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**THE ROLE OF INTEGRATED ACTIVITIES IN BUILDING  
COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL**

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**Abstract**

At present, we are living in a dynamic society and changes come at high speed. The reform programmes implemented at the level of the European education system have aimed at weighing the relation between society and school in order for each to become the other's impulsive force. In order to easily adjust to the dynamic and continuous changes the present society is passing through, it is useful and necessary for pupils to experience situations which can build their skills, attitudes, abilities and aptitudes. Referring to the general education, C. Delory (p.23-24) gives the following definition of the skill: it is an integrated whole of knowledge, habits and attitudes which allow the subject, facing certain categories of situations, to adjust, to solve problems and to make projects. The integration of the curricular contents into the primary school, and not only into it, results from the complex dynamic property of the skills necessary to solve an issue in a specific situation. In the compulsory education school must aim at building the pupils' communication skills because they are the basis of other skills but at the same time they depend on them. In the context of the National Education Act, the aptitudes and the communication skills in the mother tongue represent the basis of the whole activity of learning and receiving cultural and scientific values.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 The need to change and adapt in the knowledge field**

The multiple quick and continuous changes of the present society are nothing but challenges in the knowledge field which demand an adaptation. The traditional knowledge settles strong lines which enclose theoretical spaces dictated by the formal classical disciplines. The knowledge in the modern paradigm emphasizes the need of the educated to adapt to society, to solve real life problems, to challenge

the educated to build their own thinking and decisions. L. Ciolan (2008, p.38) states the idea according to which the integrated characteristic of knowledge is not the result of a mere superposition of the disciplinary specialists' professional interests. The integration is not a subjective aspiration or an epistemological whim but it has an objective basis as it comes from the complex dynamic character of the necessary skills to solve a problem within a specific context.

At present, pedagogics is based on skills. A survey of the evolution of pedagogics from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 21st century justifies its dichotomic delimitation into traditional and modern pedagogics, old and new pedagogics. The specific characteristics related to this dichotomy can be condensed as follows:

- The pedagogics of the past and the pedagogics of the future;
- The pedagogics of the memory, of recollections and the pedagogics of the critical thinking and of problem-solving;
- The pedagogics of the conservation and preservation structures and the pedagogics of the change, development and anticipation structures;
- The pedagogics of the second millennium and the pedagogics of the third millennium;
- The pedagogics for knowledge and the pedagogics for skills;
- The pedagogics of the surface learning and of the profound learning;
- The pedagogics of the artisanal instruction and the pedagogics of the cognitive instruction.(V. Chis, 2005, p.12)

The monodisciplinary and multidisciplinary education proved to be weak in the daily struggles of the present life. Integrated perspectives were imperative, with good reason, for instance the interdisciplinary perspectives and especially the transdisciplinary ones which:

- Ensure the epistemological progress, allowing to make connections among disciplines, in a synthetizing integrating manner;
- Facilitate reciprocal exchanges of acquisitions (contents, methods, techniques, languages);
- Imply building conceptual and practical patterns which are larger, more flexible and transferrable and elaborating paradigms and epistemological constructions;
- Allow solving new and complex problems through integrating and synthetizing approaches;
- Ensure solving real specific problems which take phenomena and processes as a whole, approach them holistically so that the premises of developing logical and systemic thinking should be created;
- Ensure a unitary knowledge, of a synthetizing, integrating and unifying manner, related to the systemically investigated processes and phenomena;
- Can lead to creating new specialized languages;
- Offer explanatory structures for large fields of science;
- Can lead to creating new disciplines, border disciplines, named transdisciplines;
  - Represent a strategy of stimulating the abilities of active and responsible involvement into the learning approaches as well as the creative innovative abilities. Musata Bocos, Vasile Chis (2012, pag.13)

## **1.2 Arguments in favour of an integrated curriculum**

The curricular integration came as a solution to the challenges of the present world. L. Ciolan (2008) gives us several arguments which clarify the purposes of integration, for instance:

- Covering the borders between disciplines. Self-sufficiency and the closed character of the disciplines have created “white spots” on the map of knowledge formed among disciplines or have led to isolation in the absence of the connections among different disciplines (an epistemological and pedagogical purpose).
- Ensuring the synergy of the disciplinary fields, both at the level of the scientific research and at the level of the curriculum and of the didactic activities performed at an educational micro level (a praxiological and pedagogic purpose).
- Building mental dynamic, flexible and responsive structures, by education, able to support the most suitable decisions (a psycho pedagogical purpose).
- Problem-solving can be seen from one point of view as the most important driving force of the integration because of its practical importance. The problems we encounter in our professional, social or personal life bring thinking and decisions which are not usually quartered in the disciplinary frames. These problems have an integrated character and their solving implies making quick relevant connections, contextualized synergy and action (a social and pedagogical purpose).

