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**BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY**

**„The European Paradigm” DOCTORAL SCHOOL**

**Faculty of European Studies**

**PHILOSOPHICAL PARADIGMS OF EDUCATION.  
CURRENT APPROACHES TO LEARNING**

**Summary of the doctoral dissertation**

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## **KEY WORDS**

**Philosophy – Contemporary philosophy - Education – Learning – Learner - Educational paradigm – Philosophical paradigm of education – Philosophical assumptions – Questioning - Curriculum – Curriculum frameworks – Education quality – Education theory - Vision – Education policy – Education practice – Reflective approach – Reflective practice – Learning potential – Competences – Lifelong learning – Learning to Learn – Learning experiences**

## **Summary of the doctoral dissertation**

In this doctoral dissertation, we aimed to inquire the connections between philosophy, education and learning through the lenses of the „paradigm” concept, and more specifically the concept of „philosophical paradigms of education”.

As regards philosophy, we envisaged three of its main features, namely:

- i) Its understanding as „love of wisdom” and/or as attempt to reach (theoretical and practical) wisdom through philosophical questioning;
- ii) The way philosophy inquires the foundations of our knowledge in different areas in a critical way; and
- iii) Philosophy’s status as discourse, i.e. as an ensemble of statements (assertions) on different philosophical issues and problems, which do not have only an explanatory function (such as to explain nature, knowledge, man and society), but, under certain circumstances, to also orientate human action in a direct or mediated way.

As regards education and learning, we envisaged both their connections, as well as what distinguishes them, such as the fact that „learning” concerns rather the internal processes based on which individuals adopt values, acquire knowledge and develop their skills and attitudes, whereas „education” refers more to the external conditions that make learning possible and efficient.

When approaching education and learning we emphasize primarily formal education (formal schooling), however, whenever needed, we discuss other forms and levels as well, such as technical-vocational education, higher education and lifelong learning. Special attention was

given to the curriculum, as an intentional, organized and systematic system of learning experiences.

As for the „paradigm” concept, we discuss its usage since Kuhn’s explanations of „scientific paradigms” and the „paradigm shift” in the natural sciences.

Through „paradigm” (and, more particularly „philosophical paradigm”) we understand the following:

- (a) Assumptions with regard to issues such as human nature and the learning potential; understandings of knowledge and learning; philosophical reflections on psychosocial aspects, such as human personality, human development and its stages; social relationships; communications; power relations; tensions between liberty, autonomy, equality, justice/fairness, responsibility and education quality;
- (b) The „philosophical” (reflective) attitude, which implies the permanent questioning of what underpins our choices in education – and their legitimacy;
- (c) Cases of concepts, theories and/or practices of a philosophical nature, that have become „exemplary” to education and learning.

In our inquiry, we considered the following hypothesis and questions:

- (1) Education and learning are considered essential for both the development of individuals and the wellbeing of societies. Our decisions with regard to how education and learning are made possible stem from different sources, among which are traditions, international „models” that seem appealing, as well as research outcomes in pedagogy/educational sciences, and human and social sciences. However, given the importance of education in today’s and tomorrow’s ever changing world, it is utmost important to also examine the philosophical basis of such decisions that shape educational visions, policies and practices.

- (2) Certain „philosophical paradigms” have a major influence on education, although that may not be always visible or explicit. One question in our dissertation is whether educational visions and policies that are more explicit about their philosophical positioning are more successful than others whose assumptions may be only implicit, and, ususally eclectic and/or rather confusing.
- (3) It is largely accepted that education decision makers, reserachers and practitioners do not have usually the opportunity to reflect upon their own undertakings, routines, and patterns of thinking and action. It may be consequently important to investigate how such moments of „reflection” can make their way in education, as well as the added value of such approaches in designing and implementing necessary educational innovations, changes and/or larger-scale reforms.
- (4) The relationship between philosophy, education and learning is not unidirectional, with influences coming from philosophy towards education and learning only. On the contrary, the many changes in today’s world, such as globalization (with its opportunities, limits, setbacks and dangers) and the impact of the new technologies, give raise to new philosophical reflections with regard to education and learning in the context of the „knowledge society” and what will come afterwards.

