

CURRENT CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGNING SCHOOL SYLLABI AND MANUALS

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I. Introduction.

An analysis of school syllabi and alternative manuals becomes imperative against the backdrop of an increasing interest for achieving end goals which focus more on multidimensional qualitative aspects, to the detriment of quantitative ones. At the same time, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity bring structural changes in the content of education, seeking a permissive operational framework by which the share of the monodisciplinary model among didactic activities is gradually decreased.

Both the theoretical debate and the articulation of educational policies reveal a series of inconveniences and inconsistencies related to school curricula and alternative manuals, with a stress over the past few decades on the simplification thereof and the optimization of manuals as working instruments for students. It is true that the review, supplementation and development of the reference framework of the national curriculum must be carried out in symphony with the new European educational matrix, with a stress on formulating the concepts, principles and norms that provide a scientific and methodological basis for the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of the curriculum from the point of view of the development and formation of “key concepts.”

II. A school curriculum materialized in syllabi and manuals.

An evaluative analysis

School curriculum - in a restricted sense - includes school programs, syllabi and manuals. It is a unitary set of documents, and it is evaluated with the help of *a system of criteria* and *a set of indicators* transposed into *evaluation questions*.

II.1. The evaluation analysis of school syllabi requires an entire matrix, of which I find the following five criteria most telling: *relevance, pertinence, coherence, applicability* and *feasibility*.

By exploring these criteria, we find the following:

a) the relevance of syllabi shows the degree in which the formulation of certain value judgments with regard to the representativeness and legitimacy of the end goals and general objectives complies with education policy, with the vision concerning education in general and the purpose of schooling as well as the aim of the field of reference;

b) the pertinence of syllabi indicates the strong or weak orientation of the curriculum by assessing the extent in which their system of objectives and competences leads to the accomplishment of the expected educational goals;

c) coherence - understood as a feature of the curriculum components reflected by a system of objectives/ competences and by a degree of harmonization of objectives/ competences with contents;

d) applicability, expressed by the degree of adequacy between educational strategies – which include resources – envisioned by the curriculum and the quality of the relationship between types of objectives, recommended learning activities and teaching methods proposed by the curriculum;

e) feasibility, which shows the extent to which the expected objectives are realistic by comparison to the available educational resources and the specialization and training of teachers, as well as achievable in the time assigned.

The identity of each criterion is given by its subordinated indicators and it covers a clear significance, rigorously defined, capitalized in the evaluation process with the goal of expressing various degrees of quality of the designed school curriculum by relation to evaluation indicators and questions.

A summary presentation of the criteria according to which school syllabi can be analyzed is included in the table below ¹:

CRITERION	DESCRIPTORS
1. RELEVANCE	Allows the formulation of value judgments with regard to the representativeness and legitimacy of the end goals and general objectives in relation to educational policy and the field of reference. The qualitative considerations which give relevance to the designed curriculum are provided by the degree of representativeness of the objectives, or by the correspondence between framework objectives, general competences and the objectives of the curricular area to which a subject belongs.
2. PERTINENCE	Is indicative of the proper orientation of the curriculum, by appreciating the extent to which its system of objectives and competences leads to the achievement of the desired results. The scope, volume and variability of objectives/ competences are quantifiable elements which express the pertinence of the curriculum.
3. COHERENCE	Expresses a feature of the curriculum components reflected by the organization of its objectives and competences, and by the degree of harmonization of its objectives and skills with the contents. !!! A good quality curriculum must include clear objectives, aligned with end goals and contents, accepted as means of achieving the desired results. Coherence by continuity is an essential qualitative consideration for a curriculum in terms of the development of objectives and skillsets, the learning strategies envisioned, as well as the set of contents by which the authors aim to reach the objectives and the

¹ See also *Analiza programelor și manualelor școlare alternative*, Centrul Național de Evaluare și Examinare, 2012, pp. 18-20.

	<p>educational results for the relevant subject.</p> <p>Coherence operates at a teleological level, measuring the vertical development of the system of objectives and skills within a school cycle and providing the horizontal framework for each year of study.</p>
4. APPLICABILITY	<p>Measures the degree of alignment between the educational strategies and resources designed in the curriculum and the quality of the relationship between types of objectives (cognitive, behavioral, practical), recommended learning activities and teaching methods included in the designed school curriculum.</p> <p>Applicability is closely related to the qualification and skills (scientific, methodological, participative-integrating) of the teachers in charge with implementing the curriculum, to the coherency of the learning strategies designed in the curriculum and to students’ ability to cover the curriculum in the assigned time.</p>
5. FEASIBILITY	<p>Consists in the assessment of the extent to which the expected objectives are realistic by comparison to the available educational resources and the specialization and training of teachers, as well as achievable in the time assigned.</p> <p>The assessment of feasibility creates a framework for corrections in terms of formulating learning objectives and activities in order to increase the degree of representativeness and of the adequacy thereof to the particularities of the students to whom they are addressed (age and pre-existing education, interests, abilities, learning potential, evolution of skills, potential for adaptability, school environment etc.).</p>

We must state here that the use of indicators expressed by statistic values (numbers, grades, opinions/ degrees of credibility etc.) leads to a more nuanced descriptive approach and to a more advanced analytical level (measuring results, analyzing factors which generated various states of things, formulating hypotheses etc.).

