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**SEARCHING THE "GOLDEN RULE"– CURRICULUM
ARTICULATION IN THE ROMANIAN NATIONAL
CURRICULUM**

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Abstract

2017 is the year that marks a quarter of a century of a curriculum system that has at its centre the concept of a National Curriculum, and is based on a curriculum framework and the programs of study. This period is characterized by the search for the best approach to develop normative document that governs educational practice. The focus of the articulation of the Romanian National Curriculum changed during this period, each new generation of programs of study putting forth a different perspective on the major components of the National Curriculum, with the overall aim to change teaching practices. But, the increase in mandatory requirements is not followed by a significant change in teaching and learning practices, since it influences the degree to which teachers can have a creative and adaptive reading of the curricular requirements. The body of evidence is constituted by a documentary survey (the Romanian National Curriculum of the last two decades), the analysis in local research trends on the topic of classroom practice and on the quality of the curricula, and interviews with teachers that taught in accordance to all generations of curricula. Initial results indicate a gap between the stated intentions of the National Curriculum and teachers' representation of the curriculum. The source of this difference is the result of the widespread perception that the National Curriculum is able to solve all perceived problems. Thus, more discreet but powerful factors (mainly at school level) tend to be ignored.

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Keywords: Curriculum alignment, National Curriculum, curriculum application at school level, teacher opinion.



1. Introduction

The educational systems in the countries that started the transition towards becoming democratic societies and market economies were faced with the task of identifying the best solutions to not only eliminating the previous hyper-centralised structures, but to also renegotiate the fundamental covenant between the school system and the society as a whole. Furthermore, the educational systems were faced with the opportunity to compare themselves with their counterparts in the world. As early as 1990, various measures were taken in order to promote the newly accepted values and principles and, at least in Romania, a rather rapid series of initiatives in the field of education. The main issue was – and still is – the relation established between two strands of change, namely institutional and pedagogical. The importance of this link is stated by Kliebard as follows: "[...] *pedagogical reforms either need to be consistent with existing structures or reformers need to undertake ways of altering those structures in order to make them compatible with the pedagogical reforms*" (Kliebard, 2002, p. 5). Now, after more than a quarter of the century of continuous reform in the field of curriculum, it is perhaps time to see both the mechanisms involved and the results of these approaches in the Romanian educational system.

2. Problem Statement

The field of curriculum has been constantly in the vanguard of educational changes in Romania; this is the (strange) result of the frequent changes in the legal framework that had a direct backdrop on the curricular documents. In turn, these impact profoundly the daily activity in schools: programs of study and learning plans are organizers of teacher activity, and textbooks and teaching materials are significant factors in both the activity (and perceptions thereof) and daily routines of teachers, students, and parents. In the present contribution we explore two of the planes on which the impact of changes in curriculum is visible, that is, the specific knowledge in the field of curriculum teachers have to demonstrate. In accordance with Shulman, this specific knowledge of the curriculum deals "*with particular grasp of the materials and programs that serve as tools of trade for teachers*" (Shulman, 1987, pp. 8). A face-to-face discussion with several teachers on their professional activity seems to highlight a familiarity with the terminology and concepts used in curricular documentation, as well as their significant and competent usage. It is a significant change when compared with the findings of research 10 to 15 years ago (Vlăsceanu, 2002). Our aim is to propose a closer look at the way in which teachers make sense of the curriculum; the key concept around which our research is gravitating is curriculum alignment.

Curriculum alignment is considered to be critical in the achievement of effective schools (Crowell & Tissot, 1986; Glatthorn, 2000), but its definitions are ranging from very pragmatic and matter-of-fact to almost poetic. There are several reasons for focusing on curriculum alignment: assessing quality of schooling experience, understanding the source of difference between students, focusing teacher activity, accountability (Anderson, 2002). Various definitions given to this concept seem to indicate this. "*Curriculum alignment, simply stated, refers to the congruence of all the elements of a school curriculum – the curriculum goals, the instructional program (what is taught and the materials used), and the tests used to judge outcomes*" (Crowell & Tissot, 1986, p. 2). "[...] *the conscious congruence of three educational elements: curriculum, instruction, and assessment*" (Leitzel & Vogler, 1994, p. 5). Curriculum alignment [represents] "*linking curriculum and testing to produce focused teaching [...it also*

