

Edu World 2016
7th International Conference

**Evidence - Based Approaches Of Curriculum Implementantion.
Some Grass-Roots Exemples**

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the concept of curriculum implementation as part of a wider process of curriculum development. In Romania, the general practice of policy implementation is focused on top down approaches; by this, educational authorities orient the curriculum implementation by means of official documents (such as Ministry Orders, recommendations), the result being a text driven reform. Although it has its advantages, especially in terms of duration of implementation, the approach limits the opportunities that schools have in order to propose localised and/or customised perspectives for curriculum. The starting point is a small research conducted in four schools in Romania. The research seems to demonstrate the existence of a number of common practices that occur in schools when implementing the national curriculum. For example, curriculum design activities can be transformed in opportunities for professional dialogue and peer learning. These commonalities can be consolidated as formal internal indicators to be used by schools in the process of self-evaluation.

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Keywords: Evidence, curriculum implementation, curriculum design, "implementation gap", process indicators, school level.

1. Introduction

The implementation or enactment of a process of curriculum change as part of a wider process of curriculum development (Potolea, Toma & Borza, 2012) is frequently the focus of research that deal with comprehensive educational changes/reforms. In many countries, implementation strategies regularly have specific components that are aimed at the school, and that take into account the mechanisms that it can mobilize in order to put into practice, monitor, and evaluate the intended changes.

The implementation approaches that are identified in the research (Fullan, 1991; Simkins, Ellison & Garrett, 1992; Elmore & Sykes, 1992, quoted in Căpiță, 2007) are constantly under scrutiny and



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reassessed. Although the perspectives on curriculum implementation have diversified, two directions shaped during the 1990s (Fullan, 1991) seem to be present in all approaches: if the intended aims and objectives of the change are accepted at the level of the system; and, if the technical quality of the change in relation to the stated objective is clearly formulated.

Both directions are under renewed scrutiny. First, because the distance between the intentions and what is actually happening seems to be increasing; and, second, because changes seem to be more and more precipitated, to have a weak support, or not to have been fully thought through (Hargreaves, quoted in Clement, 2014). Therefore, lower performing systems have large "implementation gap" between the policies enacted at the national, state, or even district level, and what actually happens in classrooms. These gaps can be explained through the lack of alignment between the curriculum and assessment, and between the training programs for teachers and the real needs of the school.

In Romania, the process of implementation, as one stage of cycle of educational change, is supported by various means, but the most frequent method is through normative documents, an approach labelled "text driven reform" or mandated change. Nevertheless, even the best texts remain unused or are used only formally, without any support from the part of the intended beneficiaries. What could constitute a possible solution? As an alternative to the frequent changes introduced from the outside, schools should initiate the change and establish implementation strategies in order to foster the perception of ownership over the process of change.

2. The Research Question

The paper takes under scrutiny the concept of curriculum implementation. The starting point are the results of an exploratory research conducted in four schools in Romania (four different counties: Argeș, Maramureș, Vrancea, and Ilfov). The schools have used the document *Cadru metodologic de proiectare și aplicarea a curriculumului la nivel de școală* (*The Methodological Framework for Curriculum Implementation at School level*) for an entire year, and in the situations in which the activities in the school made it feasible. It is important to note that the teaching staff of these schools was involved in the actual development of this document. During this period, research instruments were applied in the four schools. For example, the questionnaire related to the school-based curriculum was applied in the period in which the schools were developing their offer. The schools were asked to fill in a number of questionnaires that were focused on specific chapters of the *Cadru metodologic de proiectare și aplicarea a curriculumului la nivel de școală* (i.e., school based curriculum, curriculum design at school level, the contribution of the program 'The school Otherwise', the relation between the taught and the evaluated curricula). The questionnaires were intended as part of an action research scheme; besides collecting relevant data, the questionnaires were intended as means for supporting schools in their effort to localise the curriculum: to offer a reflective context for the analysis of the framework; to help schools to gather relevant data pertaining to the four relevant elements of curriculum implementation at school level; and, to help schools in the effort to develop strategies concerning the production of relevant pares documenting their own activity. The questionnaires were filled in by a group of teachers in each school, with the help and supervision of the school principals.

The collected data were then analyzed in order to identify commonalities between these schools during the process of curriculum implementation. Our contribution will focus on the analysis of the topic of curriculum design at school level.

3. Curriculum Design at School Level

Within this research, we define curriculum design at school level as the design process that takes into consideration the individualising (positive and inhibiting) factors that give a specific identity to the school as an institution of curriculum implementation (Căpiță & Mândruț, 2016).

The topic of curriculum design is of significance, due to the fact that it is traditionally associated to the individual activity of each teacher, and is part of the core competences of a teacher. The messages channelled through the programs of study in the last two decades did indeed promote a certain isolation of the process of curriculum design; three of the significant actions – the personalized reading of the program of study, the identification of learning units, the design of the learning units (Curriculum national Council/CNC, 2002) – can foster such an "isolation" of the design of the curriculum implementation.

