

COMPREHENSIVE IMPLICATIONS OF "CURRICULAR FLEXIBILITY" IN EDUCATION

Marius Costel EȘI

Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania

mariusesi@gmail.com

Abstract

The issue of curricular flexibility becomes relevant for the dimension of didactic sciences to the extent that it relates to the idea of curriculum design, to the multitude and diversity of teaching-learning methods or even to the idea of adaptability to the individual needs of pupils. Also, such a problem reveals ways of approaching education in relation to the idea of change at the level of the society. Given such assumptions, our approach first aims to identify what the main reasons and needs that underlie curricular flexibility are.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and propose effective methods of implementing the concept of "curricular flexibility" having as epistemic coordinates the increase in the relevance and adaptability of the educational system to the individual needs and the particularities of pupils, as well as the ways of implementing the curricular flexibility in schools.

The curricular flexibilization is an educational approach which intends to respond to diversity and the changes in the dynamics of the modern society. This flexibility finds its foundation in the recognition that each pupil has different needs, interests and learning paces. By implementing the curricular flexibility, schools can respond more effectively to these individual differences, by providing a more personalized and relevant education.

Keywords: *curricular flexibility; curriculum rethinking; personalization of learning; educational autonomy.*

Indroduction

The curricular flexibility makes possible a personalization/individualization of education in order to ensure that each educational actor involved in the instructional-educational approach (our reference is made to the pupil, it goes without saying) has equal learning opportunities that can determine the success over time. Precisely in such a context,

the curricular flexibility mirrors the need for the curricular adaptation to respond to the pupils' individual needs and paces. Such curricular adaptation can reveal a table of alternatives regarding the teaching/assessment strategies or the content transmitted/received.

Also, the curricular flexibility becomes relevant related to the education sciences in that it can prepare pupils in terms of creative/critical thinking or the development of problem-solving skills. A relevant role in this respect is the facilitation of interactive learning experiences, in an applied manner. Moreover, when we talk about the curricular flexibility, our attention must be focused mainly on aspects related to the personalization, the differentiation, the autonomy and the centering on the pupil of the instructional-educational process and also on the assumed axiological system (Cucoş, 1995).

The result of the curricular flexibility approach is given by the curricular capacity to face the new transformations at the social, economic and, not least, educational levels (Duarte, 2019). Such an approach is required in socio-educational praxis precisely because the foundations of the relationships at the level of society have an epistemic load, and some authors speak in this sense about an "epistemic flexibility" (Barnett, 2007). Such an "epistemic flexibility" reveals the very capacity for the curricular adaptation. It is about a way to transform and understand aspects of new contexts.

In educational terms, when we relate to the "epistemic flexibility" we are referring to the pupils' ability to adapt to new circumstances through processes of analysis, understanding, assessment in relation to new scientific discoveries. Also, the idea of curricular flexibility highlights the ability of the educational system to adapt to new social, economic, educational transformations, but also to the needs of those who learn (Rao & Meo, 2016). It is about a transformation of curricular programs, strategies and educational resources used at the level of the instructional-educational process.

In such a context, we can transpose the idea of epistemic flexibility to the level of curricular flexibility by considering the adaptive dimension at the curricular level. Thus, we note that along with the attempts to develop some critical, reflective thinking skills in pupils, an adjustment/reformation of some curricular programs was made over time. In addition, such a state of affairs has been complemented by an attempt to diversify teaching-learning-assessment methods, but also to combine them (Hattie, 2017). The inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary approaches and analyzes confirm the very idea of curricular flexibility at the level of the instructional process.

Also, the integration of transversal skills at the curricular level is a proof of epistemic flexibility. This can very well correlate with the ideas of hands-on experience, namely

contextualized learning. Such a state of affairs may allow pupils to be able to apply what they have learned but develop some skills in multiple and diverse contexts. We therefore note that the learning practices can be reformed/adapted to new learning contexts taking into account the feedback itself as well as the learning experience.