asks for] matching the test content to curriculum content [... and, finally, is] being a part of the curriculum development process to tests and textbooks" (English, 1988, p. 67, 76, 137). "Alignment is the ether in which float the component parts of RBR¹. The logic of actions, the accuracy of inferences, and at the core, any reason at all to believe that systematic action will achieve positive results in an RBR framework depend on alignment" (Baker, 2004, pp. 4-5). "Curriculum alignment requires a strong link between objectives and assessments, between objectives and instructional activities and materials, and between assessments and instructional activities and materials. In other words, content validity, content coverage, and opportunity to learn are all included within the more general concept of 'curriculum alignment'" (Anderson, 2002, pp. 257). "Curriculum alignment simply means one teaches children what one tests them on [...] As an educational practice, curriculum alignment is a process in which the curriculum in use is matched to the test in use" (English & Steffy, 2000, p. 14, 17). Glatthorn (2000), although is citing English as school subject, goes a step further and proposes that alignment represents the congruence between various types of curricula and, consequently, alignment can be best seen as a set of matching curricula, thus being in accord with Baker, who states that alignment, if conducted properly, might result in a tremendous amount of data (Baker, 2004). Glatthorn (2000) also identifies a possible gap, but only between the taught and learnt curricula. Leoniek Wijngaards-de Meij and Sigrid Merx (2018) with respect to higher education, consider that alignment represents "the co-construction of knowledge between student and teacher" (p. 4).

The quoted definitions also take into consideration the elements of curriculum design methodology, so much so when considering curriculum products such as programs of study, and the process of curriculum development. Curriculum alignment, therefore, seems to focus on the way in which documents produced at centralised or de-centralised level are linked to classroom experiences and to the way in which these experiences are assessed. This type of alignment is evident for the definitions proposed by Anderson and Glatthorn. They suggest that possible gaps between the various stages of the process of curriculum development can occur. The problem is more important when considering the educational system as a whole and not only the school or classroom levels. As a result, curriculum alignment has to be considered also between various levels on decision-making on the curriculum and its implementation. Alignment at centralised levels, say between a national curriculum and textbooks, or between the curriculum and the assessment schemes, can be coercive and hampering at school or district level. If English and Steffy's (2000) conjecture is correct, that tests might assess a vague curriculum, the entire chain of decision aiming at alignment has to be questioned. After all, between stated aims of an educational system and the practicalities of day-to-day teaching, an agreement between actors about commonalities has to be reached. The definition proposed by Wijngaards-de Meij & Merx (2018) shifts the debate in the area of curriculum implementation as enactment and deliberation process in which teachers and student take part. As the title of the article posits, the consolidation of the alignment and the clarity with which the learning objectives are formulated make the curriculum visible.

The Romanian educational system has undergone significant changes in the last decades. From a highly centralized system, the Romanian school promoted a decentralized system, by means that were (and still are) considered to be critical. After a period in which the ideological elements were eliminated,

¹ Results-Based Reform.

the next concern was twofold: to identify the best sequencing of change, and to implement those changes in a rapid pace. Added to that, the theoretical backwardness that prevailed (see the absence of the concept of curriculum) complicated further the issue.

1995 is the year in which the actual changes were introduced targeted only the Lower Secondary School. For the first time a set of documents labelled National Curriculum entered the system, structured around three types of documents: the curriculum framework, the programs of study, and the textbooks. The first dealt with the structure of schooling (mainly number of hours/week for each subject), and for the first time a school-based curriculum was introduced the second with the internal structure of each subject (the contents and the pedagogical rationale). The programs of study are by far the most influential documents. Their structure was aimed at giving teachers most of the elements needed for designing and implementing their teaching and started the debate concerning the alignment between learning objectives and the teaching approaches. The greatest attention was given to the programs of study in their role of recommended/intentional curriculum. This model needed textbooks as main instrument for the mediation between the recommended curriculum and the curriculum applied at classroom level. The textbooks were also regarded as the main instrument for implementation of the new curricula², and the relation (overlapping) with the program of study became the main criterion in the process of textbook evaluation and approval³. In 2003 a competence-based model of curriculum was introduced throughout the system. In 2012 the Primary Education curricula were changed and in 2014 a new process of curriculum change started, first with the Lower Secondary School (the changes were implemented beginning with September 2017).