But the context has changed, and in the new generation of programs of study teaching suggestions are integrated that promote the collaboration between teachers. In each subject, teachers have to deal with topics that range beyond the borders of traditional school subjects and, frequently, of the classroom and the school. The program of study for History in the IVth Grade, for example, states that *"when applying the program of study in the classroom, the teacher will negotiate with the students on the subject of national and European topics. This modus of implementing the program of study responds to the principle of curriculum design that advocates the use of the school context, in accordance to students' interests, educational resources, the support elements available for the school, and even the choice between a more traditional or innovative didactic approach"*.

4. Description of the instrument and collected data

The questionnaire was built on the assumption that curriculum design activities can be regarded as opportunities of professional dialogue and peer learning. This perspective, in fact, reduces the stress induced by the administrative dimension of the documentation developed by the teacher and by transforming them in evidence related to the ways in which the curriculum might be interpreted and negotiated in order to respond better to the actual situation in the classroom and the school. Therefore, practices can be constantly adjusted in accordance to objectives that go beyond the strict confines of a school subject or a particular teaching period. The questionnaire had items related to the documents of curriculum design at school level, the administrative structures that have responsibilities in the field, the attitude of actors within the school regarding this field of action.

The development of the research instrument comprised several stages. First, an analysis of the various normative documents that governs school activity, starting with the Law of National Education (LEN) to the secondary legislation (such as the regulation regarding the school inspection and the regulation of the functioning of the schooling units). This analysis targeted the structures that are

responsible at school level for the localised curriculum design and the provisions in the legislation that set the framework for this activity. The first result indicates that the legislation has basically no such requirements, the curriculum design at school level being perceived as implicit. There is one exception. The teachers' council has the ability to propose measures to improve the didactic processes and activities (LEN, art. 98.2). Another category of documents are the standards developed by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Secondary Education (ARACIP/NAQASE) for the external assessment of schools. These standards are focused mostly on the curriculum documents developed at school level (hence, on the level of quality of these documents), rather than on the process of curriculum development.

To sum up, the documentary research put forth the conclusion that both the legal framework and the school practice consider the curriculum design as only a task for the individual teacher. There are no opportunities for co-operation within the teacher community, and no provisions for curriculum design and implementation 'beyond the classroom'. To support the (individual) activity of curriculum design, schools have specific structures, but the administrative aspects are predominant.

Following these sources, analyses that consider the school as a learning community were taken into consideration.

A deep knowledge with the school as a learning community is important when assessing the ways in which interactions between students/teachers and knowledge are taking place in the framework of a competence-based curriculum, and when effective support schemes for schools in the field of curriculum design are developed.

Four of the researches that were conducted in the last 15 years are relevant for the topic at hand, as they manage to give an authentic perspective on the schooling institution.

Among these, the most in-depth and wide-ranging analysis is provided by *Școala la răscruce/The School at Crossroads* (Vlăsceanu, 2002). This massive research identifies "*the traits of the pedagogical community that processes new informations and transforms them or not in attitudes and behaviours*" (Vlăsceanu, 2002: 77). Another study, *The School as it is* (Ciolan & Nedelcu, 2010) explores the interactions between the significant educational stakeholders, teachers and students, and identifies patterns of behaviour of students and teachers that are the result of these interactions. The research on the *Analysis of the School Environment in Relation to the Implementation of the Curriculum Reform (Analiza mediului școlar în raport cu implementarea reformei curriculare)* advocates an evidence-based approach to decision making when dealing with the elements that define the organizational culture of the school and the motivations that underpin student and teacher learning (Iosifescu, 2012). Finally, a research on curriculum implementation at school level, *Mecanisme și practici de implementare a curriculumului la nivelul școlii și al clasei* (Bercu, 2012) provides a snapshot of the contextual factors that influence the process of curriculum implementation at school and classroom level, and the ways in which educational actors relate to these factors. These studies offer a multilayered image of the perceptions and representations of various educational actors on what is actually taking place in schools. The findings of these studies can be regarded as evidence of the changes that occur at school level in the process of transformation from an organization focused on the learning as a product to an organization focused on learning as a process (Păun, 1999). The final result is a school that learns and reshapes itself as an organization (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton & Kleiner, 2016).

Since the research included also an instrumental aspect, its second phase aimed at supporting the transformation of the curriculum design at school level into a local curriculum policy, therefore aiming at increasing the localised aspect of the curriculum at school level. The main element in this transformation is the co-operation between teachers, the use of common competencies that are spread throughout the learning community, and the fostering of the feeling of ownership that might mobilise resources in confronting stressful situations and issues.

The questionnaire used in the four schools included 14 questions, developed around three vectors: to identify examples of practices in the field of curriculum design, and to present the means by which these practices are formalized in the documents; to assess the activities and practices of curriculum design; and to reflect upon the practices presented.

