

PAST AND PRESENT IN THE ROMANIAN PRIMARY EDUCATION CURRICULUM

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Abstract

The paper aims at analysing the changes that marked the evolution of both the curriculum frameworks and the syllabi for primary education in Romanian post-communist era, considering the stages of the education reforms started in 1990 and continuing at present. Thus, by closely examining the curricular documents for primary education issued during the given period, we will try to identify the strengths and the weaknesses characterising each phase, so that a global perspective of the primary education reform in Romania in the recent past could be provided. Therefore, our paper is an invitation addressed to all stakeholders to reflect on the past, the present and, notably, on the future of primary education in Romania.

Keywords: curriculum, framework curriculum, syllabi, primary education, curricular reform.

1. Introduction

The endeavour to improve education has always focused on reforming the curriculum. Gradually, the curriculum concept has become more and more comprehensive, and at present both specialists and lay persons use it to cover many issues related to education as such. Therefore, education theorists and practitioners find it more and more difficult to identify the features of a good curriculum, a curriculum that should not only meet the current needs of the society, but also please its beneficiaries. Since 1990, the Romanian educational system has constantly faced this dilemma and more or less successful solutions have been provided and implemented so far. The consequences are yet to be assessed.

Regardless of its strengths, a curriculum could easily turn into a useless tool, unless teachers succeed in coming up with a form well tailored to their students' needs. To obtain the intended curriculum, a teacher is supposed to interpret, adapt and select the content of the formal curriculum. This complex task is considerably made easier provided that a high level of compatibility exists between the teacher and the curriculum.

Our analysis focuses on only one of the two key elements in the equation mentioned above, i.e. the curriculum. More precisely, we exclusively aim to scrutinize the official curricular documents that guide teachers in their teaching activity, as we consider that the quality of these documents might positively or negatively influence teachers' activity. Therefore we closely examine the main curricular documents regulating Romanian primary education in the last 25 years, as this educational stage forms an essential basis for subsequent successful development in any individual's life. Even if we

limit our research to curriculum frameworks and syllabi that were or have been in force in Romanian primary education, we do not disconsider the importance assigned to other curricular documents (textbooks or other resources) or educational stages.

Using the periodization provided by various Romanian education researchers and/or specialists (see Birzea, 1996; Crişan, 2002, 2005; Singer, 2002; Georgescu, Palade, 2003; Potolea, Toma, Borzea, 2012), this paper aims at pointing to the new elements characterising each phase. Thus, we attempt to identify the weaknesses and the strengths associated with reform stages in Romanian primary education, keeping in mind that both lower and upper secondary education went through extensive reforms along the period we indicated. Hopefully, this wider perspective will provide valuable insight into the evolution of primary education curriculum and practitioners will be able to better understand why the path taken by Romanian educational reform has not always been the shortest. Moreover, we expect these primary education practitioners to become aware of their extremely important role in interpreting and implementing the formal curriculum.

2. Phases of Curriculum Reform in Romanian Primary Education

Considering 'the specificity of the conceptual approaches' and 'the general context of changes which were implemented in the Romanian educational system' (Potolea *et al.*, 2012, p. 17), researchers generally divide the post communist curriculum reform into three main phases. Each phase marked primary education, as revised and/or newly-designed official curricular documents (curriculum frameworks and syllabi) accompanied reform strategies. Nevertheless, as far as the period

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2010-present is concerned, one can talk about the fourth phase of curriculum reform in Romania, the so called *advanced reform* (Potolea *et al.*, 2012), which started with the extension of primary education¹ and which, at present, is still very much in progress².

Briefly, these three main phases could be described as follows (Potolea *et al.*, 2012):

– **Phase I (1990-1997)** was marked by several attempts to restructure precise aspects and to provide a general conceptual framework for the Romanian educational system.

– **Phase II (1997-2000)** is the stage when a new National Curriculum was drawn up and, subsequently, implemented in a coherent manner.

– **Phase III (2000-2010)** covered numerous and essential changes divided along curricular elements, as structural adjustments permeated the Romanian educational system.

3. Research Methodology

Our research aims at pointing to the strengths and weaknesses of the official curricular documents for primary education (curriculum framework and syllabi), covering the period 1990-present. We attempt to analyse the general features of the targeted documents, so as to spot out any possible correlations with the particularities of the Romanian educational reform phases (with a special focus on what represented absolute or relative novelty in each stage that we identified). Moreover, by comparatively analysing the documents specific to the four phases, we hope to get a fairly comprehensive picture of the evolution of the Romanian primary education in the last 25 years.