A further discrepancy has historic roots and creates a long-lasting debate in the media and the society: while a more than significant portion of the youth is functionally illiterate (around 40%), thus supporting the claims that the system has major faults, and supporting parallel schooling systems, there is a significant increase in the number of High School graduates that seek and manage to be admitted at ranking universities abroad. Considering the attention given by all curriculum design models used, curriculum alignment can be considered to be a founding principle of curriculum in Romania. As early as the beginning of the 1990s, the design model chosen in Romania was one that might be labelled "rational" that starts from the aims of the formal schooling (as stated in the law of education) and reaches to the level of the classroom by means of a variety of curricular documents – the curriculum framework, the programs of study, and the textbooks are the most visible documents. The choice for this approach was upheld during the entire period, even if the main reference terms in the practice of the curriculum development and, more important, the relationships between these terms (in the description of design models) have changed over time. One example might illuminate this. The first generation of programs of study (the 1990s) focused on the relation between learning tasks and reference objectives, and on the massive change of contents⁴. The second generation of programs of study has concentrated instead on the alignment between competences and the elements of content. The latter model, in use for more than a

² Keeping in mind that at less than 4 % of the GDP for Education, access to alternative teaching materials is problematic. Textbooks are bought by the Ministry of Education, from offers made by privately owned publishing houses (3 textbooks per subject per year).

³ To tell the entire story, the price of the textbooks was also a significant element in their approval.

⁴ This was a significant feature of the subjects within the area of the Social Studies, and in particular of History.

decade, was replaced by the last generation of programs of study⁵ that are centred on the articulation between specific competences and exemplars of learning activities.

Several significant elements are relevant: the step-by-step reduction in the role that the elements of contents have to play in the rationale of the programs of study, and the existence of external sources for the impetus to change. The focus on the reference objectives (supported by the examples of learning activities) resulted in an internal alignment between the learning objectives and the learning activities. An "external" alignment was the articulation between the programs of study and the textbooks⁶. We can speculate on the role of the World Bank Project that provided funding for the first generation of new, post-communist textbooks. The second model, developed between 1998 and 2003, favoured a National Curriculum that shifted from the learning objectives as elements for internal coherence to competences. The impetus provided was, as in 1995, external. The publication of the European Key Competences triggered a similar change in the programs of study, but the main focus of alignment was the relation between competences and the elements of contents. It started with the introduction of competencies at High School level, and in 2003 at the level of Lower Secondary Schools. The third model is applied starting with 2012. After the curricula for Primary (2012-2013) and Lower Secondary (2016-2017), the curriculum for High School will be changed possibly soon. The most significant changes are related to a new type of alignment, and the abandonment of the chapter related to values and attitudes (on the premises that these are part of the competence descriptors).

3. Research Questions

Simply stated, our primary research question was to first identify what – if any – points of intended alignment can be identified at the level of curriculum documents produced in various stages of educational changes in the last quarter of century. The second question was to see if there is an implementation gap, and where it can be identified. Possible points of intended alignment that were taken into consideration were between stated educational aims and the National Curriculum, between different components of the National Curriculum (as reflected in the various models of programs of study that have been proposed during the period under scrutiny, as well as several alignments/articulation between the curriculum components), and between the National Curriculum and its application at school level.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main aim of our research is to identify evidences related to possible elements of alignment by means of relevant research instruments: contents analysis (in order to see what the curriculum documentation offer in terms of relevant data), and interviews (to see if teachers are aware of elements of intended alignment, make sense of them, and are considering them as useful in their daily activity). We consider this approach to be significant because, and in spite of several waves of reform, educational results are not evolving as predicted: teachers have a diverse opinion concerning the application into practice of the curricula; students' results are not the best (there seems to be no significant change in performance during the last quarter of century). Although the public discourse over education remains

⁵ The new programs of study are for the Primary (2014) and Lower Secondary School (2016).

