Implementation of Optional Disciplines in Schools: Case study in Bihor, Romania

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In the view of current educational curriculum foreshadows an educational route based on a bid of the school education system and represents the direct and indirect learning experiences given to the students, lived by those in formal, non-formal and informal background. From the applied perspective in Romania, the curriculum is classified into core curriculum, respectively school based curriculum (SBC). The decision latitude of the school level, through the possibility of developing a SBC, is consonant with the democratization of society and is a chance of appropriateness for an open system with multiple options. The study assumed, that although created in Romania, a legislative framework in this respect, there are still many shortcomings in the implementation of this type of curriculum. The study strategy used was a complex one. It combined both quantitative research methods and qualitative ones: literature review (framework documents on educational policies), a questionnaire survey, an unchanging analysis. This approach demonstrates the need for changes in school organization and culture, so as to allow individualization of the school and create a personality of it, and on the other hand, to ensure students their individual journeys, according to their interests and skills, enabling them to choose.

Introduction

The school curriculum includes the learning experiences students are invited to go through in an organized and systemic way. In the Romanian education system the operational curriculum consists of: *the core curriculum* (approximately 65-70% of the National Curriculum) and the *school-based curriculum* (approximately 30-35% of the National Curriculum). The school-based curriculum (SBC) is the set of education processes and learning experiences which each school offers directly to its students within its own curricular offer.

SBC is an educational project which includes, with optional status, various disciplines suggested by the educational institution or chosen by it from a list compiled by the Ministry of Education (Blândul,

2014:104). Each teacher has the opportunity to take part directly in the preparation of the curriculum, taking into account the actual conditions of the teaching activity. The importance of capitalizing on the SBC in school comes from the need for a more participatory education system, which meets local requirements and integrates with the labour market (Blândul & Bradea, 2015). In this context, the optional disciplines are considered actual subjects of study and/or transdisciplinary themes/modules, opportunities to provide the students with individual study itineraries, in accordance with their interests and abilities, concrete ways for the teachers to show their professional and psycho-pedagogical mastery in the topics they are interested in and, on the other hand, they are also opportunities for students to choose the field in which they want to develop skills and abilities and shape their own system of attitudes and values (Giurgea, 2007:16). At the same time, they also form the framework offered by school to students to choose their own learning paths, and it also helps parents choose a school based on what it offers (Blândul & Bradea, 2015).

The optional disciplines can be designed in a mono disciplinary approach, that is, at the level of one curricular area, or at the level of more curricular areas. SBC is not subject to external, national evaluations and examinations. The teacher who prepares this type of curriculum has the duty to work out, besides educational objectives and instructive-educational contents, the competences the children are expected to acquire, as well as the performances they are expected to achieve, and the appropriate assessment tools (Bradea & Peter, 2015).

A decision about SBC is made by the School Board after consulting students, parents and based on the resources available (*Law on National Education no. l/2011*, art. 65,5). The regulations in force stipulate that the optional disciplines are part of those teachers' timetabled teaching time who can prove their competence in the chosen area (disciplines that are mentioned on the transcript attached to their diploma of studies, continuing education courses, certificates of vocational proficiency, endorsed by school inspectorates etc) (Bradea & Peter, 2015).

Optional disciplines have been introduced in schools in Romania in the period 1998 - 2000, when he started Curricular Reform, but later, this very role and status became unclear and uncertain. Subsequently, the role and place of optional disciplines became confused and uncertain. Due to the completely new situation, several inherent difficulties arose soon, which required and imposed a quick change in mentality, at the level of decision makers (school directors, inspectors etc.), on the one hand, and at that of teachers, on the other hand. At the beginning, teachers were not at all keen on teaching optional disciplines. Many of them still consider it a burden

to teach an optional discipline and they do that only when they do not have other options. They prefer classes dedicated to deepening and widening contents of the core curriculum, because it is true that teachers have the main role in organising the teaching of optional disciplines. They find themselves in the exclusive position of curriculum creators, which means drawing on their competences in order to create learning situations that have not been prescribed by others (Bradea & Peter, 2015).

In Romania, there is a long tradition of a curriculum based on disciplines and most teachers are specialised in only one academic discipline, as it often happens in secondary education. Some of the transversal competences are learnt along with the disciplinary ones: sometimes in an explicit way (through inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary approaches), other times in an implicit way (as a side effect of extending and diversifying the contexts in which disciplinary competences are learnt and practised) (CIDREE, 1998). Gradually, as transversal competences are learnt, they become factors that facilitate the learning of disciplinary competences, which are the factors that drive and explain school success (Voiculescu, 2011).

The research focused on analyzing how they are implemented optional disciplines in schools from Romania.

Methodology of Research

The specific objectives of the research were the following: (1) identifying institutional policies on selecting and approving optional disciplines, (2) identifying the teachers' opinion, depending on their teaching certification, on the usefulness of optional disciplines, (3) identifying optional disciplines implemented in schools.

