

# POSTMODERN DIMENSIONS OF CURRICULUM. IMPLICATIONS ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE INSTRUCTIVE-EDUCATIVE PROCESS

## DIMENSIUNI POSTMODERNE ALE CURRICULUMULUI. IMPLICAȚII ASUPRA ACTIVITĂȚILOR PROCESULUI INSTRUCTIV

**SOARE E.**

*UNIVERSITY OF PITEȘTI, Dept. for Teacher's Training*

**Abstract:** *The present papers analyses some of the most current problems related to the field of curriculum theory and methodology. It emphasizes some aspects of postmodern curricular organization, with fundamental implications on the projection of the activities related to the instructive-educative process. The presented approaches rely on the latest trends in the field of curriculum, underlining the perspective of several theoretical and practical contributions. There are reviewed some essential dimensions of curriculum postmodern approach, as well as the way in which they can be projected, organized and realized.*

**Rezumat:** *Lucrarea de față analizează unele dintre cele mai actuale problematice legate de domeniul teoriei și metodologiei curriculumului. Evidențiază câteva aspecte ale organizării curriculare de tip postmodern cu efecte fundamentale asupra proiectării acțiunilor procesului instructiv-educativ. Abordările prezentate au la bază studiul celor mai noi orientări în domeniul curriculumului accentuând perspectiva unor contribuții teoretice și practice fundamentale. Sunt trecute în vedere câteva dimensiuni esențiale ale abordării postmoderne a curriculumului, precum și modul în care acestea pot fi proiectate, organizate și realizate.*

**Key words:** *curriculum, curricular organization, instructive-educative process, teaching, learning, evaluation*

### Introduction in the problems of curriculum

At the level of specialty literature, there can be identified multiple acceptations of the term, these are extremely different depending on the philosophical schools and trends that have generated them, as well as the socio-educational contexts they have been applied in.

An interesting point of view on curriculum can be found in *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* (1960) which defines curriculum as “the assembly of experiences the educated one lives under school coordination. It represents an assembly, more or less planned and controlled, of conditions in which the student learns to behave in various ways” (p. 358).

Among the most outstanding researchers who focused on the problems of curriculum, it worth mentioning: Aoki T., Apple M., Belth M., Bloom B.S., Bobbitt F., Briggs L. J., Bruner J., Cornbleth C., Crețu C., Crișan Al., Cristea S., Cucoș C., De Landsheere G., Dewey J., D'Hainaut L., Doll W. E., Gagne R. M., Giroux R., Glatthorn A., Grumet M., Grundy, Hirst P. H., Hunkins, Hunt M. P.,

Kliebard H., Peters R. S., Pinar W., Potolea D., Reid A. W., Rhoades G., Schubert W., Schwab J. J., Skilbeck M., Sosniak L., Stenhouse L., Taba H., Tanner D., Tanner L., Tyler R., Walker D., Wraga W. etc.

According to C. Crețu (1999), in spite of all the differences present at the level of definitions, curriculum means “the extended area of learning offers and their manner of organization by school institutions, as well as the extremely complex corpus of documents by the help of which there are projected, organized, implemented, evaluated and reviewed, in a flexible and open manner, these *offers, contexts or learning activities*”.

As S. Cristea observes (2000), while defining curriculum, it is necessary that the rigorous delimiting of the concept reference field should be done, beginning with the term’s etymology and its origins reflected in its historical evolution and finishing with the current pedagogical meanings.

When we talk about curriculum, and especially of curricular organization, we start from curriculum paradigm launched with Ralph Tyler’s *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (1949). From this moment on, any discussion related to curriculum founds itself beginning with the four principles established by Tyler (*selection of educational purposes, selection of educational experiences, organizing educational experiences, continuous evaluation of attained educational purposes*).

As regards curricular organization we must take into consideration the conceptions of authors such as P. H. Hirst și R. S. Peters (1970) who have a major contribution to the level of curriculum theory and practice. According to these authors, curricular organization can have two forms: it can be *modular* (or disciplinary) and it can present an *integrative* form. The former variant can produce an artificial atomization of school experiences proposed to the child, while the latter can better correspond to complex interactions presents at the level of social experience the child benefits of outside school.

### **Postmodern determinations of curriculum**

In the field of education, post modernity “designates a *pattern* of approaching the permanent activity of personality’s training and development, applicable in a certain evolution of pedagogical theory” (S. Cristea, 2004, p.3). This concept with “a paradigm value” presents two types of conditioning:

- historical (post modernity as a variant of postmodernism). It appears a “repositioning of pedagogical theory” in the context of postmodern culture;
- axiomatic (post modernity as a (re)analysis and (re)synthesizing of a reference system).

