

# The curriculum reform and the schools' ability to innovate

Lomos Catalina

PPSW Faculty, RUG University, Blekerslaan 4, 9724 EJ, Room 4D14

Groningen, Netherlands

*lomos catalina@yahoo.com* *lomos\_alina@yahoo.com*

**Abstract.** *The presentation is the summary of two-research projects developed in Romania – 2003 and Netherlands – 2005 on the traits of the educational policies, curriculum reform and the ability to innovate in the primary education. The project combines quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis with valid results and an interesting inside on the human aspect of the process of curriculum innovation.*

*The purpose of the project was to discover the actors, the steps and extend of innovation in primary education. In addition, the cultural and social contexts were considered in analyzing the development of the innovation process.*

**Keywords.** Comparative research on the field of curriculum development and innovation in primary education, actors and institutions to sustain the process of top down change.

## 1. The context

In 1994 in Romania started an educational reform determined by the social, political and economical changes in the society. The outcomes of the educational system were not conforming anymore to the needs and the demands of the new democratic society. The system was centralized and mainly prescriptive. The main components of the educational reform were curriculum, textbooks, teacher training, school management and financing, quality evaluation system and many others. The curriculum reform was the main part of the educational reform and went through three stages: elaboration of the policy and principals of the curriculum reform, implementation and monitoring and finally evaluation. The new Law in Education in 1995 stipulated as ideal the *free, total and harmonious development of human individuality, to become a creative and independent personality*. [1] A national document called The National Curriculum was

legalized in 1998 [1] and its goal was The New Curriculum is made for the students that are going to be active subjects in the social and professional life of the next century. In this case, *the educational system has the duty and the responsibility of preparing them for the changes that are going to happen in the economical, social and cultural field in our country and in the world*. [1] In 2002, even if the curriculum reform was officially ended and was evaluated, the changes in the educational system and process are following with a law for quality assurance system, qualitative actions of the national inspectorate, internationalization of the compulsory and superior education.

The curriculum reform in the Netherlands took place between 1985 and 1990 and it was a general reform in education called the *neoliberal reform*. [5] The concept of freedom in education was the main element, freedom of schools based on religious and cultural believes. A new policy for schools was introduced regarding founding, governance and free choice. The freedom of education is guaranteed under the article 23 of the Constitution, [5] *freedom of establishment, organization of teaching, of conviction*. The National Curriculum that was introduced established the national aims that should try to be achieved by all the students finishing the compulsory education. The core curriculum is a central document with the purpose of giving the same direction of actions of all the schools.

Looking from this perspective, the process of introducing the National Curriculum had opposite goals in the two countries. If in Romania, the purpose of the National Curriculum was to decentralize the system and to offer freedom to the schools to make their own taught curriculum, in the Netherlands the goal was to centralize the direction of the outcomes of the process, to offer the same final level of achievements to all the students. However, the process of introducing a top down change was the same and the influence of

different actors and institutions on the quality of the implementation process can be compared.

## 2. The design and the methodology

The curriculum reform is part of the educational reform. Usually, the curriculum reform is defined as an innovation on the level of structure of the curriculum, the teaching and learning strategies.

There are some general principles of a curriculum reform, as:

- a very good integration of curriculum reform in the general context of the educational and the social global reform
- the educational reform has to reflect the general objectives of development of the society in that moment
- a curriculum reform has achieved his goals only if the changes are visible in school's practice and in the every-day process
- the curriculum reform has to be seen as a permanent and perfectible process
- the curriculum reform has to be implemented only in relation with permanent education [4, 1994].

The article intends to identify the quality of the curriculum reform process and the factors that influenced the level of quality and efficiency, the role of the support – materials as the guides for the teachers or the textbooks. The help needed in an innovation process is high, especially the help offered to the teachers that have to implement the change and make it work. In this case, I was interested to find out if there were institutions named to offer help, specialists to support the implementation process, training periods for teachers or meetings with the specialists. I focused mainly on the teachers in both countries and I intended to discover their roles in an innovation process, roles perceived by different educational actors. I had also as goal to discover if the teachers in both countries considered implementing an innovation into the classrooms is a difficult process and for what reasons.

The comparisons is between two research projects, a qualitative data analysis using a questionnaire done in Romania in 2003 and a quantitative data analysis using an interview done in the Netherlands in 2005. The both projects focused on the process of implementing the curriculum reform and the role of the teachers in an innovation process.

The subjects questioned in Romania were selected in a representative sample for the all teachers population from Botosani County in the north of the country, population of two hundred sixty five teachers. The sample of ninety-five teachers from primary education was representative. Fifteen educational actors from all other Netherlands, an representative equal number of actors from all the levels of the educational system's structure of authority. It was a equal number of teachers, headmasters, general directors, school inspectors and educational specialists, represented the subjects interviewed in the Netherlands also from primary education.