The major changes that have appeared in the contemporary education bring new concepts and approaches of the curriculum and one of the consequences of the fact that in the present society adaptive reorganizations are necessary is the integrated approach of the curriculum. The integration of the curriculum is an idea which has a very strong historical basis and is a viable way in which learning becomes reality.

### **1.3. The integrated planning of the curriculum**

One of the development trends of didactics in the last decades is part of a new grid of concepts and approaches, which brings major changes in the contemporary education, in what concerns defining the ways of reaching knowledge, for instance the interest paid to the curricular integration and to the curriculum centred on integrated activities.

The present pedagogic literature describes the curricular integration as an innovative way of planning the curriculum, which implies didactically synthetizing and organizing the contents in the different fields of knowledge so that systematic unitary and coherent images about the real world should be built with pupils. Musata Bocos, V. Chis (2012, p.17).

As concerns the definition and use of the concept of educational curriculum, two trends have been identified:

- the restrictive one (the traditional stage of the curriculum)
- the extensive one (the modern and postmodern stage of the curriculum). (I. Negret Dobrodor, 2001, p.14)

The evolution stages of the concept of curriculum (C. Cretu, 2000, S. Cristea, 2000, M. Bocos, 2008) can be defined in the following terms:

- In the traditional stage, the curriculum is organized in an institutionalized environment specialized in education, receiving the syntagm of *curriculum centred on knowledge*.

- In the modern stage, the curriculum acquires the meaning of pedagogic project, the organization through the correlation of the objectives, of the school subjects with the pupil's experiences of direct and indirect learning, expanded beyond the school environment. They usually use the syntagm of *curriculum centred on the pupil*.

This stage is represented by the theories of John Dewey and Franklin Bobbit.

In John Dewey's view (1977, p.123), the curriculum is centred on the child, so that the child become "the sun around which the pedagogic devices revolve; he is the centre around whom these devices organize themselves."

Dewey presents the syntagm of the pupil's "learning experience", organized by school, by studying all the education disciplines offered and suggests the complexity, the amplitude and the dynamic character of the curriculum as educational reality. The syntagm was then taken over and largely used in operationalizing the concept of curriculum.

Franklin Bobbit, through his work "The curriculum"(1918), gives new meanings to the concept and includes both the formal activities, done in the school environment and those done in the out-of-school environment, planned and projected in school, with a view of accomplishing a global interactive education. The syntagm used by the pedagogue is "the true education for life".

In the postmodern stage, the curriculum has the meaning of pedagogic project based on some principles which emphasize the prior importance of the assumed educational objectives. The used syntagm is that of curriculum as education pattern.

The postmodern stage marks the continuous evolution of the concept of curriculum against the background of the new educational paradigms which value the progress made in the fields of educational sciences, psychology as well as the common positive experience acquired in the praxiology of the curriculum.(Musata Bocos, V. Chis, 2012, p.18)

The notion of curriculum is not a new one. J. J. Rousseau anticipates the modern meaning of the concept from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards, J. Fr. Herbart (1776- 1841) approaches the need of the "correlation of disciplines".

Unfortunately, the integrated approach of the curriculum is just an alternative, few are the situations in which it has become the main paradigm in planning and implementing the curriculum.

Two contemporary pedagogues have contributed to the definition of the concept of integrated curriculum, for instance: Humphreys(A.H. Humphreys, Th. R. Post, A.K.Eliis, 1981, p.11) states that "An integrated study is that in which pupils globally explore the knowledge belonging to several school subjects but they are subordinated to some peculiar aspects of the life environment"; and according to Shoemaker (1989, p.5) the integrated curriculum is defined in two terms " ...the education is organized in such a way that it intersects the main thematic fields of several disciplines, builds a holistic interactive view of the real world". In this way, teaching and learning are seen from a holistic perspective, reflecting the real world which is interactive.

