



Original Contribution

EUROPEAN DIMENSION OF EDUCATION – CURRICULAR ASPECTS

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ABSTRACT

As schooling and curricula become more diverse, governments are cast in the role of regulators, license providers and protectors of minimum standards – of safety, water, sanitation, timetables, teacher qualifications and certification of student achievement. In many countries, the search for curriculum standards has led to a fundamental review of what it means to be educated – or more precisely, what it means to be, say, an educated Romanian or Russian or Slovene.

Key Words: teacher qualifications, student achievement

INTRODUCTION

In literature the European dimension is understood as a principle present in education system enhancing understanding of wider European context and educational perspectives, opening horizons of global thinking and intercultural understanding¹. The European dimension includes both a dimension of cognition (knowledge of Europe) and a dimension of affection (relationship, attitude, experience and Europe). It is necessary to define the European dimension in a wider sense, which also includes the following aspects: anthropological-existential, cultural, cognitive, emancipation, participation and effective, qualitative, economic, social, egalitarian, communicative, as well as the aspects of protection, mobility and security.

THE CURRICULUM IN EUROPEAN EDUCATION

In many countries, the search for curriculum

standards has led to a fundamental review of what it means to be educated – or more precisely, what it means to be, say, an educated Romanian or Russian or Slovene. This raises many questions: Can the content of education be globally defined? Or should it reflect and to what extent the specific culture and society in which it takes place? As migration within and beyond the region increases, are there common expectations, and if so, who defines them? To what extent can common expectations be accessible to all learners? And what kind of accommodations should be made to ensure accessibility?

Systematic work in curriculum reform began only in the late 1990's, including a large-scale EU funded project in Poland and Romania's new National Curriculum Framework. In the most successful cases, greater school-based autonomy is balanced by national standards for each subject. In these cases, schools may vary their curricula, choose their own teaching methods and introduce new courses, such as environmental and health education, ethics, civics and economics.

THE CONCEPT OF CURRICULUM

There is some semantic difficulty with the term *curriculum*. In international usage, it

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refers to everything that goes on in schools: not only the content of lessons or textbooks but also the development of the students in the total context of their school experience. In the transition countries, the term *curriculum* tends to refer to a curriculum plan (a framework list of subjects and choices, plus a timetable for each level of schooling), or to subject-related educational programs or educational field syllabuses that provide details of topics to be covered. The latter are usually developed by expert subject committees, often based in education institutes or universities, which may or may not include classroom teachers.

While this procedure is probably effective for simultaneous reform of an entire curriculum, it is less so when changes pertain to one subject or one school level while the rest remains unchanged. Rarely is there a mechanism to assure the overall coherence of the curriculum both horizontally and vertically.

Expert committees tend to concentrate on their own area, plus perhaps one or two related subjects – for example, physics may look across to mathematics in terms of coverage and pedagogical approach.

But the excessively subject-bound nature of the process and the lack of coordination inevitably result in a fragmented, overloaded plan, and at school level it is the timetable rather than educational goals or the design of the curriculum that dictates what teachers teach and students learn.

The greatest obstacle to curriculum reform is lack of time. In order to survive, many teachers have more than one job and cannot spend sufficient time with students. Many schools in the region work in shifts, often with reduced lesson-times (35 instead of 45 minutes). But timetables and curricula are not adapted to the time available, and they still demand coverage of all subjects and all chapters in the textbook. Lack of opportunity to learn is frustrating for both teachers and students, especially for slower learners. It is also a barrier to introducing methods such as active learning simply because student interaction demands time and resources. If shifts remain a practical necessity, the obvious remedy is to reduce the number of subjects taught. Instead, the common response is to reduce the hours per subject, leaving in some cases (such as foreign languages) only one or two 35-minute periods per week, which is clearly unsatisfactory.

In many transition countries, the curriculum remains centralized, fact-based, dense and detailed. The emphasis still is on

memorization rather than the development of learner skills, such as evaluation of evidence, independent judgment, understanding of cause-and-effect relationships, presentation of coherent arguments and analytical thinking. However, the new focus on standards, especially assessment standards, is making a difference.

One common innovation to increase choice and local relevance is to devise a framework that divides the curriculum into a core that must be taught nationally and a set of options. Ideally, these are agreed with community stakeholders and offer schools a chance to emphasize their strengths. Such *core plus options* models are usually expressed in percentages (percentage of time on the timetable, not content).

For example, 70 per cent of time is allotted to the national core and 30 per cent to locally developed curriculum options (as in Moldova, Romania and the Russian Federation, although percentages vary).

In practice, the model presents a number of problems. First, school directors and teachers find it hard to decide which part of the timetable and the textbook falls into the 70 per cent and which not. Moreover, because time is tight and only the national core is subject to national examinations, teachers, often under pressure from parents, are obliged to spend 100 per cent of the time on the 70 per cent covered by the examinable core. Secondly, schools have little curriculum development expertise and, because the optional subjects often require non-standard learning materials, teachers find they have to make their own – not easy when they lack even such basic supplies as paper and photocopiers. Nevertheless, creative and innovative work does take place, the best of it with community involvement. Specific subjects, such as life skills, environmental education, based on local conditions, civics, moral education, art, drama and music, can flourish under the right leadership, often with important NGO support.