I took in consideration the organization of the institutions on the authority level, the context of the reform and the nature of change, the characteristics of the innovation process, the actors involved and the different institutions, the extend of the diffusion, the quality of the implementation process and the expected abilities of continuing the innovation process. From all this perspective, I analyzed the perceive roles of the teachers in an innovation process and identify the factors that could increase the quality of the process.

The questionnaire I used in Romania was elaborated and pre-tested by me. It contained thirteen items focused on the quality of the implementation of the curriculum reform at the local level, the use of the support materials for teachers, the help and was offered to teachers and from which institution came the help they needed. In addition, I focused mainly on the teachers and their roles in the curriculum reform.

## 3. The research projects

The objectives were to discover if the teachers felt the introduction of the new curriculum in the schools as a difficult process, if they received the help they needed, what kind of help they think would have been the most efficient. It was an objective to discover what roles they consider they had in the all process and which one was considered the main actor in a top down change.

From the answers, I received on the multiple choices questions; I could discover many dysfunctions in the implementation process, at the local level in Romania.

At the question if the implementation process was an easy or hard process, 65% of the teachers said the change was hard to implement

and they found very difficult to work with the new curriculum in the classrooms. Interesting is that I identified significant differences between the answers of the young teachers and the experimented teachers as: the young teachers found the process of working with the new curriculum significant more difficult than the experimented teachers.

In this context, I wanted to identify if the teachers received the help they needed in implementing the new curriculum and I asked which one was the person that they asked for help and which was the institution that offered them specialized help when needed. 34% of the teachers questioned said that as person, they asked for help the local school inspector and 30% the specialist in curriculum (the function of the specialist in curriculum was a very new function and the responsibilities and duties of such a person were not clearly stated). Just 13% of them said they would ask for help the other teachers from their school. Moreover, when they had to point out the institution that mainly offered help in implementing the curriculum reform, 42% of them pointed out The Teacher Training Center and just 27% the Local School Inspectorate. There is no connection between the person that they said mainly helped them in the curriculum reform which was the local school inspector and the institution which was The Teacher Training Center. This makes me consider that the teachers did not received the help they needed to implement the school curriculum and could be one of the explanation why 65% of the teachers said that the change was hard to implement. Again, just 19% of the teachers pointed out the school with the school's headmaster as institution that they asked for help. We can see that the Romanian teachers do not ask for help or look for support in the school, working with the other teachers or asking the school's headmaster. However, this could not be a conclusion that can be generalized in all the innovation processes, because I asked only in the case of a reform, of a significant change, when no teachers know how to work with the new elements.

Another essential element in the curriculum reform was the materials-support for the teachers in working with the new curriculum as guides or textbooks. 72% of the teachers said that the materials-support were insufficient. They did not have guides to work with and the issue of the new and alternative textbooks is still on debate. They did not know which textbooks are made

respecting the new core curriculum and which content had to be thought. Moreover, this was a big challenge for the teachers, because they were used to work mainly with the textbooks and to teach the content that was stipulated in the national documents.

Considering that the teachers affirmed that they had major difficulties in working with the new curriculum, I asked them what type of help and under what form, they consider would have been efficient in sustain their activity during the changing process. 28% of them said that special training activities as part of the continuing teacher-training programs, 25% said meeting and debates with the educational specialists, 24% said more information and explanation would have helped more and finally, 22% said the teacher training sessions focused on the curriculum reform. As we can see, the teachers cannot decide on one type of help that they needed the most in the changing process, all types of help proposed in the questionnaire would have helped them. I could say that all these types of help were missing and that the national policy makers in starting a changing process should consider them.

It is true that every process of change, especially reforms, will raise numerous issues and difficulties and I see the research I did as a step in identifying the elements that the national policy makers should focus more on the moment of starting the innovation process. They should point out institutions that can offer help to the teachers; they should define clearly, what are the roles and the positions of the teachers in the change, lobby about the change and offer support-materials that would improve the quality of the implementation process.

In the Netherlands, in 2005, I went into schools and I talked with the actors involved in the processes of change on a regular basis. In this analysis, I will mainly describe the teachers' answers, but not only, and try to identify the answers to the same items as I used in the questionnaire in Romania.

I talked with the teachers in the interviews about the difficulty of introducing the curriculum aims into the classroom's activity and they all said that it was a short and very easy process and everything went smoothly. It was felt like a natural change and they had enough time to implement it. I did not feel the pressure of change, not at all, say the teachers. Moreover, the teachers consider the process as very easy, with no big pressure and they all agreed with the

change. They all consider that the main national institution involved was the Ministry of Education.