4. Landmarks in the evolution of the primary school curriculum in Romania

4.1. 1993

It is in 1993 when a completely new set of syllabi for primary education³ came out. One cannot perform a fair analysis of these documents unless a broad view of the social realities characterizing Romania at that time is kept in mind. Thus, in 1993, Romania was in transition, and this situation was permeating all the domains, education, included. Therefore, in 1993, the main objectives of the syllabi for primary education were:

a) to change the number of hours in the curriculum framework and to divide the disciplines into four educational areas (humanities and social sciences, science, art and physical education);

b) to eliminate obsolete, redundant or less accessible content (Romanian Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 4).

The introduction to the new set of syllabi for primary education could be interpreted as a powerful mission statement, as the drawing up of the syllabi stemmed from the following body of principles:

- improving formative assessment;
- fostering harmonious child development;
- better preparation for subsequent education stages, by capitalizing not only on the domestic educational traditions and experiences, but also on the modern teaching trends and educational research;

– balancing the ratio between the amount of knowledge and the time needed to acquire it (Romanian Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 4).

In our view, the strengths of the syllabi for primary education, issued in 1993 were as follows:

- they set out **future directions**⁴ for the forthcoming syllabi for primary education, exhibiting the policy makers' awareness of the inherent drawbacks of these documents, as well as its limited validity, i.e. to be used only during the transition period;

- they provide **methodological suggestions** for practitioners;

- they are attuned to **modern pedagogical principles**, emphasizing the pupil's active role in the learning process (acquiring skills in Romanian, as well as in one's mother tongue and a modern foreign language⁵; developing basic skills in science and Romanian history; fostering prosocial behavior and environmental action);

- they give details about **the coherence of the disciplines** in the curriculum, by mentioning their aims;

- they are **more flexible**: alternative syllabi are designed (for the discipline called *Developing Speaking and Thinking*); recommendations for supplementary reading have an orientative character; in *Romanian* and *Maths* objectives are clearly marked as either compulsory or non compulsory; the possibility of organizing special clubs to capitalize on the pupils' skills and interests and to integrate extracurricular education; a number of class hours are at teacher's disposal;

- they attempt to provide a curricular

¹ In 2012 the preparatory grade became part of this educational stage.

² A new curriculum framework for lower secondary education has just come in force.

³ Romanian Ministry of Education (1993). *Syllabi for primary education. Grades 1-4. To be applied during the transition period.* (Nr. 32655/1993)

⁴ Among these we could mention: a more rigorous selection of the content in line with the objectives of primary education; better division of the content between grades and activities; more natural integration of knowledge from an interdisciplinary perspective.

⁵ Starting with the 2nd grade. Formerly, a foreign language could only be studied from the 5th grade.

reorganization in terms of integrated modules, by introducing disciplines such as *Environmental Knowledge*, *Applicative Compositions*, *Art*, accompanied by suggestions for content topics;

- they put forward the competence concept, defined as sets of capacities, as well as the transversal competence concept⁶.

As for weaknesses, we identified the following:

- no matter the intentions, the syllabi for primary education focus on content (there is a big amount of information, which, to a great extent, is not attuned to pupils' comprehension abilities, specific to their development stage);

- textbooks drafted before 1990 are still very much in use (the changes in the syllabi are not easy to grasp by practitioners if they have to rely on obsolete textbooks);

- the integration and interdisciplinary scope of the primary education curriculum is not correlated with the curriculum framework (e.g. the discipline *Romanian* is strictly divided into *Reading-Writing*, *Developing Speaking and Thinking*, *Reading Comprehension*, *Composition- Presentation*, each being associated a fixed number of class hours);

- there is a large total number of class hours (from 20 for the 1st grade to 23 for the 4th grade), which has a negative impact on the pupils (the amount of information to be delivered remains the same although there are only five school days, as compared to 6 before 1990-1991 school year);

- the ratio between the number of class hours per discipline and the information content is unbalanced (e.g. *Maths* is allotted 4 hours per grade, but in the 2nd grade the amount of content to be covered is double as compared to the 1st grade; *Romanian History* is allotted 1.5 hours – a 0.5 hour rise as compared to previous situation, but the complexity of the content units makes it impossible for the teacher to meet the demands);

- the intended flexibility, described in the introduction to the primary education curriculum, is dramatically reduced, since a strict number of class hours is allotted to the content topics listed in each syllabus;

- compulsory objectives are marked, which means ranking them in terms of importance – hence, the possibility to differentiate considering the concrete specificity of any given teaching activity is highly disregarded; moreover, the number of compulsory objectives is too large, their correlation with the development stages is low, which definitely causes discontinuities;

- little information is given about assessment, except for vague suggestions (e.g. challenging assessment; assessment integrated in the teaching-learning activity).