The specific hypothesis of the study was the following: there are significant statistical differences between the teachers' willingness to implement new optional disciplines and the policy of the school where they teach.

The sample of the research consisted of 127 participants (N = 127), all of them teachers from pre-university educational institutions from Romania. The people included in the sample were chosen using the simple random sampling procedure, and they belonged to the following categories: according to the school stage: 64 primary school teachers and 36% secondary school teachers, according to years of teaching: less than 5 years – 0% between 6 and l0 years – 36%, between 11 and l5 years – 36 %, above 15 years 28% , according to the certifications obtained: beginner teachers and those with full-time professional degree – 14%,

teacher certification level 2 – 64%, teacher certification level I – 22%.

The instrument used in this research was a questionnaire consisting of three parts: the first part included the respondents' personal data, the second one five items on the ways optional disciplines are suggested and selected at school level, and the third part included questions on the teachers' attitude towards the place and role of optional disciplines in the national curriculum. The questionnaire was filled in online by each respondent and the answers were imported into a database that was accessed by the person conducting the research. The study was carried out from April 2014 to October 2014.

The quantitative interpretation of the results was performed by calculating the statistical frequency of the answers. In addition, the answers given by the respondents belonging to different subcategories of the sample were comparatively analysed according to the professional certification level: beginner, full-time professional degree, teacher certification level 2 or 1. The statistical processing of the values obtained was performed using the SPSS program.

Results of Research

The results obtained can be seen in the following tables:

Table 1. Ways of selecting optional disciplines

Teaching certification	Need to complete some teaching loads (%)	Some disciplines are favoured by the SBC (%)	Students' disinterest (%)	Inadequate material resources (%)
Beginner	4	0	2	2
Full-time professional degree	10	3	0	3
Certification level 2	27	4	0	6
Certification level 1	12	11	0	8
Total	53	18	2	17

Two interesting things can be noticed when analysing the data in the table above: on the one hand, a high percentage (53%) of the

teachers who suggested at least once an optional discipline felt aggrieved when it was not selected for the SBC. Likewise, 18% of the respondents consider that there are disciplines that are favoured by the SBC, and an almost similar percentage believes that the optional disciplines suggested by them were not selected because of inadequate material resources. 2% of the respondents, who are at the beginning of their teaching career, consider that the suggested optional disciplines were not selected because of the students' disinterest. It is most likely that these teachers do not have yet the experience needed to understand the correct and true reasons beyond selecting or rejecting an optional discipline. Only 10% of the respondents did not suggest an optional discipline. On the other hand, all those respondents who form the 53% consider that the selection of optional disciplines is based only on the "need to complete some teaching loads", and this happened while they had 4 other reasons to choose from.

In order to see the reasons why optional disciplines are selected or not, was calculated χ2: $\chi^2(3) = 15,440$; $p < 0.01$, which shows that there are significant differences between the reasons why optional disciplines are selected by the school board, the most frequent reason being that of completing teaching load.

Table 2. Usefulness of optional disciplines

Teaching certification			Usefulness of optional disciplines			Total
			uncertain	agree	strongly agree	
	Beginner	% of Total	2.0	0.0	2.0	4.0
	Full-time professional degree	% of Total	0.0	8.0	2.0	10.0
	Certification level 2	% of Total	0.0	26.0	38.0	64.0
	Certification level 1	% of Total	0.0	11.0	11.0	22.0
Total		% of Total	2.0	45.0	53.0	100.0

It can be seen that the great majority of teachers included in the research consider that the optional disciplines are useful for developing inter- and transdisciplinary competences in students. Only 2% of the respondents are uncertain in this respect, they belong to the category of teachers with less teaching experience and without a certification level. This is the very explanation for their answers, they probably do not have yet the experience

needed to appreciate the importance of optional disciplines. As far as the other teachers are concerned, 98% of them agree or strongly agree with the usefulness of optional disciplines.

Table 3. The usefulness of optional cross-curricular disciplines (that involve more disciplines) in forming and developing competences in students

Teaching certification			The usefulness of crosscurricular optional disciplines			Total
			uncertain	Agree	strongly agree	
	Beginner	% of Total	0.0	4.0	0.0	4.0
	Full-time professional degree	% of Total	2.0	6.0	2.0	10.0
	Certification level 2	% of Total	0.0	47.0	17.0	64.0
	Certification level 1	% of Total	0.0	13.0	9.0	22.0
Total		% of Total	2.0	70.0	28.0	100.0

The results are quite similar to those presented earlier, 98% of the teachers included in the research either agree (70%) or strongly agree (28%) with the significant effectiveness of optional disciplines in forming and developing transversal competences in students. This is good news, as we live in a society that requires more and more people who are capable of coping with various challenges, in different contexts, rather than people who have competences only in one field.

Unfortunately, only a small percentage of these disciplines are included in the SBC, as it is shown by the following table. This is something that should be taken into account both by those who do the actual work and suggest these disciplines and by those who train future teachers and provide further training to those who have already started teaching.