As an institution that mainly helped all the actors involved in the curriculum reform, is considered the Pedagogical Institute. They all agree, I mean all the fifteen subjects, that the Pedagogical Institute was pointed out to offer the help, explanations and support to the schools. During the curriculum reform, the schools did not have to buy the help of the Pedagogical Institute; the help was paid for a few years by the national institutions. During the curriculum reform, the government paid for these institutions, but the headmasters decided if the school needs the programs or not, say the general directors.

The answers to the question: which they consider is the most important actor in the curriculum reform and in an innovation process, in general, were very interesting. The teachers and the educational specialists have the same opinions: the teachers represent the most important actor, together with the community and its demands. In all three moments, the teachers should be more actively involved... The teacher has to feel that he has a real job, not just by sitting and doing what we say they should do. You should experiment, discover a way of teaching, think about it, and talk about it with everybody... says one of the headmasters interviewed. We have to give freedom to the teachers to discover how they are going to achieve it say the school inspectors. One of the educational specialists says definitely, in the all implementation process, the most important actor is the teacher... The teachers are the ones that have to do everything; they are the most important in a process of change. We can introduce a change in the political system, but the most important is the applied curriculum, so the teachers are the ones that make it possible. The curriculum reform took part, actually, when the door at the class was closed... The question is if the teachers can handle the process of change and what can we do to make the process easier. Therefore, we have to ask ourselves what we can do to grow the quality of our teachers and at of the process they develop.

Regarding the issue of sufficient materials to sustain the curriculum reform, one of the general directors says I think the relation is essential and that it was one of the secrets of the curriculum reform. The markets of the textbooks knew the curriculum by heart, so they knew they could not

seal books that were not right for the new curriculum. Therefore, they were an important actor in the political aspect. They were very important in the process of the curriculum reform. Talking about the textbooks, the teachers say The textbooks are made in a way that at the end of the school's process, the children reach the level that is demanded at the national level, by the national aims... Textbooks are the most important thing that we have... The textbooks are important so you know what you have to teach in that year... I know about the national levels that the students have to achieve from the textbooks and guides, but I do not know about the national aims exactly... They all agree strongly that the textbooks are very important and the base of the curriculum reform. The teachers as the specialists consider that guides for the teachers were also important in the implementation process. For the teachers, the textbooks have many roles: support in preparing the lessons, important for both teachers and students, used to measure the level of achievement, as assurance in obtaining the success and in order to know what to teach. Based on the textbooks, the teachers were able to implement the changes in the school and at the classroom's level.

The teachers, the general directors, the school inspectors and the educational specialists affirm the process was well organized, the regulations were good and were sent in time and they could always talk about it with the school's team, talk about the change. In addition, they always got the help they needed from the helping institutions. The educational specialists played a main role in initiating the innovation and assuring the lobby and the support needed during the process. They take the decision and they built the instruments of the change. They have a very positive attitude towards change and they infuse a lot the importance of the social skills and the social changes and demands.

The actors that said they felt the curriculum reform as a hard process were the headmasters, at least at the beginning. In this case, the reform was not easy to implement for them. Yes, it was a very hard process for the schools, because it was not clear what we had to do, say the headmasters. However, the teachers perceive it as easy, which is the element of debate in this paper. The educational specialists interviewed said we had many meetings and we could talk about the process and maybe be initialization process was long, but not the implementation.

As I think at the beginning, it was hard to accept the idea, because nobody likes to be told what to do and we like to decide for ourselves. It was a process of talking about the way of implementing the innovation and of trying to make everybody agreeing with the process of innovation.

If I want to point out explanations for the fact that the teachers perceived the curriculum reform as easy, I choose to present the patterns that I identified in all the interviews, the aspects that all the actors agreed on. The first and the most important pattern identified is we can talk about it. The teachers say they could talk about the change and the way of the change with the actors, they met, as the other teachers, the headmaster, the representative from the institution that helped the school during the curriculum reform. The second pattern identified was time and help. They agree that the teachers, the school's team, the general directors, they all had the time they needed to implement the change and they knew they can ask for extra help, if necessary. The third pattern identified is we worked together as a team. The pattern of working together as a team is present especially at the school level. The teachers choose to go and ask for help first to the other teachers in the school and secondly to the headmaster. They do not go to ask for help to the local actors or the local institutions. The use of the textbooks is also present as a pattern in all the interviews and by all the actors involved. They all start talking about the textbooks from the first questions of the interview. They identify multiple roles and functions of the textbooks in primary education and they are identified as the secret of the curriculum reform.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The teachers in the Netherlands felt the process of reform as an easy process, with an effective rhythm of change. The headmasters are the ones who felt the pressure of change and who had to make a plan for the school to integrate the innovations. The teachers did not feel the pressure of change, because they worked as a team, they talked about the things they knew how to do and especially about the things they did not know how to do, even with the headmaster of the schools. The national authorities pointed out clearly the institution and the persons that are going to offer the support to the schools. The teachers were perceived as the

main actors in the top down change and the process of implementation was evaluated after sufficient time of practice. They all leaned on the textbooks and on the guides and the teachers could take courses to get familiar with the change. In a way, the teachers are protected from the pressure of change at the beginning and they are stimulated to talk about the things they do not understand with the other teachers.