II.2. The evaluative analysis of school manuals

There are too many criticisms regarding school manuals currently existing on the Romanian educational market. Surely, manuals and curricula alike have been the target of criticism during Communism also. Today, this criticism is focused more on their *alternative nature* than on their content, with outdated opinions calling for the return to a single unique manual used across the board, in other words turning the clock back by twenty-two years. This suggestion is the “fruit” of the narrow, inflexible and rudimentary thinking of certain decision makers within the Ministry of Education, as well as an aggressive form of manipulation by means of *contextual pretext*.

I am referring here to the hidden methods of *perverting* the problems in the field of education, one of them being, in this case, *alternative manuals* and the market for them. The

quarrel between the Ministry and the competitor publishing houses and the launch of anathemas based on false claims - that manuals are not ready in time, that their content is inadequate and that this is caused by the free market of manuals - corrodes the credibility of the functions of a manual, as well as of plurality in education. I would like to remind here that any manual, regardless how “alternative” it is, must observe the school curriculum and the Ministry is in charge with the alignment between the contents of the (alternative) manual and the school curriculum, issuing the approval for the publication thereof. Therefore, I believe that evaluating manuals from this perspective is not just inadequate but also generating serious confusions.

I would like to propose an evaluation system comprised of nine criteria based on indicators and descriptors which we will describe in detail in another paper.

The following table lists the criteria for the evaluation of school manuals¹:

CRITERION	DESCRIPTION
1. IDENTITY ELEMENTS	Contains information regarding cover design, user instructions, preface and introduction, aspects of attractiveness, quality of paper, illustrations, tips for students, bibliography.
2. CURRICULUM DESIGN	Integrates aspects regarding the curricular project proposed by the manual, namely the existence of an interior paradigm which reflects a certain architectural vision of the manual, the correspondence between the school curriculum and the contents of the manual, the observance of the imperatives of rational learning and the degree in which the lesson structure favors learning.
3. CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTENT	Express the way in which the content is presented, the relevance of information, the selection and summarization of information, the quantity of information provided by the manual, information density, presentation of content sequences, presence of interdisciplinary structures and openness to non-formal education.
4. NON-DISCRIMINATION	Indicates the existence of elements that can be interpreted as discriminatory, in the text or the imagery within the manual.
5. ORGANIZATION AND DIRECTION OF LEARNING ACCORDING TO THE MANUAL	Is indicated by the associated indicators and refers to the induced learning tasks and their impact on the student (motivation, personalization, active learning).
6. ACCESSIBILITY	Refers to the adequacy to the students’ age particularities, language used, accessibility of empirical support (pictures, charts, drawings, illustrations), the accessible nature of learning activities.
7. THE EVALUATION COMPONENT	Refers to the explicit presence of regular evaluation activities, evaluation instruments, complementary evaluation methods.

¹ Ibidem, pp.11-12.

8. REFLECTING THE STUDENT'S REFERENTIAL UNIVERSE	Expresses the manual's openness to the promotion of values, motivation for learning, suggested connections with real life, with the ever-changing daily picture.
9. DTP ELEMENTS	Includes aspects regarding the legibility and grammatical correctness of texts, the structuring thereof, the permission for use in various situations.

The observance of this matrix and the successive application of these criteria in the evaluation of school manuals provides information of great utility for authors who are in direct competition, as well as for editors and decision makers authorized to approve them.

III. Conclusions

The Romanian education system is neither better nor worse than its society, whose exponent it is. It is faced with significant issues - starting with the identity crisis to the scarcity of resources, from system design errors to sterile imitations, from a crisis of vision to inadequate, even undesirable end results.

A lot of energy is wasted on debates on the same topics, and solutions are delayed almost intentionally. After consulting several bibliographic sources, I was unpleasantly surprised to find that the criticism brought to syllabi and school manuals has remained an inevitable invariable of all public debates in the field. Specialized journals discuss the same topics in 1972 as they do in 1988, in 1995 and today. The solutions proposed in this study are both achievable and remedial.

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