J. Dewey and the idea of a curriculum centered on the needs and interests of the pupil

In such an instructional approach, we believe that our attention must also focus on the idea of (learning) experience. It relates to the interaction between the learning and the actual experience of learning. The entire learning process thus constitutes a holistic approach through which the very idea of curriculum is contextualized. This state of fact is expressed by the idea that any form of curriculum must be built/achieved in such a way that it can reveal the social experience of the pupils in relation to the social environment, but also to their interests. In other words, there must be a close epistemic correlation between the knowledge/acquired knowledge and the social and educational experience.

Such aspects are captured very well by J. Dewey in his specialized works on the idea of curriculum. In his study "The Child and the Curriculum", J. Dewey analyzes the relationship between education and child development, highlighting that it is shaped by the interaction between the young person - perceived as being in an immature and unconsolidated stage - and the values, meanings and goals impregnated in the social and cultural environment of adults (Dewey, 1972, p.67). The American author shows that the human experience derives from a continuous accumulation of knowledge, shaped by a constant process of cultural reconstruction. In other words, the education is the process of reinterpreting experiences in the light of previous ones (Dewey, 1977, p.67). Thus, in his viewpoint, the past becomes a relevant resource for designing the future, both at the societal level and in the individual development of each child.

The education is a dynamic result of the interaction that the child achieves with his own cultural environment (Antonesei, 1996). From this perspective, the curriculum assumes responsibility for directing this child's experience by identifying and implementing effective learning strategies. However, it is essential to look at such an approach not as an end goal, but rather as an initial stage in the evolution of the child's educational journey. According to Dewey's concept, the educational experience represents an effective and harmonious interaction between the learning process and the subjects studied (Dewey, 1992).

From J. Dewey's perspective, it is remarkable to see that the school and the child's trajectory are often divergent, having distinct goals and aspirations. Thus, the curriculum, far

from being just a rigid set of cultural contents, must essentially focus on the individual needs and interests of pupils. This perspective becomes justified by the fact that outside the school environment, the pupil is limited in the use of his learned experiences. Essentially, everything that is valuable in the school context cannot be applied in other circumstances. Therefore, the curriculum development must be guided by a well-defined path, coherent and adapted to the specific realities of pupils.

Above all, the curriculum must be thoroughly grounded in psychological principles, thus continuously adapting to the needs and individual capacities of the children and avoiding any attempt to impose or conflict with the inner reality of each child. It must be designed and applied in a way that respects and capitalizes on the unique identity of each pupil. Thus, for J Dewey, the curriculum represents a synthesis of human experience accumulated over time, just as a traveler draws on his own experience to guide and influence other travelers in exploring their own pathways.

An interesting detail is how the teacher orients and draws inspiration from the curriculum in his own teaching practice, having the ability to directly shape the learning environment of the children. Therefore, the development and application of the curriculum must equally be an art and a science, continuously adapted to respond to the changing needs of pupils and to provide them with authentic opportunities for learning and personal development. A deep knowledge of the essence of a curriculum allows the teacher to identify and capitalize on the ability and potential of each child in the learning process.

The truth gained through exploring and understanding the curriculum influences how it is shaped and applied in educational practice. In this context, the teacher acts as a guide and the child acts as an active partner in his own development and learning process. Thus, the concept of "learning experience", promoted by J. Dewey, becomes relevant through its adaptation to the educational reality. This approach highlights the paradigmatic change induced by J. Dewey's theory. The curriculum is not just limited to learning content, but it is also a deep understanding of how children learn and develop. With J. Dewey, we therefore move to a curriculum that emphasizes the pupil's interests and needs, and such an approach reflects flexibility itself and, implicitly, a flexible curriculum.

J. Dewey's ideas can be explained at the level of curricular flexibilisation by the fact that he emphasizes the relevance of the individual experience of the pupils. From this standpoint, we talk about a pupil-centered curriculum. The experience as the foundation of the learning process is also the result of assuming and deepening a curriculum that must provide opportunities for its practical use. It is a flexible curriculum that supports the

participatory and active learning, the critical thinking, the problem solving and the creativity. Also, such a flexible curriculum relates to the ways in which it is achieved. We consider in such a context the educational actors who support it, where they apply it and how they capitalize on it.

A flexible curriculum must provide useful real-life contexts and it must allow the pupils to apply their knowledge and skills to concrete real-world problems and situations. It must also support the collaboration among pupils and it must encourage the teamwork by developing the pupils' social and communication skills in a democratic environment. Therefore, the connection between what is learned in school and pupils' real life becomes relevant.