To sum up, considering the features of the reform covering this period, the curriculum frameworks and the syllabi for primary education approved in 1993 represent a major step for the advancement of Romanian education, mainly at the level of intent. These new curricular documents attempt to do away with communist ideology and to evince modern pedagogical principles (Cristea, 1992, p. 33).

4.2. 1995

Based on the 1995 curriculum frameworks and syllabi (named 'analytical'), alternative textbooks were drafted and gradually introduced (first for the 1st grade in 1995-1996 school year). This is a direct consequence of the new National Education Act (no. 84/1995), which laid down the aims of education in Romania for the years to come. The syllabi are meant to be 'analytical syllabi drafted from the perspective of the curriculum movement' (Ministry of Education, 1995, p.6).

The components of the framework curriculum are integrated into the concept of 'school culture', which comprises:

- scientific knowledge about the world and mankind, about the environment and environmental protection;

- communication skills in *Romanian* and a modern foreign language (starting with the 2nd grade);

- math knowledge;

- technological skills;

- history knowledge and civic skills;

- artistic and musical skills;

- physical education skills and health education (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. 3).

The guiding principles for the new curriculum frameworks are: (1) the compliance with the physical and mental particularities for each age group; (2) a unitary and global organization for the whole education system, in close relation with the main aims of school education; (3) an adequate ratio between humanities and science, with the former being given priority, as, previously, it had been disfavoured (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. 3-4). The disciplines to be studied are divided into five areas, as compared to only four in 1993, and this is the result of excluding *Religion* from the *Humanities*. Thus, they are ranked as follows: *Humanities* (on the rise from the 1st to the 4th grade – 12/13/14/14.5); *Science* (4/5/5/6,5); *Art, Craft and Music* (the same number of class hours for the four grades comprising primary education – 3), *Physical Education* (3/2/2/2) and *Religion* (one class hour per each grade). The total number of class hours per grade is on the rise: 20 class hours – 1st grade; 21 class hours – 2nd grade; 22 class hours – 3rd grade; 24 class hours – 4th grade.

⁶ e.g. the competence of *learning to learn* = 'initiation into acquiring techniques required for brainwork and learning activities', Romanian Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 4.

- Both the syllabi and the curriculum frameworks stem from the seven aims of primary education (put forward in the introduction to the curricular documents). The information included in these documents comprises: a strict number of the class hours that teachers are allotted for teaching-learning, revision, assessment, sometimes per term; general objectives for disciplines and grades; content and skills; specific objectives for each discipline; types of learning activities and extensions.

We consider that the strengths of the curricular documents issued in 1995 were:

- introducing a new component for *Romanian – Communication*, which was to be studied along primary education and which was accompanied by topics meant to facilitate integration;
- introducing *Science*, as from the 2nd grade, a discipline which comprised concepts from biology, physics, chemistry, ecology and which represented a real progress as compared with the 1993 discipline *Romanian Geography and Environmental Awareness*;
- introducing *Civic Education* (as from the 3rd grade) correlated with the aims of primary education;
- attempting to correlate the content with the objectives and to go along the lines already drawn, i.e. the formative purpose should take precedence over the informative purpose;
- introducing the concept of school culture, which aims at globally developing personalities;
- providing extensions, which partially offer certain flexibility;
- introducing various types of learning activities.

As for weaknesses, we would like to point to:

- low correlation between the principles considered to form the basis for developing the curriculum frameworks and the general and specific objectives;
- some of the general and specific objectives are difficult to operationalise and assess, which might be due to their wording (too general in some cases or overlapping with learning activities⁷);
- learning activities give no concrete indication as to how the pupils should behave or act;
- the number of objectives listed in the syllabi is unreasonably high⁸;
- the integrating intention is not really transposed into the curricular documents⁹;
- extensions (which are optional) are aimed at

above average students;

- the total number of class hours is still high, even if one of the aims of primary curriculum developers was to reduce it as much as possible;
- there are almost no methodological suggestions, except for some simple notes in the syllabi;
- the amount of information is very large, in some situations surpassing the 1993 situation¹⁰;
- the emphasis is predominantly on information, despite declared intentions (four out of the seven aims of primary education focus on *acquiring* or *becoming familiar with*);
- part of the content included in the syllabi is highly complex and abstract¹¹, considering students' age, and it seems that the wished-for vertical correlation with the lower-secondary education is achieved by overloading the syllabi for primary education (continuing the 1993 trend);
- there is no correlation between syllabi components, and the name given to these documents¹² proves to be realistic, pointing to lack of coherence and systematization.