Life skills can also include basic livelihood skills, such as computer education, general literacy and money management, indispensable in today's labour market and in breaking the cycle of unemployment and poverty. In The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, for example, UNICEF (with NGOs and the World Bank) supports 26 community youth centers that provide conflict resolution and peace education programmes, along with art and computer classes. More than 13 000 children attend these centers and

the attendance criteria are specific: the ethnic mix must reflect the local population, at least 60 per cent of the children must be from low-income families, at least 50 per cent must be girls and provision must be made for children with special needs. The centers are popular with youngsters and successful in breaking down ethnic segregation in the communities they serve.

Another trend at upper secondary level is for schools to specialize in a group of subjects, loosely described as *scientific* (mathematics and natural sciences) or *humanistic* (languages, economics and social sciences). Traditionally, the brightest students have been channeled into mathematics and natural sciences in the region, but due to the strong post – 1990 demand for social science courses – especially business, law and economics as well as languages – many prestigious lycées and gymnasiums offer specialized curricula in those subjects. These programmes are often high quality but entrance is selective and in many cases fees are charged.

Attempts to change curricula in the region have taught several lessons:

- Agreed standards are the foundation for curriculum reform. Without clear curriculum standards, no assessment or evaluation is possible. However, it is difficult to ensure that assessment systems are accessible to all learner groups and vigilance is required to make sure they include all learners.
- Curriculum change is not merely an academic issue – it is a process of public learning and negotiation. The creation of learning communities and networks, and links with the labour market demand community involvement.
- Working teachers should be members of expert curriculum committees to ensure a realistic view of student capacity and total workload. Isolated pressure groups and powerful individual stakeholders also need to participate in the process to widen the discussion and ensure all are heard.
- To avoid overload and fragmentation, curriculum reform needs to include a mechanism to ensure horizontal coherence (across subjects at a particular grade level) as well as vertical coherence (by subject from grade to grade).
- Flexibility, feedback and collaboration are essential, in particular at the stages of implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. The most successful curriculum change takes place where

there are links between top-down government-led reform and grass-roots innovation.

- Strong, practical help to schools and teachers must include timely information, in-service teacher training, provision of teacher guides and learning materials, and a supportive attitude from school inspectors.

EUROPEAN DIMENSION IN DEVELOPMENT TEACHERS

Now it is the time to ask a question who will implement the idea of European dimension in education? The requirements imposed on teachers in this aspect are substantial as apparent from the following list of tasks that a teacher should carry out in Europe and for Europe:

- They should spread knowledge that contributes to the development of European awareness, not only inform pupils about European symbols (flags, anthems, Euro etc.). European identity must be also encouraged by practical experience.
- They should initiate cooperation and communication at all levels of education and get involved in the European school network.
- They should prepare young generation for a responsible, peaceful and emancipated life in Europe that will have high qualitative and quantitative standard for all citizens.
- As we suppose that the level of education in our society will improve, teachers should encourage pupils to learn how to learn independently and encourage lifelong education.
- They should pay attention to how they convey basic values and norms.
- Teachers should not replace their national thinking by international ideas but broaden it to the European and international perspective
- Teachers should deal with the topics which are interesting for children and youth in order to spread knowledge of Europe and lead to understanding of integration processes.

ASPECTS OF THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION IN DEVELOPMENT EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP, CONSCIENCE AND BEHAVIOUR

The answer to the question how teachers are to fulfill the above mentioned requirements is

usually left to themselves. They have no choice but to handle, beside others, also the following problems:

- To define Europe is difficult due to its complexity and it presents one of the great difficulties in teaching. On the other hand, if there is not one “correct“ and “absolute“ definition of Europe, teachers are offered a chance to work with the concept of Europe in the context of just studied topic and, if possible, across taught subjects.
- The complexity of the topic of “Europe“ presents yet another problem. For most of us the European dimension is not simple to be understood as we have not experienced it in desirable extend. It is difficult to choose from the huge bulk of teaching material about Europe the content that is prior and important for teaching specific groups of pupils.
- Rapid development of Europe requires continuous update of knowledge on Europe in order to confront pupils with the current situation of European integration processes. This update seems to represent a considerable problem. It proves that a number of teachers at the advanced age and after years of practice are not able to acquire this new knowledge and correspondingly mediate it.
- Diversity of attitudes to European integration processes leads to a diversity in target visions of common life in Europe. That is why it is necessary to create common basis of values and norms that should be shared in pedagogical thinking and conduct of teachers.
- As well as the aims of integration processes, the expectations associated with them are understood differently by different groups of people. And so people can also experience disappointment that undermines their openness and motivation. In this context it should be taken into consideration that not only rational “political“ education is at stake but also emotions and empathy.

CONCLUSION

The requirement to promote the topic of Europe as a curricular content, integrate it into textbooks, teacher education and all areas of politics, economy and law presents a demanding task for future. Establishing of European identity is based on growing understanding of processes of European

integration. In education the aim is to initiate such teaching processes that would contribute to critical thinking about difficulties and obstacles as a challenge for the common development of Europe. The implementation of the European idea is inconceivable without participation, responsibility and investments from all people involved.

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