The curricular flexibility between personalization and differentiation

Beyond the cultural variety and the multitude of teaching-learning strategies, the idea of curricular flexibility brings with it a multitude of aspects focused on increasing diversity in relation to the achievement of personalized but also differentiated learning approaches. Thus, the contextualization according to adaptability, but also accessibility is a complex process that manifests itself at the level of significant conceptual realities. Understanding the appropriateness of using different instructional strategies in relation to the idea of curricular flexibility, depending on the diversity and personality of learning systems (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013), can make it possible to create an adaptive learning context that constitutes a benchmark in terms of the achievement of a later instructional approach (Gronseth & Bauder, 2022).

The curricular flexibility also allows for the permanent learning on the part of the pupil. This makes it possible for the understanding of the learning process to be associated with the idea of metacognitive skills. Moreover, such skills become relevant precisely in the self-evaluation process. It is about a whole metacognitive process that develops over time following a step by step pattern. However, through the development of metacognitions, we believe that it is necessary that the learning process must take place in a structured, organized and even in a independent manner. That is why, in such an approach, we believe that the autonomy of learning becomes significant.

A first argument consists in the fact that pupils who develop metacognitions are more effective in managing time, planning and organizing learning activities. These skills allow them to approach learning tasks with more confidence and to achieve better results. They can also set their learning goals.

A second argument relates to the idea of autonomy in the learning process. The autonomy allows the pupils to have the opportunity to choose how and what to learn, manifesting their freedom of expression and learning (McCalla, 1992; Houlden & Veletsianos, 2020). The connection between the two dimensions, autonomy and flexibility makes it possible to create a learning context. This relationship makes it possible to adapt the curriculum contents, the education plans in relation to the interests, needs and capacities of the pupils.

Thus, the pupils have the opportunity to make personalized learning plans based on their own interests and needs. Also, through a flexible curriculum, they can implement and manage their own hobbies and projects in the learning process. Their usefulness is achieved within the self-assessment process, but also in contexts where they can show/demonstrate their skills and knowledge gradually acquired over time.

A third argument resides in the fact that the metacognitive skills become relevant to the lifelong learning. The pupils who learn to monitor and evaluate their own learning strategies adapt much more easily to new transformations in society, while managing to continue their personal and professional development in the long run.

Such a personalization may include the use of a range of educational materials and resources, tailored to each pupil's needs and learning style. The use of alternative textbooks is an argument in favor of the idea of curricular flexibility. Their analysis from the content perspective reveals the possibility of epistemic reconsiderations. Also, from a methodological standpoint, we can talk about various approaches, using different strategies of the same issue.

However, regardless of the learning method adopted by the pupils, we believe that it is necessary for teachers to capitalize on multiple/diverse learning strategies in order to achieve an effective learning process. In other words, for a different typology of pupils, a different use of teaching strategies is necessary (promoting creative and innovative approaches is a first stage, in our opinion, in such an educational context). The purpose of such strategies is not to identify one or more for a specific pupil, but rather to see which of them prove to be beneficial, useful in the functionality of the instructional process.

In addition, by creating flexible educational programs, individualized support can be provided for each pupil, helping them to develop their strengths and overcome their challenges. To the extent that such flexible educational programs are drawn-up and implemented, there is the possibility of a personalized support for pupils that takes into account their own needs and interests in the learning process (Alpay, 2013; Ricco & Ohland, 2011). Such a situation allows precisely the identification and capitalization of those strong

points for each pupil, offering them opportunities, but also resources in order to develop these types of skills.

We can see that the benefits of the curricular flexibility can be substantial, but their administration must be carried out carefully in order to preserve the quality of the learning process as well as the opportunities/equal chances for the pupils within it. The pupils can be better prepared for the challenges/demands of the present time and the future by easily integrating new concepts and technologies into their instructional process (McPhail, 2019; Baldwin & Baumann, 2005).