By analyzing the impact and the complexity of the strengths and weaknesses listed above, we consider that 1995 is not a big step in the evolution of the Romanian primary education curriculum. On the contrary, it could be viewed as a period of stagnation, as, unfortunately, the intention to develop new syllabi, based on modern curriculum theory, could not be materialized.

4.3. 1998

1998 represents a crucial moment in Romanian curricular reform. Amid the major changes characterizing this period, the primary education curriculum was completely redesigned.

4.3.1. The characteristics of the curriculum framework for primary education are also valid for subsequent education stages. The main strengths of this curricular document are:

- its structure: it is developed along curricular areas, with common objectives for all the disciplines included in the respective curricular areas;
- its flexibility: a lower, as well as an upper limit of class hours per week are provided for each curricular area, which result in a minimum and maximum total number of class hours per week, for every grade;
- the introduction of school-based curriculum:

⁷ e.g. the objective to *group the words according to the number of syllables they are made up of* is accompanied by the learning activity *grouping the the words according to the number of syllables they are made up of* – Reading, 1st grade.

⁸ e.g. only one of the components of *Romanian – Reading* (the other components are *Writing and Communication*, *Reading Comprehension* and *Calligraphy*) – includes 45 objectives to be reached along a school year, which is quite impossible to do.

⁹ e.g. the former 1993 *Reading-Writing* is actually divided into *Reading* and *Writing*, each of them having their own objectives and content – two completely different syllabi.

¹⁰ e.g. the grammar notions for the 4th grade, listed under *Communication*.

¹¹ e.g. in *Romanian*, the nominal predicate is kept in the 1995 syllabus.

¹² *analytical syllabi*.

optional disciplines¹³ can be proposed at school level, within a curricular area – the number of hours allocated to the optional discipline is part of the total number of hours allocated to the respective curricular area;

- its focus on ensuring equal educational opportunities: one important curricular provision mentions that the objectives, content and learning activities included in the syllabi are to comply with the minimum number of hours for each discipline (more exactly with the core curriculum);

- the high degree of freedom granted to schools and teachers.

- As for weaknesses, we could mention the following:

- postponing the study of modern foreign languages: pupils start learning their first foreign language in the 3rd grade, as compared to the period before 1998, when the first foreign language was included in the 2nd grade pupils' timetable¹⁴;

- imposing restrictions on the proposal of optional disciplines: optional disciplines are allocated class hours per week within a certain curricular area, so they can be either monodisciplinary or strictly related to the respective curricular area.

- including provisions that limit the introduction of optional disciplines, e.g. 'optional disciplines may be accomplished with whole classes or with groups of 10-15 pupils, *depending on the school's possibilities*' (Ministry of Education, 1998, p. 13); or when including optional disciplines, 'timetables are to be drawn up without affecting the school staff's teaching loads';

- keeping a high number for the maximum amount of total class hours per week, very much in line with the 1995 curriculum framework.

4.3.2. 1998 primary education syllabi directly stemmed from the aims of primary education, which closely followed the goal and the general aims of education in Romania. In addition to that, these curricular documents complied with the objectives of the curricular key stages comprising primary education: *the basic acquisitions key stage* (1st and 2nd grades) and *the development key stage* (3rd and 4th grades). The primary education syllabi observed the new curriculum framework, as well as the principles that lay behind it: decentralizing the school system, making it more flexible and less congested. Each curricular area was carefully outlined, and, accordingly, each discipline was massively reconsidered so that the basic objectives of both primary education and key stages could be achieved.