We can better understand post modernity in education by considering it a “break from modernity” (p. 4), to the extent to which, unlike it, which treated differently / separately the relations between knowledge and human experience, post modernity promotes “a new way of understanding the relations between knowledge and experience, between theory and practice at the level of human action” (ibidem), an integrative relation capitalized at the level of curriculum

general theory. It is specific to the instruction action which capitalizes the interdependences between its main actions: teaching, learning and evaluation, actions contextualized by the specificity of the didactic relation.

An analysis of the curriculum can also start from the knowledge of dominant philosophies which lie at the basis of its projection, organization and practical realization. According to some American researchers (John H. Johansen, Harold W. Collins, James A. Johnson, 1986, p.250), two major trends must be taken into consideration at the level of curriculum. These are:

1. *Traditionalism*. This philosophical trend is based on two educational philosophies:

a) the *essentialism* (William C. Bagley, 1938), as a philosophy of education suggests that the emphasis on school disciplines offers education the essential components. The student operates on things in order to learn by observation and nature. The discipline, the necessary reading, memorizing, repetition and examinations are, due to this reason, very important to learning.

b) the *perennialism* (Thomas D'Aquino as the main representative author) is the philosophy which generated essentialism, being a component part of traditionalism. The emphasis is being laid on mental discipline, and school disciplines fully contribute to it. According to the authors mentioned above, in America, the perennialism is associated to Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer Adler. These authors have promoted the stress on the study of fundamental works, as means of education.

These two philosophies are characterized by the idea according to which the student has to operate on contents in order to achieve the instruments necessary to rational thinking.

The traditional approach underlines the role of mind disciplining as a fundamental means in obtaining knowledge. From this point of view, according to John H. Johansen et al (1986, p.251), we can identify the following estimations related to students, teachers, curriculum and education methods associated to traditionalism:

*The student* = reasoning is learnt with the help of mental exercises. The student can learn by conditioning. The mind is capable of realizing links between learning sequences.

*The teacher* = model of study, example, expert. He realizes demonstrations of contents and knowledge; mental discipline, spiritual leader, transmitter of knowledge and tradition.

*The curriculum* = literature and history as symbol disciplines, mathematics and science as disciplines of the physical world, language and logics as disciplines of the intellect, fundamental works and doctrines as disciplines of the spirit.

*The Methods* = operating with facts and information. Stress on exercise and memorizing, homework and compulsory reading. Study as means of intellectual discipline.

2. *Progressivism*. Appearing in the 1920s in America, it has its roots in Charles S. Pierce's and William James' works. On the other hand, John Dewey's works have offered "the principles of progressivism as educational philosophy". Dewey opposed the idea according to which school has to exclusively center on mental development. In his opinion, school should offer conditions for full, complete development of the child. Therefore, the disciplines related to social experience are very important. "This experimental method seems to be one of the best methods for realizing the continuous unity of disciplines and methods". This philosophy had a very profound impact on elementary school in the States. Progressivism remains a viable alternative to traditional approaches of education.

Another dimension of progressivism appears under the influence of *existentialism*, as a new way of thinking, represented by J. P. Sartre, A. S. Neill, S. Kirkegaard, F. Nietzsche. It includes more thinking schools and, often, contradictory approaches and is centered on the individual. The idea according to which "the reality of the personal existence makes possible freedom and choice" becomes, according to John H. Johansen et al (1986, p. 252) the foundation of this philosophy. Human personality becomes the foundation on which education is being realized, and the educational goals are stated in terms of "awareness, dedication and affirmation".

As in the case of traditionalism, we can also mention the following considerations on student, teacher, curriculum and education methods:

*The student* = he is a person who experiments. He has the freedom of choice; self-awareness and student's acceptance are very valuable; human experiences are important to the extent to which they are related to change; learning by experience becomes the fundamental organization of education and curriculum.

*The teacher* = manager of research project; the teacher functions as a guide for students' activities; he is not an obstacle, always respecting everybody's rights; he has a motivational role.

*The curriculum* = the content should not be fragmented; students' interests can order what they are to study; group learning and trips are very important; disciplines rely on social experiences.

*The methods* = choices and personal expression are fully capitalized; Frontal instruction is limited in favor of those learning areas attractive for the student; problem solving, teaching ways of changes management, participation in group activities represent an important part of the socialization process and encourage the practice of choice freedom.

To these philosophies, we can add *behaviorism* (represented by J. Watson, Pavlov, Skinner etc.) as an essential way of thinking and with a strong impact on the level of curriculum.