In the Romanian top down change, these things were a little different. The teachers did not go to ask for help from the other teachers and they do not feel free to talk about the things they do not know how to do. It is clear from the percentage of answers that they did not have sufficient material and guides to sustain their effort of change. They asked for help and I guess they received it individually, because they pointed out persons and institutions that they could ask for help. However, there are no correlations between the persons and the institutions chosen. That infuses the idea that, at the national and local level, they did not name institutions and trained persons to be able to offer organized support and counseling. They should have considered more that the teachers were not used at all with the new working instruments and with the paper work that they had to do, so they did not offer sufficient time in order to avoid the pressure of change.

These elements should be considered when there is a structural and fundamental change and the teachers should feel more actively involved and as part of the change. They need to understand that the change is necessary, that it is going to make things better, and in this case, the change will be a success.

Doing quantitative research in Romania, I felt that it was easier to do quantitative research in Romania, because I could easily get the chance to analyze official documents than to talk to people. In addition, in Romania, the local school inspectorate has the role of schools' management and control, so it is easier to send and questionnaires to schools. I also considered that the people still do not feel comfortable to speak out, so I was taking the risk of not getting an objective response in a qualitative investigation.

I could also say that my impression was that the teachers were more interested to be a part of a research that is possible to affect them directly, in changing things and educational actors in Romania put a lot of trust in quantitative representative data in order to change things.

There are a few quantitative national analysis and paper focused on the curriculum reform, but I consider that the Romanian educational policy still needs many quantitative projects, in order to compare outputs and to find solutions. The development of education is in a moment when it needs more quantitative investigation, comparisons and specialists are interested on a national level for the results of different research projects.

Doing qualitative research in the Netherlands, I felt it was easier for me to talk to official educational specialists than to analyse official documents. In addition, I think I got an inside of the process. Moreover, it was very useful for my knowledge to get more information about the process of a top down innovation and make my own objective opinion. I consider it was very useful to start with qualitative investigation, having a great chance to get the human inside of the curriculum reform and the real pulse of the educational process. The qualitative research gave me the chance to focus more on the personal opinions or individual development processes. Moreover, talking to people I was able to identify other subjects interesting to research and causes or phenomena that I did not think of from the beginning.

After talking with the educational actors in the Netherlands and from my experience, I was able to identify after issues and themes that they were interested on and that would be interesting to research. Such themes of research could be: the textbooks – the process of changing the textbooks and the rhythm of change, the constructive role of the School Inspectorate and his role in stimulating the bottom up innovations and related, the importance of the school self evaluation process and the quality evaluation process. Some of the persons I talked to pointed out the role of the European tests and the impact of the results and the concept of the good teacher.

## 5. Acknowledgements

I acknowledge my professor at University Al. I. Cuza Iasi, Romania, Professor Carmen

Cretu and my professor at RUG University Groningen, the Netherlands, Dr. E.J. Boerma and the Nuffic Huygens scholarship that I received in order to do research in the Netherlands.

## 6. References

- [1] OECD - Reviews of national policies for education, Paris, 1991
- [1] OECD- Reviews of national policies for education, Romania, Education and skills, 2000
- [1] OECD – Reviews of national policies for education, South Eastern Europe, Volume 2, Romania, 2003
- [1] European commission - Key data on education in the European Union, 1997
- [1] European commission - Key data on education in the European Union, 1999
- [1] Parliament of Romania - The Education Law in Romania, 151/1999, Article 3(2)
- [1] The Ministry of Education – MEN – "Majors changes in education made in 1999 by the MEN", Romania, 2000,
- [1] Ministry of Education, National Board of Curriculum – Education for all: National Report on Romania, Bucharest, Ministry of National Education, 2001
- [2] Informative bulletin - The reform project of compulsory education, Nr. 10/ February 2000, MEN, Romania, p. 163
- [2] MEN - The decentralization of the compulsory education, Romania, Notes - Nr.5145/ 1999, p. 71
- [2] Taylor and Francis, editors - Journal of Curriculum Studies, volume 31, nr. 1, January – February, 1999
- [4] Birzea, Cezar – Educational policies of the countries in transition, Strasbourg, Council of Europe Press, 1994, p.23
- [5] <http://www.eurydice.or/>
- [5] <http://www.oecd.org/>
- [5] <http://www.infoeuropa.org/>
- [5] <http://www.europa.eu.int/>
- [5] <http://www.edu.ro/>
- [5] <http://www.guvernulromaniei.ro/>