In our opinion, the strengths of the 1998 syllabi for primary education were as follows:

- using framework objectives and synthetic reference objectives, focused on building skills, in order to structure the content;

- stemming from competences and attitudes essential in building up one's personality;

- orienting educational aims towards the harmonious development of the students' personality;

- correlating and integrating disciplines within the curricular area;

- providing indicative content;

- complementing the curriculum by learning activities meant to develop various skills (observing, measuring and using information); moreover, these activities are accompanied by examples generated by objectives not by content and they are to be accomplished not only in class, but also directly, by means of experiments;

- emphasizing procedural learning, by (1) encouraging the development of personal strategies necessary for solving problems or exploring-investigating new facts, to the detriment of memorizing rules; (2) using teaching activities centred on active learning; (3) using and integrating new information into what the student already knows from personal experience, which should be turned to good account and not neglected; (4) reconsidering assessment and self assessment, as means of improving students' performance;

- allowing for easy adjustment to students' acquiring abilities, by considering the age characteristics of the students;

- being derived from a curriculum attuned to specific conditions and local traditions (Ministry of Education, 1998).

As for weaknesses, we identified the following: (1) some of the provisions included in the syllabi remained declared intentions, as they did not reflect in accompanying textbooks; (2) although content was better structured and anchored in students' real life as compared to previous situations, the syllabi were still overloaded, making it impossible for the objectives to be reached within the time allotted to this purpose.

4.4. 2001, 2003 and 2004 Revisions

4.4.1. The 2001, 2003 and 2004 revisions of the curriculum frameworks did not overcome the weaknesses of the 1998 curriculum frameworks. Nevertheless, each phase brought about some changes for primary education, except for 2001.

In 2003, new curriculum frameworks for 1st and 2nd grades are approved (Ministry of Education

¹³ At primary school level, at least one optional discipline is to be included, according to 1998 curricular provisions.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, compensatory measures are provided: (1) 2 or 3 class hours per week can be dedicated to studying the first foreign language; (2) 'intensive teaching classes' can be created – 3-4 class hours per week.

4686/2003). These two documents are identical, aspect which can be easily explained if we consider that grades 1 and 2 make up the basic acquisitions key stage. According to new provisions, class hours for optional disciplines are no longer included in the class hours for a certain curricular area, but they are distinctively marked. Thus, although transdisciplinary optional subjects are more likely to come into existence, no more than one optional subject could be included in students' timetable (one class hour per week) for obvious reasons, related to the teaching load and the total number of class hours per week. Moreover, very similar to 1998/2001 curriculum framework, in 2003, no class hours are allotted to the curricular area *Mankind and Society* and the discipline *Religion* is maintained in the core curriculum, students having the possibility not to attend this class by requesting it in writing. On the other hand, one class hour for *Science* is included in the curricular area *Maths and Natural Sciences*, which means that: (1) the number of class hours for the core curriculum increases – 16 class hours in 2001 vs. 17 class hours in 2003: (2) the number of class hours allotted to optional subjects decreases – 1-4 in 2001 vs. 1-3 in 2003. These changes or lack of changes do not comply with the arguments given for revising the new curriculum frameworks and syllabi, as they do not provide real solutions for decongesting the curriculum, in general.

The curricular documents approved in 2004 continued the revisions started in 2003, as they refer to the 3rd and 4th grades (Ministry of Education 5198/2004). Curriculum frameworks issued in 2004 are identical for the 3rd and 4th grades (as both these grades belong to the development key stage), except for two disciplines, *History* and *Geography*, which are to be taught in the 4th grade. Consequently, the total number of class hours per week are different: 19-22 for the 3rd grade vs. 21-24 for the 4th grade.

In comparison with 1998/2001, the ratio between the class hours for the core curriculum and class hours for school-based curriculum, as well as the ratio between the minimum and the maximum number of class hours per week changed: (1) for the 4th grade, the number of class hours allotted to the core curriculum increases by one hour, hence the larger number of maximum class hours per week; (2) for the 3rd grade, the minimum number of class hours per week decreases by one hour. As for the number of class hours allotted to optional subjects, there are no changes: 1-4 class hours per week for both grades (the 3rd and the 4th) and it is mandatory that at least one optional subject would be included in the timetable.

By comparatively analyzing the curriculum frameworks for primary education issued between 1998 and 2004, it is worth mentioning the following conclusions:

- curriculum frameworks were flexible, as minimum and maximum numbers of class hours were suggested for all curricular areas (except for *Mankind and Society* for the 1st and 2nd grades) and as school-based curriculum was allotted 1-4 class hours a week;
- the ratio between the curricular areas / disciplines did not suffer any changes: *Language and Communication* weighs the most, which was very much commonsensical if we consider the main objective of primary education, i.e. to develop oral and written communication skills;
- the way curriculum frameworks were drawn up did not eliminate the pressure related to the calculation of teaching loads, especially when considering optional subjects¹⁵

Accordingly, one could state that, as compared to 2001, 2003 and 2004, the curriculum frameworks for primary education approved in 1998 had the widest scope, as they provided a new path for the advancement of this curricular stage.