The integration of the contents of the subject matters as well as of the curricular areas is seen as the main challenge in the field of planning the school syllabi (V. Chis, 2001, p.135).

The integrated teaching of knowledge represents an essential element of the process of curricular integration and an authentic direction of curricular innovation. It is based on an integrating principle

which transcends the borders between the subject matters and organizes knowledge depending on the new perspective. Therefore, integration represents the action of making different elements interconnect to finally build a harmonious whole, of superior level; the integration of parts leads to a product which tops the sum of the parts (L. Ciolan, 2008, p.115). On the other hand, J.Y. Boyer (R. Legendre, 1993, p.732) states the fact that integration means organizing and relating the subject matters, the purpose being to avoid their traditional isolation.

#### **1.4. The stages of curriculum integration**

The stages or levels of curricular integration appear as answers to questions like: “How do we integrate?” or “How profound is the integration?”. In the integrated approach of the curriculum we see several steps or levels: monodisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

1.4.1. Monodisciplinarity (the first stage of curricular integration) is centred on independent subject matters and implies “the action of approaching a project or of solving a problem by limiting to the data of a single subject matter” (Legendre, 1993, p.88).

We can enumerate the following advantages:

- the increase of the internal coherence of the subject matter;
- the increase of the significance and relevance of teaching by enriching the learning activities and by stimulating the creation of relations among contents;
- the increase of the learning effectiveness, through the support brought by “external” elements;
- the change of perception of the one who learns about the school subject (L. Ciolan, 2008, p.123).

1.4.2. Multidisciplinarity refers to the situation in which a problem which belongs to a certain field is submitted to an analysis from the perspective of several school subjects but without their interconnection.

We enumerate a few advantages of multidisciplinarity:

- realizing correlated planning is encouraged;
- it allows pupils to make connections among the contents of the different subject matters;
- it helps to better understand certain subjects or problems which cannot be explained within the strict limits of a subject matter (L. Ciolan, 2008, p.125).

1.4.3. Interdisciplinarity aims at complex approaches, the interaction among certain skills, cooperation among subject matters and ignoring the strict limits of the subject matters. At the level of the curricular planning, one concentrates on skills or key-skills. At the interdisciplinary level, methodological and conceptual transfers among subject matters are made.

Basarab Nicolescu (1997) presents three levels of interdisciplinarity:

- an applicative level (applicative integration): after the method transfer is made, practical applications result;
- an epistemological level (epistemological integration): after assimilating methods from other fields, within the certain subject matter profitable analyses are initiated within the subject matter regarding their own epistemology;
- a level generating new subject matters (hybrid integration): the transfer of methods among two or

several subject matters leads to the emergence of an autonomous field. Interdisciplinarity has several advantages:

- centres the education process on the pupil, encouraging the learning process by the active motivation in the use of participative methodologies of class work.
- supports pupils to create durable learning, with the help of the permanent interactions among subjects and by building skills in correspondence with the personal, social and professional needs;
- centres the education process on thematic or conceptual learning, on learning through cooperation, based on projects or on problem-solving, the work on centres of interest etc.

1.4.4. Transdisciplinarity represents the most complex stage of curricular integration and it is centred on life's important problems and needs in the present context. The interpenetration of several subjects under the form of curricular integration offers the possibility of emerging in time of a new subject or of a new field of knowledge.

Why transdisciplinarity? Because technology makes a progress, science stimulates its development, new jobs appear every day and many of the pupils who are now learning in school will embrace these jobs. In order to survive and adapt, abilities and habits of handling information are needed.

The paradigms of the traditional education acquire new interpretations: learning is a complete cognitive process and a social intrapersonal and interpersonal activity and it is no longer the result of the teacher's approaches and the pupils' differential treatment and the integrated approach to knowledge become imperative.

