community of experts has also an important role in defining the specific conditions and challenges in curricular development process, fostering the potential for connecting with relevant national and international experiences. Offering support to independent think tanks, national authorities can benefit from a professional support in ensuring the coherence and continuity of the innovations in curriculum area.

– **Allocate necessary resources.** Budgetary allocations for curriculum development should reflect the importance of this component for the overall quality and equity of an education system. Often, curriculum is perceived as an intellectual activity requiring only a limited amount of resources, in comparison with costs related to human resources or investments. However, to co-ordinate and motivate the work of curriculum developers, an adequate support must be provided, with a balanced allocation between different education levels and costs categories. Most of the resources cover only the human resources costs, while investment in infrastructure, teaching materials, training costs or educational support for the students at risk or out of school children is far from sufficient. Therefore, under-investment limits severely the potential for accelerating the pace of implementing key reforms in all social sector fields.

– **Build a curriculum equally important for schools and students at risk.** Beyond the discourse related to personalization and individualization, more than ever the development of the curriculum needs to take into consideration and embed equity issues. This is why curriculum developers need to specialize in new areas (resilience, socio-emotional skills), facilitating this task of curricular adaptation in the classroom. School heads, at the same time, should develop their skills in the inclusive curriculum management at the

school level and in allocating adequate resources (ISE/UNICEF, 2015; Save the Children, 2018). This task is not easy, having in mind the significant number of schools still facing difficulties concerning qualified teachers, learning and educational resources and even adequate sanitary conditions.

Another challenge in the curriculum development process for all subjects consisted in the authentic competence-centred approach with an organizing role that: sets the expected outcomes; orients possible learning activities; selects the necessary chunks of information that are needed as an operational basis; organizes the methodological approach at classroom level. An in-depth teacher training program is a condition sine qua non for addressing this challenge.

Thus, rational, relevant and constructive changes are required, in a systemic approach, whereby the curriculum component interacts and evolves concurrently with other components of the educational system, such as training of teaching staff, developing school textbooks and other learning resources, student assessment, school management, etc.

It is important also to know if these conclusions are relevant only for the Romanian educational context. An in-depth research, in a comparative education perspective, could validate these findings and document their importance for other education systems as well.

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