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Key Issues of Curriculum Evolution and their Educational Implications

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the various meanings conferred to the concept of curriculum and the way in which they are reflected at the level of the educational theory and practice. There are presented the most important stages this concept has traversed and the ways these stages can explain the manner we look at curriculum today. We emphasize the role which the historic foundations have in making clear some approaches we find at the level of the educational practice and theory. Another important direction presented in our study is that of post-modernity and its implications on the curriculum. There are presented the main streams and the impact these have on curriculum, offering, at the same time, some concrete trends which can be identified in the future evolutions of the curriculum.

Key words: *curriculum, education, postmodernism, reconceptualism, historical fundaments of curriculum*

Introduction

The term curriculum, firstly mentioned in the documents of Leiden University (Netherlands, 1582) and Glasgow University (Scotland, 1633) and described in "The Oxford English Dictionary" (OED) as „compulsory study or instruction course, held in a school or university” has come, nowadays, to arouse some of the most vehement controvercies.

From being ignored to becoming the central point of school reform, the concept of curriculum is nowadays a reference point school education.

Between the 16th century and for the 19th century, more often, as it is reflected in Webster’s New International Dictionary, the concept of curriculum was regarded as „an official course organized in a school or college, which finishes with obtaining a degree, a level of instruction” and „the entire coprpus of courses offered in an educational institution or one of its departments”, being materialized in documents such as education plans, syllabuses, the list of academic disciplines functioning, in this period, as the main structuring criterion

The meanings given to the concept of curriculum are important in order to understand its role in organizing instruction.

The Interpretations Offered the Concept of Curriculum

Pedagogical literature has acknowledged three stages which emphasize the interpretations offered the concept of curriculum and the different ways of conceiving and realizing the educational practice:

- *the traditional stage*: curriculum with the sense of official course organized in an institutionalized context, specialized in education, adapted to the changes present at the level of society;
- *the modern stage*: curriculum with the sense of pedagogical project organized by correlating educational disciplines to student's direct/indirect learning experiences, extended beyond formal environment (Dewey, Bobbitt);
- *the postmodern stage*: curriculum with the sense of pedagogical project organized based on some principles which show the utmost importance of assumed objectives determining the choice of learning experiences, the strategies of learning organization and the means of evaluating school results (Tyler).

If the traditional/pre-modern period do not allow defining curriculum as a fundamental concept specific to pedagogy, reducing it to the level of content, modern meaning brings into discussion the problem of rethinking the relations between students' experiences and education content.

In this sense, curriculum becomes the educational process which adapts school disciplines to child's background and experiences.

Postmodern period deliniates the principles lying at the basis of curriculum: defining the main pedagogical objectives, selecting educational contents proposed as learning experiences depending on the mentioned objectives, organizing, from a methodological point of view, of learning experiences, evaluating the results of didactic activity related to the educational objectives proposed initially.

An efficient way of surpassing the contradictions and the multitude of meanings given to this concept is that of looking back to its *historical fundaments*. [2, p. 156]

This is the main reason why the concept of curriculum arouses so many misunderstandings concerning its nature and comprehensive area.

Historical Fundaments of Curriculum

The historical fundaments of curriculum „sustain the elucidation of the concept from the perspective of its pedagogical and social evolution”, realized in the main three significant stages: pre-modern, modern and post-modern stages.

Thus, for the post-modern period, the principles established by Ralph Tyler draw the guiding lines of curriculum conceptualization.

These principles „will mark the evolution of curriculum between 1950-1970 as a rational projection model (objectives – learning experiences/contents and methodology – evaluation, having a continuous adjustment – self-adjustment role in the education/instruction activity)”.

After 1970, the concept of curriculum extends to a much broader sense, as it is presented by D'Hainaut L.: curriculum represents an educational project which defines:

- a) goals, purposes and objectives of an educational action;
- b) ways, means and activities used for accomplishing these goals;
- c) the methods and instruments to evaluate to what extent the action has succeeded. [2, p. 157]

The historical fundamentation of the concept of curriculum offers an unitary and coherent perspective on realizing today's instruction.

The rapprochement to the modern definition of curriculum was offered by John Dewey, who was preoccupied with the necessity of correlating the contents of school syllabuses with the objectives of instruction and learning experiences organized by the teacher for his students: „the curriculum represents the organized whole of the truth assimilated through learning”.

He is one of the first theorists and practitioners who contributed to this concept extension.

His paper do not object to the traditional meaning of the concept, but draws attention to its possible misunderstanding as representing two separate entities:

- a) disciplines and subjects studied in school;
- b) child's learning experience, organized by school.

The Educator's Professionalization

Educator's professionalization reveals itself in the correlation process of these two phenomena through a „continuous reconstruction which begins from child's present experience and moves to what the organized whole of the truth assimilated through learning represents”.

„To hardly learn” or „to learn easily” are things which reflect child's skills and the particularities of the curriculum (seen traditionally, as pre-organized knowledge to be achieved). Decisive is also the structuring of knowledge assimilation or of „learning experiences”, so that it should reveal child's natural inclination.