We mention a few advantages of transdisciplinarity:

- it allows a biunivocal relation of learning between educable and educator;
- it relates to a conceptual elaborate and useful learning;
- it involves pupils in the learning process by challenging significant problems, adapted to their cognitive level;
- the acquisition and the application of knowledge occurs in new complex situations in order to encourage the transfer and the generating of new knowledge ;
- it correlates with the continuous formative evaluation.
- As a conclusion about the stages or levels of curricular integration, we can state the fact that, irrespective of the level of integration, the integrated approach of the curriculum is a dynamic process which brings relevant contributions not only in the knowledge field but also in the general social process and that of humanity.

## **2. The Curriculum Centred on Skills. Building Communication Skills with the Primary Pupils**

The need to build and develop competences through the learning process is imperative in most education systems.

### **2.1. What is a skill?**

In Ph. Perrenoud (2005, p.3-4) the skill entails action. A skill is an action ability in a class of comparable situations. The skill is more than an ability which relates to a specific operation. The skill is

what allows the global management of a category of complex situations by stimulating diverse resources (knowledge, practical abilities, operational diagrams, social representations, values and attitudes). This ability can be interpreted in a legal meaning when the skill grants the action legitimacy or it can be interpreted in a psychosocial meaning as a number of means of accomplishing an intelligent effective action (Voiculescu F, 2011, p.16).

C. Delory (2002, p.23-24) refers to the skill as being an integrated number of knowledge, habits and attitudes which allow the subject, at the stage of a category of situations, to adapt , to solve problems and to carry projects out.

The pattern of curricular planning centred on skills makes the curricular structure simpler and ensures a larger effectiveness of the teaching, learning and evaluation processes.

The education based on skills essentially aims at three great objectives (Roegier, 2000):

To emphasize the skills the pupil must master at the end of each year and at the end of the compulsory period of instruction at school. From this perspective, what the pupil should know is important and especially, what the pupil can do with what he knows. The teacher's role must be that of organizing learning in such a suitable manner as to lead pupils to the expected level.

To make learning meaningful, to show the pupil what the use of what he learns in school is. Therefore, we should get rid of the contents lists and the school subjects which have to be learnt by heart. On the contrary, the approach through skills teaches pupils to permanently relate learning to situations that make sense to him and to use his acquisitions in these situations.

To certify the pupil's acquisitions in terms of solving specific situations and not in the terms of a sum of knowledge and habits that the pupil will forget, that he doesn't know to use in his active life. The approach through main skills is an answer to the problem of the functional illiteracy.

## **2.2. Communication skills in the primary school**

Communication skills are the basis of building the other skills but, at the same time, they depend on them. Within the curricular area Language and communication, the communication skills in Romanian are situated at the beginning of the list of the key competences which determines the pupil's educational profile, for continuous learning. In this context, communication skills have a special significance; they represent the basis of the whole activity of learning and receiving the cultural and scientific values. *Communication in Romanian* means a step ahead in the curriculum development, an opportunity through which one can open to other meanings of the subject matter, an integrative transdisciplinary meaning.

The present school syllabus suggests a flexible offer which allows the teacher to change, add or replace the learning activities. One aims at accomplishing a personalized didactic approach which should ensure building the skills required in the syllabus within the specific context of every classroom and of every pupil. To include the preparatory grade into the general compulsory education implies a delicate perspective of the curriculum at this age level. A specific approach of the early education is necessary which should be mainly based on stimulating learning through play, which should offer at the same time a wide range of differentiation of the didactic approach, depending on the pupils' level of varied acquisitions. The transition from kindergarten to the preparatory grade doesn't affect the children's

attitude if we have a warm soul, we gladly approach them, we address them in an accessible language, we have ludic spirit and we balance exigence with relaxation.

In the didactic communication we must be at the same time concise, precise and expressive in order to make the transfer easier and to understand the message conveyed. All information we convey must be adapted to the didactic purpose and objectives as well as to the pupils' intellectual level. The schoolmaster must also know how to listen. The pupil realizes whether his communication partner only seems to listen to him and then he refuses to communicate. In the communication relationship, the schoolmaster must create a situation convenient for the pupil to express himself who shouldn't feel judged or manipulated through questions. To know how to listen is a science. Although certain people give the impression that they listen, all their body language show that, in fact, the information doesn't reach them. The absence of communication also results from the absence of the real listening to one's interlocutor. The absence of listening can be determined by the lack of interest towards the issuer's message.