Certainly, when we talk about the personalization of the learning process, we must also take into account a number of details related to the idea of the standardization of learning. Thus, it is more difficult to assess the performances among pupils or even among different school units. In addition, starting from the idea that there is the possibility for pupils to follow their own "personalized" learning pathways and then the evaluation of their performances is also difficult to achieve. Also, the diversity and multitude of evaluation strategies at the level of curricular flexibility does not allow the reporting to a common standard, which makes it difficult to establish specific evaluation criteria in this respect.

Moreover, at the level of various institutions we can talk about different evaluation/standardization criteria, a fact that can generate difficulties in explaining the ideas of competitiveness and school performance. Such inconsistency in what constitutes the educational standard reveals significant discrepancies in the level of education provided and facilitated by differing curricular interpretations and applications. Therefore, the equity in education related to the idea of curricular flexibility involves ensuring that all pupils have equal access to learning opportunities and educational resources, regardless of the different choices they make within the flexible curriculum.

That is the reason why it is necessary at the educational level to implement some educational policies and practices that provide support in order to reduce such discrepancies, so that each pupil can reach his maximum potential in the learning process. Of course, the existence and use of additional resources reveals a significant role in this regard (especially for disadvantaged persons/groups, with special needs, etc.). It is basically about preserving equity in education that can be strengthened through the opportunities and challenges specific to the curricular flexibility.

When we talk about challenges at the level of the curricular flexibility, we must consider the future of education (Cole, 1962). That is why we can ask ourselves what the main coordinates of action are when we talk about the evolution of the "curricular flexibility"

in a social, economic and educational context. We can thus identify those that take into account the educational technologies built on artificial intelligence or virtual reality through which learning can be personalized, but also the curriculum adapted based on the needs and interests of the pupils.

Also, we can also identify a coordinate that is becoming increasingly obvious in the instructional process, namely the hybridization of learning in order to ensure the freedom of management of the pupils' own learning process. The development and promotion of transversal skills is another coordinate intended to support the idea of curricular flexibility in order to develop critical thinking, communication skills, inter-personal collaboration but also with the community, as well as the problem solving.

Conclusions

Through the curricular flexibility, we can appreciate that pupils are provided with equal learning opportunities and the education they benefit from, as well as the pace of learning, can be tailored. Precisely in such an approach, we can talk about curricular adaptation in relation to the interests, needs and capacities of each pupil. Hence, the diversity of strategies that are used in the learning process.

By means of such an idea, that of curricular flexibility, the curriculum can be adapted/readjusted according to the new changes that have occurred in the social, economic and, last but not least, educational terms. In such an approach, some authors speak of "epistemic flexibility" (Barnett). It is about facilitating the development of metacognitive skills that become significant in the autonomous learning. Such a state of fact allows for the adaptation of educational plans and their contents in accordance to the needs and aspirations of the pupils.

Starting from these assumptions and summarizing those explained and argued in this investigative approach, we can state the following:

- When we talk about the curricular flexibility, the teachers' attention must be mainly focused on the complexity of the learning process. That's why it becomes relevant to identify and frame from a conceptual and theoretical viewpoint the idea of curricular learning in a certain educational context well explained in relation to the needs and interests of the pupil.
- Dewey's ideas about the experiential learning, the active involvement of the pupil or the life-oriented education can serve as a theoretical foundation for the implementation of the curricular flexibility in today's society, thus contributing to the

promotion of an education more adapted to the individual needs and aspirations of pupils.

- The interest in the curricular flexibility has and it must have as its starting point a series of reasons, namely the learning needs that can be correlated with a very good preparation for a world in permanent transformation. The future generation must develop a series of meta-competences designed to support them in a context where they must know how to learn and how to apply the knowledge learnt over time and in this sense the learning experience becomes fundamental.
- In the current context, understanding the idea of curricular flexibility requires reporting educational actors to a series of examples of practices or concrete examples of application and capitalization of some didactic/methodological strategies used in the instructional process (for example, personalized learning programs, individual and group projects, competency-based learning or alternative assessment approaches).

Although the benefits of the curricular flexibility are significant, we must pay special attention to their management in order to maintain the integrity and coherence of the learning process, as well as to ensure the equality of opportunity among pupils. The effective integration of new concepts and technologies within the educational process can play a relevant role in preparing pupils for the challenges the contemporary society throws at them. Therefore, pupils can be provided with an accessible learning context in which they can explore and develop their own potential.

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