Therefore, at the level of curriculum projection and organization, there is to be sensed the influence of both categories of educational philosophies. As R. Tyler's observed (1949), school philosophy has a tremendous role in setting curricular objectives. In this way, at the level of curriculum, we need an

“integrative philosophy”, capable of offering a way of curricular structuring, representative for all the actors involved. Traditionalism (with its alternatives) and progressivism (with its variants) play an important role at the level of curriculum. As long as curriculum gravitates around pedagogical finalities, both philosophies harmonize at the level of its organization, thus justifying the existence of organization and methodological alternatives.

On the other hand, post modernity contributes to “the consolidation of the core epistemic nucleus” of the education sciences. It justifies and capitalizes, at the level of curriculum theory and practice, the main ways of theoretical and practical foundation of curriculum paradigm. In post modernity, the curriculum paradigm validates two perspectives, different at the educational level (cf. S. Cristea, 2004, p.8-10):

- *deconstruction perspective* which “encourages the detachment of certain elements of the whole, considered more important in a certain determined social and pedagogical context” (such as the education reform, lesson curricular projection, evaluation theory). The tendency manifested also at the level of “disintegration of some fundamental pedagogical sciences in favor of other research areas, considered priority in a certain historical stage”, leads to the impossibility of satisfying the essential requests of curriculum paradigm, related to “the necessity of unitary approach of the education process and the instruction/education activity, at the level of interactions between objectives-contents-methodology-evaluation, between teaching-learning-evaluation”
- *reconstruction perspective* which “provides the permanent construction of the whole (education, instruction, education/instruction projection), enriched as a consequence of integrating fragmentary analyses in the new structure of the reference system”. Such a perspective justifies curriculum paradigm which, once with Tyler’s study *Basic principles of curriculum and instruction*, 1949, unifies all the efforts in an axiomatic framework with a strong operative role.

When the subject of curricular projection and organization is brought into discussion, Robert M. Gagné (1977, p.12) argues in favor of following some fundamental principles. They are based on the learning conditions which have to be established at the level of curriculum. The key principles are the following:

1. *Instruction planning has to be made for each individual*, being individual-oriented (instruction individualization) in the process of his development from child to adult, throughout his entire life
2. *Instructive design presents a series of phases* with a short or long duration. The immediate design refers to what the teacher does when he elaborates the lesson plan. The long-term design refers to the set of lessons organized on themes, courses and even to the entire educational system. These stages must be realized as distinct tasks; they should not be realized together. In the former stage, the teacher uses instruments from the latter one.

3. *The instruction systematically projected can affect to a great extent the individual's development.* It is not enough to only provide an educational environment in which the student could develop following his own way, because “unplanned and unguided learning leads almost always to training individuals who are not capable of attaining a meaningful existence in society” (p. 13).

4. *Instruction projection should be based on knowing the way human beings learn.* An extremely important role in developing individual abilities is that of the ways in which they can be formed, in which students are guided to learn. Therefore, the instructive design should take into account *the learning conditions* which are to be established depending on the effects we want to obtain.

Thus, this conception on instruction projection is based on a series of principles which fundaments it. From this perspective, the following question appears (R. M. Gagné, 1977): What kind of knowledge of learning is necessary in order to project instruction? The author argues for taking into consideration those aspects of the theory of learning which refer to “controllable events and conditions”, such as: contiguity, repetition (Ausubel, 1968, Gagne 1970), consolidation (Thorndike 1913). Learning conditions are, therefore, external and internal, being dependent on that that learns

Thus, post modernity remains an important scale of curriculum interpretation, which contributes to the expansion of its roles at the level of didactic processes.

## REFERENCES

1. **Cristea S.** 2000 - *Dicționar de pedagogie*. Grupul editorial Litera Internațional, Chișinău-București.
2. **Cristea S.** 2004 - *Studii de pedagogie generală*. E.D.P., București.
3. **Gagné R. W.**, 1975 - *The Conditions of Learning*. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston,
4. **Hirst P.H., Peters R.S.** 1970 - *The logic of education*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London,
5. **Hirst P.H.**, 1969 - *The Curriculum in Western European Education*.
6. **Johansen J., Collins H. W., Johnson J. A.**, 1986 - *American Education. An Introduction to Teaching*. Fifth Edition, Wm. C. Brown Publishers, Dubuque, IA,
7. **Soare E.**, 2007 - *Strategic Elements of Curriculum Development in P.H. Hirst's and R.S. Peters' Vision*. In *Scientific Bulletin, Education Sciences Series*, no. 1/2007, p. 237-247, University of Pitești Press.
8. **Tyler W. R.**, 1959 - *Basic principles of curriculum and instruction*. Chicago & London,
9. \*\*\* *Encyclopedia of educational research* .1960, ed. By Chester W. Harris, Marie R. Liba, Third Edittion, The MacMillan Company New York.