Since the preparatory grade, communication has been made through intuitive support (picture-based stories, picture-based problems etc). In grades 2-4 one uses both artistic images (pictures, movies, Power Point) and synthetic ones (maps, charts). The use of the *active-participative methods* leads to the facilitation of expression. The collaborative and cooperation teaching methods are methods in which children work together, in pairs or in small groups, they learn to work as a team, communicate directly among them, face-to-face. In these methods pupils share their ideas, help each other understand and find solutions, they sit next to each other, explain to the other pupils what they know, they discuss every aspect of the topic they have to solve. Communication among children represents a natural way for them to learn new things one from another. Another way of improving communication is the responsibility language- a type of communication by which one expresses one's own opinions and emotions without attacking one's interlocutor. This type of communication is a way of avoiding criticism, labelling, moralization of the interlocutor, focusing conversation on one's behaviour, and not on the person. In order to improve the didactic communication to know and to obey certain rules is necessary for the teachers:

- the correct, open and direct talking (which avoids and reduces the message distortion);
- the encouragement of feedback from pupils (in order to know to what extent the messages sent were well received and understood);
- the careful, patient and encouraging listening of the messages received from the pupils at the same time with the effort to understand the exact meaning of these messages;
- the use of several types of didactic communication for the same type of messages (usually at the same time oral and visual);
- the repetition of the more complex messages

In the didactic communication all the elements of the system benefit from a rigorous elaboration. Taking into consideration what the French pedagogue Celestin Freinet used to say: "The main problem of education remains not only the content of education as one would believe today but also the way of stimulating the child's thirst for knowledge..." then we as teachers have to find the most suitable ways of making the didactic approach more efficient so that we should stimulate the pupils' thirst for reading.



School has the mission to form a competent reader and also a reader who could build his own taste for reading so that he should be an active reader all through his life. The fact that the present syllabi are based on communication results in seeing reading both as act of knowledge and also as act of communication (thus the text becomes dynamic, being a dialogue between the receiver and the text, actively taking part into the process of rebuilding meanings).

Reading is an instrument which develops the possibility of communication among people and it is also the echo of the abilities of thinking and language. The pupils' reading is an essential intellectual act which must be guided and supervised by school and by family. The importance of reading is given by the educative aspects it implies:

- the cognitive aspect: through reading pupils enrich their knowledge about the world and the reality;
- the educative aspect: reading essentially contributes to educating children in the ethical and aesthetical dimensions;
- the formative aspect: consists in the fact that reading has as consequence building and consolidating the habits of intellectual work, developing thinking, imagination, the ability of accurate and expressive speaking.

With the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, in the reading class, guided by the schoolmaster, pupils can be accustomed to orientate in the structure of a book which will help them a lot in taking notes down relating to the books read in the following grades. Another way of guiding reading is making a classroom library as well as a personal library. The first is composed of books brought by children or only by the schoolmaster, a classroom librarian is named and then books are lent to pupils.

With the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades, the pupils' interest for reading becomes bigger. When studying certain writers, one aims at stimulating pupils in reading other works written by these writers. One can make portfolios together with the pupils, for every known writer, comprising his portrait, bibliographical data and essential aspects of their work, on which occasion curiosity and interest for reading can be aroused.

### **3. Conclusion**

By developing communication skills, the pupil will have the following profile: civilized, sociable, communicative, interested, and creative.

He will:

- understand that he can communicate, conveying his own thoughts, opinions, feelings to those near him in a way that should make him understood;
- obey the rules of a civilized dialogue;
- discover that he can communicate using a lot of conventional and unconventional languages;
- think of the importance of communication in everyone's life and will approach the richness transmitted through the written messages;
- notice that through communication he can get closer to the people around him, establishing harmonious relations;

- be interested to find solutions to different problems through communication, books, computer;
- know where and how to find the information he needs;
- discover the pleasure of reading a book, a computer/tablet, an iPad, an eBook or any other support;
- enjoy going to the theatre and watching a movie.

Paying greater attention to the communication relations between us, listening to our interlocutor, receiving correctly what is communicated to us, collaborating, we can create a better world in our families, in groups or at our workplace.

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