4.4.2. Primary education syllabi were also revised in **2001, 2003, 2004** and **2005**. The official documents issued in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001; Ministry of Education 3915/2001), were aimed to improve the syllabi, by eliminating, redrafting or introducing contents and objectives. Methodological guides for each discipline in the curriculum were also drawn up and distributed nationwide. The revisions did not result in new syllabi for primary education, they rather provided clarifications and were mainly focused on contents, as very few objectives were modified. Nevertheless, in our opinion, the amount of content is still impressive, the syllabi being overloaded, comprising topics irrelevant for the intended objectives. On the other hand, in 2001, a new syllabus for *Science* was drawn up. It was definitely an improved syllabus for this discipline as it displayed an integrated approach for natural sciences, in comparison with the 1998 document.

The syllabi approved in 2003 for the 1st and 2nd grades, in 2004 for the 3rd grade and in 2005 for the 4th grade continued the descongessive process initiated in 2001. However, not all the obstacles were overcome (Crişan, 2002, p. 128): excessive contents, low correlation of the syllabi with one another, mismatch between students' age / skills and the contents / objectives, low representation of some disciplines in the curriculum framework still remained as important drawbacks.

¹⁵ Schools were unable to provide interesting and varied optional subjects and choosing an optional subject was a mere formality because of the schools' wish to conform to the general trend of proposing 'safe' optional subjects, similar with those offered by other schools. Therefore, instead of contributing to the development of each school based on its specificity, to a certain extent, the introduction of optional subjects had quite the opposite effect.

Although in 2009 the lower secondary syllabi were redrafted to comply with the competence-based model, the syllabi for primary education remained the same, following the restructuring proposals included in the report put forth by the National Institute of Education in Romania. The Institute comparatively analysed European and Romanian documents focusing on educational issues, with a special emphasis on the European profile for the student graduating from compulsory education and recommended that ‘the objective-based curriculum design should be maintained for primary education, so that pre-school and primary school stages could benefit from a similar coherent approach’ (I.S.E., 2009, p. 30). On the same line of thought with Căpiță (2012, pp. 47-88), we consider that keeping the objective-based model for primary education meant postponing the achievement of vertical coherence for Romanian compulsory education, as a whole. This coherence was badly needed, if we are to examine the results primary school students achieved in national and international assessments. Thus, according to Neacșu (2012, p. 198), Romanian ‘primary education needs a new structure for the syllabi, based on what lies behind competence: knowledge, abilities or capacities, values and attitudes,’ which could give teachers the appropriate teaching and assessing directions and which could open the road for inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, as well as for integrating non-formal education.

4.5. 2011-present

2011 is the year when a new National Education Act (no. 1/2011) came into force. According to its provisions, the preparatory grade becomes part of primary education and is no longer included in pre-school education. New curriculum frameworks were issued in 2012 and 2013 (Ministry of Education, 2012) for the basic acquisitions key stage and in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2014) for the 3rd and 4th grades, and they stemmed from the key competences for lifelong learning put forth by the European Reference Framework (2007), thus aiming to achieve coherence along the curricular stages that make up primary education. Moreover, although curricular areas were redefined, the new curriculum frameworks were still made up of the core curriculum and the school-based curriculum, just like in the 1998 version. It was still compulsory that one class hour per week be allotted to an optional subject (it was recommended that the optional subject be a modern foreign language, comprised by the curricular area *Language and Communication*).

Syllabi for the preparatory grade were first drafted and issued in 2012 (Ministry of Education

3656/29.03.2012) and then, in 2013, they were revised, coming out together with the syllabi for the 1st and 2nd grade (Ministry of Education 3418/2013). In comparison to the documents in force before 2012, the new syllabi have a completely new structure: general competences of the discipline, including here the attitudes to be achieved along the basic acquisitions key stage; specific competences; learning activities; methodological suggestions. It is also worth mentioning that the contents in the syllabi were significantly reduced (finally accomplishing one of the goals of the reform started in 1990). In addition to this, the contents changed their status, becoming valuable resources which could be reused to develop specific competences. The syllabi for the 3rd and 4th grades (Ministry of Education 5003/2014), issued in 2014, followed the 2012/2013 curricular model.