⁶ The textbooks from this generation are still in use for Grades VII and VIII, but they will be replaced in the following two years.

along the same coordinates, the visible lack of progress in attaining the stated objectives raises questions concerning the coherence of the actual implementation of the reform. The issue is if there are flaws in the theoretical models put forth, or in the decision-making process, the management of implementation processes, or at the school level. The implementation of a theoretical model limits the degree to which experiences and conclusions drawn from practice can influence the way in which educational reforms are conducted. At the same time, in order to analyze the impact of theoretical models of curricula on educational results a long-duration framework is needed.

5. Research Methods

5.1. The Documentary Research

In order to identify the elements involved in the limited results of the reform process, the analysis starts by looking at the chronology of events, the type and structure of curriculum models and documentation, assessment and evaluation schemes, and teacher perceptions of the process.

5.2. The interviews with Teachers

The interview guidelines included eight open-ended questions. Five of them (I4 to I8) were explicitly focused on alignment from the perspective of the articulation between the structure of the program of study and the classroom activity. The question I1 is also linked to the alignment, but between the National Curriculum and its classroom application. Finally, questions I2 and I3 are exploring the opinions of responders concerning the quality of changes proposed by the programs of study.

6. Findings

6.1. Curriculum Documents

The analysis of curriculum documents seems to demonstrate that the programs of study are by far the most influential documents. Their structure (introductory note, general and specific learning aims, subject-matter, proposed didactical and assessment approaches) was aimed at giving teachers most of the elements needed for designing and implementing their teaching. The alignment took into consideration the learning objectives and the teaching approaches. In the period 1998-2003, the National Curriculum shifted from the learning objectives as elements for internal coherence to competences. The impetus provided was, as in 1995, external. The publication of the European Key Competences triggered a similar change in the programs of study, but the main focus of alignment was the relation between competences and the elements of contents. It started with the introduction of competencies at High School level, and in 2003 at the level of Lower Secondary Schools. Starting with 2012 a new curriculum is in process of development. After the curricula for Primary (2012-2013) and Lower Secondary (2016-2017), the curriculum for High School will be changed possibly soon. The most significant changes are related to a new type of alignment, and the abandonment of the chapter related to values and attitudes (on the premises that these are part of the competence descriptors). General competencies are defined for each subject and are developed during the whole high school education; they are highly general and complex. Specific competencies are defined for each subject and are developed during one year of study; they derive from the general competencies and represent stages in the acquisition of the latter. Their

development is dependent of learning contexts that are given as examples by the program of study. The methodological suggestions may be related to the teaching/learning process itself, or could be focused on the development of those competencies, values and attitudes in students, that are mentioned in the curriculum. The suggestions also include examples of learning methods and activities that are considered to be the most adequate, the material/equipment necessary for the implementation of the curriculum; finally, suggestion regarding continuous assessment, and further readings. This structure is identical for both common core subjects, and also for the school-based curriculum.

6.2. The interviews

The interviews were conducted with five teachers (4 History teachers and 1 teacher for Romanian language as mother tongue). All have over 15 years of teaching practice, are active in urban schools that have different levels of performance. Two teachers teach in Lower Secondary schools, three in High Schools that also have Lower Secondary classes.

Q1. To what degree is the topic of the programs of study present in the debates within the school?

All respondents are unanimous to consider that debates over the programs of study are a rarity at school level. When such discussions arise, they seem to be informal and contents-oriented. One of the teachers states the following (concerning the programs of study): "*it becomes a discussion topic only when the Ministry of Education is putting forth new changes (for Romanian literature, for example), or when teachers realise that the programs of study are content-heavy (such is the case for History), and that the textbooks are significantly over the level of student performance (mostly in relation to the textbooks for foreign languages), or are lacking any practical utility for students (in Sciences, for example)*".

Q2. Please indicate three changes at the level of the structure of the programs of study that you remember occurred in the last 25 years, such as, e.g., the shift from objectives to competences The lists of remembered changes include references to various components of the programs of study (categories of competences, elements of content). All teachers indicate such changes, but do not indicate elements that are linked to the articulation between these elements. The comments are mainly focused on the topic of the structure of content.