Thus, it is suggested that this last approach of the curriculum should be integrated, as a component part. [1]

Is there „a conflict between child and curriculum, between child's experiences and the structural forms of disciplines in educational plan?” Dewey asked. [4, p. 71]

This happens when we do not take into account, while constructing the curriculum, the learning experiences which take place outside school space.

Another major contribution regarding a possible interpretation pattern of curriculum evolution in post-modern society is offered by S. Cristea, for whom the evolution of the meaning of curriculum is influenced by the permanent education, which leads to curriculum development as a projection model of a *rational* (objectives with a decisive role), *process* (educational actors' didactic interaction, specific to contexts) and *motivational* type (actors' interests in the educational field). [2, p. 157]

An interesting perspective, we are to take into account in our study, is to be found in the way D. Potolea presents curriculum.

The author does not offer a definition of this concept, but he states it: „it is a construct-concept, not a notion which more or less accurately reflects an existent reality, but a mental construction which refers to a reality which is about to be born”. And: „curriculum is firstly a project which has the value of a plan of educational action”.

It „from a functional point of view, indicates goals to be attained, directs, organizes and leads the instruction and learning process; from a structural point of view, presupposes goals, contents, time for instruction/learning, teaching/learning strategies, evaluation strategies; from the perspective of the product, it materializes in: educational plans, school syllabuses, textbooks and a variety of auxiliary curricular materials”. [8, p. 82-83]

Thus, curriculum defines, constructs, grounds itself, and the way we are sure we are in the right direction that, we must always return to history.

Especially in this case of curriculum, whose resources are to be fully found in the way the industrialized and democratic society is structured.

The post-modern period, characterized by the revolution proposed by Ralph Tyler's model will offer multiple approaches.

The understanding of the historical contributions of the most outstanding authors of this period can be facilitated by some various classifications of how this period of time evolved.

We will focus, for the moment, on that offered by Mutch C. According to this author, three major trends are to be detached: traditionalism, reconceptualism and post-reconceptualism.

Traditionalism

Traditionalism is reflected by theories from the beginning of the 20th century, regarding the model of social efficiency of the curriculum, exemplified by:

- a) Tyler's model (1949);
- b) Taba (1962);
- c) Walker (1972);
- d) McGee (1997) etc.

These models, which, in Ornstein și Hunkins's opinion, (1998), „resulted in acknowledged knowledge and research fields” and are characterized by the materialization of „the four functions of theory”:

- 1. descriptive;
- 2. predictable;
- 3. explanatory;
- 4. orientative.

The traditionalist approaches offer models of curricular development which explain the important factors which lie at the basis of decisions regarding realizing curricular construction.

These ways include approaches of a historical, cultural, gender, critical and post-modern type.

Although there are many studies on curriculum, we agree with Kliebard's conclusion (1992), according to which, despite the field of curriculum has its own history, it often lacks a historical perspective.

Reconceptualism

The '70s bring into discussion the models imposed by the traditional period. The emphasis moves from curricular development to its understanding.

The reconceptualist approaches are in search for new alternative ways and for new perspectives on curriculum. From *how* to *why* seems to be the major characteristics of this trend.

Post-reconceptualism

Post-reconceptualism is characterized by several key elements observed by Wright [7, p. 84]:

- we do not find a single global theory, but there are to be found multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives, such as:
 - progressivism;
 - phenomenology;
 - hermeneutics and critical theory, illustrated by Dewey's, Piaget's, Tyler și Habermas's studies;
- post-discourses development and new canons: post-modernism, post-structuralism, Freud post-analysis, illustrated by Derrida's, Felman's, Lacan's and Kristeva's studies;
- several clear study guidelines are crystallized;
- reconceptualism, as a rebuff to traditionalism, has not achieved its aims;
- the evolution in this field is not clear, but several clear trends are being crystallized;

Conclusions

There are worth following, according to the already mentioned author [7], the trends which are being crystallized in the theory of curriculum, as a result of critical approach of traditional models.

We must have in view the multiple perspectives on curriculum, without eliminating the initial efforts which shaped the field and paradigm of curriculum in post-modern society.

This approach can represent a subsequent study line we are in view.

The way we look at post modernity has vital influences on the way we educate.

The various perspectives on the curriculum must be integrated into the educational practices, and the curriculum paradigm plays a major role in the projection, realization, development and perfection of the component activities of the learning process.

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Elemente privind evoluția curriculumului și implicațiile lor școlare

Rezumat

Acest articol se concentrează asupra diferitelor sensuri conferite conceptului de curriculum și asupra modului în care acestea se reflectă la nivelul teoriei și practicii educaționale. Sunt trecute în revistă cele mai importante etape pe care acest concept le-a traversat precum și modalitățile prin care aceste etape pot explica maniera în care privim astăzi curriculumul. Este accentuat rolul pe care fundamentele istorice îl au în clarificarea unor abordări pe care le găsim la nivelul teoriei și practicii educaționale. O altă direcție importantă pe care o prezentăm în studiul nostru este cea a postmodernității și a implicațiilor pe care aceasta le are asupra curriculumului. În consecință, sunt prezentate principalele curente și impactul pe care acestea îl au asupra curriculumului, oferind în același timp câteva tendințe care pot fi identificate în evoluțiile viitoare ale conceptului de curriculum.