One of the questions asked specifically to evaluate the positive aspects of curriculum design at school level in relation to: supporting students in their autonomous learning; a stimulating and friendly learning climate; the cohesion among staff in co-operating for a creative implementation of the curriculum; enhancing the partnership between the school, the family, and the local community; supporting the development of teaching materials at school level; a better integration of formal, informal and non-formal elements in the teaching; the decrease in the differences between students' performance; the decrease and or avoidance of school drop-out. The questions enabled not only a stocktaking of current practices, but also an analysis of attitudes of schools as communities of practice towards the activities related to the curriculum design and their interest in this activity.

5. From Evidences to Indicators

The research aimed at collecting data to demonstrate differences and commonalities between four schools in the process of curriculum implementation on the basis of the Methodological Framework. Given the fact that the evidence describes important processes that are linked to the attainment of objectives related to the curriculum implementation at school level, it constitutes a basis for the development of process indicators. Such indicators are important because they enable a process analysis and support the construction of improved rationales for curriculum implementation. At the same time, they constitute a basis for dissemination of good practice, the development of recommendations, and can inform decision making. (Scheerens, 1990; Porter, 1991). At school level, such indicators and their descriptors can provide a "toolkit" for the strategic/controlled improvement; schools can develop into learning communities able to self regulate and fine-tune their own development. Table 1 summarizes the indicators resulting from the research.

Table 1. Indicators for assessing curriculum design processes at school level

No.	Indicator	Descriptors
1	Documents of the school that make explicit reference to curriculum development at school level	Documents relevant for the curriculum development at school level (e.g., the management plan of the committee for curriculum) include elements that demonstrate the adaptation of the National Curriculum to the perceived school needs (e.g., priorities of the school in relation to the curriculum implementation for the school year) The dissemination of documents of curriculum implementation by means of activities at the level of the local community (e.g., uploading the timetable on the school website)
2	Roles and responsibilities of school structures in the curriculum design at	Co-ordination of the activities of the significant committees that are responsible for the curriculum at school level (e.g., didactics committees

	school level	<p>for various subjects, the head teachers' committee)</p> <p>Identifying and disseminating at school level of good practices in the field of individual coaching and teaching (for individual performance and recuperation)</p> <p>Exchanges of good practices and topical activities in the field of curriculum design are set in the school timetable (e.g., at the beginning of the school year, after the activities in the program 'The School Otherwise')</p> <p>Group initiatives in the field of curriculum design are encouraged</p> <p>Partnerships with other schools aimed at exchanging examples of good practices in the field are set</p> <p>Actions focused on quality assurance of the curriculum design are initiated and discussed in relevant structures</p>
3	Roles and responsibilities of teachers in the field of curriculum design at school level	<p>Teachers participate in group activities aimed at developing documents and materials used in implementing the curriculum at classroom level (e.g., teaching plans for the whole year/semester, models of evaluation instruments, models of teaching units)</p> <p>Development of auxiliary instruments for the didactic activity and assessment, and their use as educational resources</p>
4	The curriculum design process at school level uses effectively human resources and the specifics of the school community (logistics, educational setting, urban/rural setting)	<p>The particularities of the school are used as assets in curriculum design developed by the teachers</p> <p>The alignment between curriculum and assessment and evaluation is used (e.g., activities before and after assessment schemes at national level or term papers, activities aimed at reducing negative influences within the educational setting)</p> <p>Training activities are organized at school level in the field of competences related to curriculum design</p> <p>Debates and meetings are organized in relation to educational support materials that are on offer on a yearly basis</p>

6. Conclusions

The research on the reactions of schools as organizations to curricular changes is significant, since these changes were based on a top-down approach. Even the local character, as it is formulated by the schools through the school based curriculum, is regulated at national level through the National Curriculum Framework. One of the results is that the support given to grass-roots initiatives and changes is influenced by a number of factors, frequently of subjective nature. Therefore, various means to foster the feeling of ownership are needed, both at individual and organizational level. One such possibility is to develop, in partnership with the schools, documents and methodologies that inform and orient the process of curriculum implementation, especially in situations in which the aim is to translate new ideas into new educational practices, a situation that involves complex sense-making processes.

The research provided data that point to the following conclusions:

- There is evidence that demonstrate that the schools have a grasp of the ways in which the national curriculum can be implemented at school level, the most frequent approach being curriculum adaptation in order to suit local needs.
- The adaptation of the curriculum to local needs is facilitated by school structures that have responsibilities in the field at school and or classroom level; one example is the didactic committee, constituted by the teachers that teach the same subject or subjects in the same curricular area.
- Existing hurdles do not impede decisively on the opportunities and possibilities of curriculum implementation at school level, and such problems are circumvented in various ways.

- The practices provided by the schools questionnaire have a different potential of transfer beyond the particular school; they are dependent on a number of variables, such as the degree of awareness of the issue, the creativity of teachers.

- Instruments such as process indicators that are based on research evidence about the things that contribute to intended changes can help schools to make sure that they are advancing on the intended path.

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