Table 4. The percentage of optional disciplines

School stage	At the level of one school discipline		Cross-curricular	
	discipline	percentage	discipline	percentage
Primary school	Fun Mathematics	47.5	-	0
	Literature for kids	25	-	0
	Writing and Calligraphy	22.5	-	0
	English language	5	-	0
Secondary school	English language	45	-	
	Choir	21.67	-	
	Painting	20	-	
			Computing and ICT	13.33

The data in the table with the percentage of optional disciplines in primary and secondary schools show that at the level of primary schools there are no cross-curricular optional disciplines. Instead of that, almost half of the teachers (47.5%) chose Fun Mathematics. One explanation for that could be the need for deepening the children's knowledge of mathematics, but it can also been seen as an attempt to teach everything that is included in a usually overloaded curriculum. Literature for Kids and Writing and Calligraphy have almost the same percentage, and only 2 (5%) out of the 40 respondents opted for the English language.

At the level of secondary schools the situation is not much better, but here there is at least one optional cross-curricular discipline, Computing and ICT, which, however, was chosen only by 8 out of the 60 teachers (13.33%). The English language has a rather high percentage (45%), which can be explained with the need for deepening the knowledge of a foreign language, while choir and painting have lower percentages.

Discussion

The results presented above show that, in general, teachers suggest and want to teach new optional disciplines, but the school boards quite often reject them, as there are situations when other teachers need this category of disciplines to complete their teaching load. This implies first of all a change in the thinking of the management of pre-university educational institutions so that good practices in curriculum

management can be identified and promoted. A particular attention should be given, in this respect, to curricular contextualization, which means establishing connections between various disciplinary contents and real life situations the students experience. This should be done by designing effective learning environments, taking into account various parameters. Curricular contextualization involves: a) intervention in order to adapt to the context of the school and of the class of students/ of the student (differentiation, individualization) so that the educational objectives can be achieved (developing the students' competences and achieving the expected school performances); b) adoption of those educational practices which proved effective in solving specific problematic situations; c) adjustment to the diversity of competences requested by the broader social environment and by the labour market (Fernandes et al., 2012). The study has proved that teachers are aware of the importance of optional disciplines (of the cross-curricular ones in particular), and know the obstacles they have to face in order to make the curriculum flexible (personalisation, focusing on developing transversal competences). If the educational policy of the school encouraged the strengthening of a socio-professional environment based on trust, cooperation, reflexivity, proactive attitude and it observed the methodology in place concerning SBC implementation, the diversity of these disciplines would be much higher and would transcend the boundary of formal education, extending into various contexts of non-formal and informal education.

Another aspect that affects the process of SBC implementation is connected with the way students or parents are involved in choosing the disciplines from the offer of the school. Although the methodology stipulates this fact, in most cases they do not have the possibility to choose, the optional discipline is rather imposed on them. This happens either because the offer is limited (the reason for that most often is the insufficient financial resources of the school), or because some disciplines are preferred to others. Though the optional classes are included in the free state education, the Parents' Councils have to purchase certain materials that are required to hold them. Because of that, the spectrum of optional disciplines in the SBC is restricted to one discipline, and even less at cross-curricular level, where textbooks and certain accessories are not available, but have to be purchased by parents and students.

Despite all these, teachers want to teach integrated disciplines, where they have a total freedom to choose contents. When they do that, they are no longer restricted by the curriculum, by the need to cover certain contents in a given time, and the integrated curricular approach can be noticed in the results obtained (Skilbeck, 1984). In some cases, however, they do not feel prepared for such approaches, which imply working in multidisciplinary teams.

Conclusions

Through an adequate management, optional disciplines can become important assets to schools, providing complementarity to basic education and contributing significantly to building institutional ethos. By developing a curricular project, the school can build its own identity and can inform the local community about the type of training and education it provides and its advantages over other schools. As a result, curriculum management is at school level one of the key points for promoting it as an institution with a distinctive identity, which is a very important aspect in a competitive and stimulating environment, in a context that connects school with the particularities of the local community and with the trends education is expected to meet. The change in education is, however, easy to suggest, hard to implement and incredibly difficult to sustain (Jan van den Akker, 2010:6).

Teachers' initial training and professional development can play a key role in helping them to acquire new work related skills, abilities and techniques, mainly in conceiving and teaching an integrated curriculum in a team. However, the major changes have to take place at the decision making levels of schools because in Romania the focus is on teaching those curricular aspects that have been tested at national level. The adequate situations for assessing students could be extended to informal learning contexts, as is the case, for instance, with social and civic competences. Students' active participation in school and community activities is an integrated component of social and civic competences in most European countries, one third of them taking this participation into account when summative assessment is performed (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice, 2012:30).

It can be concluded that in the Romanian educational system, still centred on teaching contents based on one discipline, SBC could mean shifting towards an integrated approach to teaching contents, opening a much larger horizon of opportunities for personal and professional development of students.

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