Q3. On the whole, do you consider that the quality of the programs of study has increased? For example, the text is clearer and/or has more useful indications Four respondents consider that the quality of the programs of study has increased. Out of these, one is appreciative of the articulation between competences and contents, and states that this has an obvious role in the efficiency of learning and assessment. Another teacher admits that many of the new features of the programs "*remain unknown for the teachers who do not have a genuine interest in personal professional development,*". A third teacher considers that "*there is still a gap between those who develop the programs and those who have to apply them, especially given the large area of the teacher community (urban vs. rural schools, elite vs. low achieving schools)*".

Q4. The changes at the level of the programs of study have made it easier to (a) design the teaching approaches, or (b) the application of the programs at classroom level Four of the respondents appreciate the utility of changes in terms of both didactic design and classroom application. Also, there is a favourable opinion for the opportunity to be more creative in terms of design and application, since the programs of study (for History) are formulated in broader perspectives (History), or the structure is

offering more leeway (Romanian language). One teacher states that *"I felt no relief, both in designing and the teaching, as a result of the changes in the programs of study. The new elements appeared as a result of the personal engagement of each teacher, independently of the programs of study, and as a reaction to classroom needs"*.

Q5. What other materials are of help today in clarifying the requirements of the programs of study? For example, guidelines, web pages The respondents appreciate the diversity of materials available (both online and printed) which contribute to the "reading" of the programs of study and the personal effort for continuous training that each teacher should make. The materials that are specifically mentioned are in the majority related to the classroom activities, but there is no focus on assessment. As one teacher puts it: *"the text of the new programs of study is clear only for those that are familiar with a terminology that was adopted from the European body of pedagogical and academic literature in the field"*.

Q6. What other materials do you use for preparing and delivering a class? All teachers have a positive appreciation of the diversity of materials that are available (again, digital and printed). As with the previous question, the majority of answers indicate a focus on classroom activities. One respondent indicates several web pages (in English), and only one materials related to assessment.

Q7. To what extent and how does the program of study help you in the assessment of students (usual assessment, and the assessment schemes at national level)? Two of the respondents acknowledge the importance of competences for the design of ordinary assessment, and for the effort to align it to assessment schemes at national level (especially for High School level). The effort is perceived as being more individual, and no mention is made on materials for study in this regard. One teacher indicates resources in the area of academic publications.

Q8. In conclusion, do you think that there is a good articulation between the programs of study, the classroom activities and current and national assessments? Why? It is the question that raised the strongest debate, especially on the topic of the relation between the programs and the current and national assessment schemes. The answers seem to indicate the individual effort of teachers to reconcile the provisions of the programs of study with the requirements of national assessment schemes. One teacher identifies a significant contradiction: *"national assessments in grades II, IV, and VI seem to be more attuned to international models (e.g., PISA tests), but in the classroom the teaching-learning-assessment are done after a Romanian recipe"*.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, teachers are in total accord with the absence of any debate concerning the national curriculum at school level. They provided a significant variety of answers when identifying three curricular changes over the last two decades. However, there seems to be a split opinion over the utility/nonutility of changes at the level of programs of study for classroom design and application; this difference seems to be more marked when considering the relation between national assessment schemes and classroom assessment practices. Textbooks, however important these seem to be (mainly in the public debates concerning the school system), are not mentioned as an element that enhance the understanding of the programs of study. This last observation is significant, since the group of interviewed teachers had

the opportunity to test several generations of textbooks (i.e., of articulations within the programs of study). The research seems to prove that teachers have a better understanding of the specialised vocabulary related to the curriculum. At the level of curriculum documents, several elements are missing or are lacking clarity. The fact that elements related to the current assessment are largely missing seems to indicate that curriculum developers have left this aspect to the expertise of the teachers. A question remains, though: where should be guidelines developed in order to promote the articulation between current assessment and national assessment schemes. Teachers have a clear understanding of the available resources (mainly online), but some resources that acknowledge explicitly a relation with the programs of study (such as the textbooks) are not among the documents considered. One of the possible causes is the (perceived) gap between the curriculum developers and the practitioners⁷. The absence of any debate concerning the National Curriculum at school level raises several questions. Does the school, as organization, have the necessary leverage to be involved with the debate concerning the application of the curriculum at classroom level, or should teachers decide by themselves? And in what instances is such an involvement necessary?

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⁷ A situation that is somewhat surprising, since practitioners were always involved in the groups producing the programs of the study. For the last generation of programs, the teachers were in overwhelming majority, at least for History.