The 2012 curriculum framework for primary education is more flexible, as compared to the previous ones. The disciplines that make up the curricular areas are integrated and organized around topics – the names of the disciplines are suggestive: *Maths and Environment Exploration, Physical Education, Sports and Healthcare, Visual Arts and Crafts, Music and Movement*. Moreover, two new disciplines were introduced – *Personal Development* and *ICT (Playing with the Computer)*, so that key competences could be more easily attained.

The main strengths of the 2012 curricular documents are:

- there are plenty of examples for designing timetables, as well as examples describing integrated approaches for topics that pupils aged 6-11 are usually interested in;
- they provide a syncretic and integrated approach for the discipline *Communication in Romanian*¹⁶;
- although *Communication in a Foreign Language* is still an optional subject¹⁷ for preparatory, 1st and 2nd grades, a centrally designed syllabus is provided, comprising general guidelines, suitable for studying any modern foreign language and focusing on developing foreign language communication skills in close connection with the self assessment grids in the European Language Portfolio;
- there is an integrated approach for maths and some aspects belonging to natural sciences, contained in a single syllabus, named *Maths and Environment Exploration*, aiming at a holistic and contextualized learning, which not only favours developing in-depth conceptual comprehension and procedural facilitators but also leads to the harmonization of the two fields;

¹⁶ As compared to previous stages when artificial approaches were generally used, now the focus is on communication that stems from real, everyday situations.

¹⁷ In the past, the syllabi for foreign languages as optional subjects were designed by the class teacher and approved by a foreign language inspector.

- the scope of artistic education¹⁸ was widened towards visual arts, in order to incorporate children's interests, as well as towards crafts, in order to focus on character building, very much in line with the active and cooperative learning trend, and the result was an integrated syllabus, *Visual Arts and Crafts*;

- music and movement were put together in a discipline called *Music and Movement*, which aims at: stimulating children's personality in an expressive manner; reducing the gap between school and everyday life; laying the foundations for learning basic musical concepts intuitively;

- the discipline *ICT (Playing with the Computer)* focuses on developing digital competences, which have a high degree of transferability, and also on identifying potential risks when using computer technologies;

- the discipline *Physical Education and Sports* aims at: developing the young learners' motricity; making them familiar with the rules of a healthy lifestyle; achieving harmonious physical development;

- the discipline *Personal Development*¹⁹ is introduced to provide a sequential program for developing and training pupils for their future life.

In 2013, the curriculum framework for the basic acquisitions key stage was revised as a new curriculum framework, comprising primary education in its entirety, was devised, taking into consideration the general profile of the Romanian primary school graduate (Ministry of Education, 2013). As compared to the 2012 curriculum framework, the study of a modern foreign language is no longer optional, but compulsory, starting with the preparatory grade. It is the first time ever in Romanian primary education when the foreign language is included in the core curriculum.

The weaknesses of the 2013 curriculum framework are:

- some 2012 disciplines, highly correlated with the domains of the key competences, disappear, situation which contradicts some of the characteristics of the Romanian primary school graduate profile, and, up to a certain extent, even the provisions of the National Education Act 2011 (the discipline *Education for Society* is wiped out from the curriculum framework for primary education and it is replaced, starting with the 3rd grade, by *Civic Education*, similar with the 1995 / 1998 situation; *ICT (Playing with the Computer)* is also eliminated, which could be explained if we consider its uncertain status in the 2012 curriculum framework – 0-1 class hours per week);

- there are no minimum or maximum class hours per week, as disciplines are allotted a fixed number

of class hours;

- the number of class hours allotted to school-based curriculum is reduced to 0-1 class hours per week;

- there was no official curricular document providing the necessary guidelines for compulsory education as a whole the moment the preparatory grade became an integrating part of primary education²⁰.

5. Conclusions

After 1990, the formal curriculum for primary education has been repeatedly revised in close connection with the curriculum reform stages characterizing Romanian education. Consequently, even if its path has been full of difficulties and obstacles, sometimes there have also been good moments, as the reform of Romanian education has meant 'a continuous source of reflections, debates, proposals and contradictions (...) and, at the same time, a highly relevant source for building up beneficial and constructive educational experiences, which created the conditions for continuing the innovations within the educational system' (Crețu, Iucu, 2012, p. 41). Thus, although the journey taken by the Romanian primary education curriculum has had some detours and pit stops, it has continued and now, in our opinion, it has reached a high point, which should be turned to good account by correlating and by maintaining the correlation between the reforming elements.

The syllabi and the curriculum framework for primary education, included in our analysis, have had both strengths and weaknesses. We divided the period 1990-present into four main phases, considering the curricular developments within the Romanian primary education. Nevertheless, there have also been intermediary steps, which mainly consisted of curricular revisions.

The first two phases represent the most difficult moments in Romanian curricular reform: 1993 = finding the identity of education in Romania, after the communist era; 1995 = clarifying the defining contexts for this identity. The year 1998 is a significant landmark in Romanian curricular reform, as it coherently and systematically drew the main directions of the curricular philosophy, which are still in use at present. After, being modified, remodified, revised and decongested in 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, at this very moment, curricular reform has reached an advanced stage, in which the formal curriculum for primary education is circumscribed to the competence-based model, a model which is

¹⁸ The former name of the discipline dealing with art was *Artistic Education*.

¹⁹ This discipline is brand new. No other curriculum framework for primary education has ever comprised such a discipline.

²⁰ In contrast, in 1998, when the main reform of the Romanian educational system was initiated, the Ministry of Education issued a document, named *The New Romanian National Curriculum*, which provided a valuable reference point for all the stakeholders.

better attuned to the pupils' needs. Moreover, this new curriculum for primary education goes along the same lines with the secondary education curriculum, which was redesigned in 2009, and thus we can talk, to a certain extent²¹, about a unitary National Curriculum that complies with European recommendations.

The recent primary education curriculum could not be labelled rigid, as, at times, it is really flexible and generous. Besides the obvious limitations, mentioned in our analysis, the current formal curriculum for primary education gives practitioners enough leeway to play their role and to prove their competences, to competently act in order to perform their daily tasks²², so that objectives could be met: endowing students with the key competences for longlife learning.

Some of the weaknesses²³ that we pointed out to along our research have been partially overcome:

(1) The amount of **content**, too large in 1993, has been gradually reduced, as a direct consequence of the reforming measures taken to improve curricular documents. At present, the content included in the syllabi is more in the form of general guidelines, allowing teachers to come up with planning well attuned to the specific needs of pupils, classes, schools, local communities.

(2) The **rigid division into disciplines** has been gradually done away with. Currently, the integrated, interdisciplinary approach dominates the primary education curriculum.

(3) The lack, and sometimes the low quality of **methodological suggestions** have been overcome over time. At present, the official curricular documents comprise various examples, which prove useful in planning teaching activities.

(4) The **goals of education**, at first too general and difficult to pursue, are now translated into profiles for each type of possible graduates: the pupil at the end of primary school and even at the end of the curricular key stages making up primary school (the basic acquisitions key stage and the development key stage respectively).

If primary school teachers were given more curricular freedom, i.e. more class hours to be left at teacher's disposal and more guaranteed flexibility to organize the timetables, than limitations present in the primary education framework curriculum in force might be easily overcome. According to current curricular provisions, no optional subject might exist in the pupils' timetable, which seriously contradicts the official intentions – the curriculum aims at meeting the pupils' needs and complying with their interests and skills. Nevertheless, one should not forget that one optional subject can be included and we suggest that it could be designed so as to partially overcome this limitation.

Furthermore, the total number of class hours per week is still large. Even if, starting with 1998, the idea of reducing the number of class hours per week has been recurrent, a viable solution is yet to be found.

The meteoric existence of some disciplines in the 2012 curriculum framework (*ICT – Playing with the Computer, Education for Society* disappeared in 2013) is difficult to account for, as they had an important part to play in developing the intended key competences. Teachers have now to do their best to approach content in such a manner so that they could make up for the loss.

In our opinion, the strengths of the new curriculum framework and the new syllabi for primary education should reverberate through the official curricular documents for the lower and upper secondary education. Moreover, a New Romanian National Curriculum, regulating the activity of both primary and secondary education, is badly needed, as this document could provide a comprehensive perspective for all education stakeholders. By taking a close look into the recent past, we could avoid past mistakes, we could capitalize on 'the history of the Romanian curricular reform which could serve as a useful reference point for future changes' (Potolea *et al.*, 2012, p. 21).

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²¹ So far, there is not a single document regulating both primary and secondary education in Romania as it was in 1998, but several documents that came into force between 2009 and 2014.

²² i.e. planning, teaching, assessing.

²³ We assume that well trained, experienced and competent teachers were able to overcome any of the limitations mentioned along this paper, as they could easily spot out, for example, if methodological suggestions were irrelevant or non-existent and successfully deal with it.

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