In the context of several curriculum development projects we have helped carrying out over the last twenty years – many of them having involved also a capacity development component for curriculum specialists and decision makers – we had a chance to look into the curriculum policies and practices of developed countries, with constant good results in international comparative studies, such as PISA. When analyzing curriculum policy documents of such countries, it became obvious that their success is linked to the way they defined their education vision, which is usually closely connected with the societal prospects of those countries against changes happening in today’s world.

As such visions are closely connected to philosophical assumptions about human nature, the human potential, as well as the question about the type of social and interpersonal relationships that can best further people's learning potential, over time our interest was directed towards looking more closely into the relationships between philosophy, education and learning. Exploring the „philosophical paradigms of education” is of course one possible way of investigating the sometimes very complex connections among these domains.

As shown also above, decisions in the areas of education and learning are influenced by many factors. Without downplaying the importance of empirical and statistic research, of experiments and of other „scientific” methods in educational sciences (of both quantitative and qualitative nature), our research is drawing attention to the need of complementing the „scientific” perspective with a philosophical one, which implies both the visionary dimension, as well as the capacity to inquire critically the underpinnings of our decisions in the areas of education policy and practice. While sometimes such endeavors are considered futile, our dissertation envisage to shed light on the benefits of such approaches.

Why do we consider „experiential learning” and „problem-based learning” are to be preferred in certain circumstances to „traditional” (rote) learning based on transmitting information, as well as on its memorizing and accurate reproduction? Why should we promote interactive pedagogies or approaches that encourage students to take part in the construction of their own learning, so that we can build on their prior learning while also taking their context into account (constructivist views)? Why should we privilege interactive and inclusive teaching and learning instead of looking into some scattered aspects of learning only?

The answers to such questions are sometimes based on the practitioners' intuitions or on some social and pedagogical movements that promote social equity, for instance, such as in the case of Freire's „pedagogy of the oppressed”. In many other cases the different educational choices are based on some deeper and wider-ranging philosophical views/assumptions.

For the last 50 years, education and curriculum have become the battle field between objectivist and behaviorist views, on the one hand, and constructivist views, on the other hand. In addition,

sometimes fierce battles are fought between the partisans of (different) „relativisms” and those of (different genres of) universalism.

How can we find our way amid all these debates and dilemmas? In our dissertation, we attempt to shed light on some of the choices and visions of a more philosophical nature that triggered education changes and reforms over the last decades, both internationally and in Romania. It is hoped that based on exploring such philosophical assumptions one can identify some promising directions for the development of education and learning with a view to cater for balancing tradition and innovation, change and stability, as well as „national/local” and „universal” features in a wise way.

As for the research methodology, we attempted to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the connections between philosophy, education and learning based on an extended bibliographical research, involving sources in different languages, such as Romanian, English, German and French. We have also carried out a comparative analysis of curriculum frameworks from countries that have constantly had excellent results in PISA over the last ten years (above the OECD mean) in order to identify what is common for such countries in the way they shape their education vision. With regard to Romania, we undertook also an analysis of the main elements of the 1997-2000 curriculum reform with a view to pointing to some of their philosophical and value underpinnings. The results of different focus groups with curriculum specialists and decision makers organized in different countries during the period 2010-2015 were also considered in analyzing how practitioners (including teachers) envisage the connections between philosophy, education and learning and whether philosophy plays a role in making inspired curriculum decisions.

The dissertation is structured in several chapters, as follows:

### *Chapter 1: Conceptual clarifications*

A first part, „*Philosophy today*” looks into the different shapes philosophy takes today, from a philosophy connected to daily life to the comprehensive systems of a more academic nature.



Different philosophical „turns” are also being discussed some of them having had an important impact on education and learning.

A second part, „*Education and learning*” explores the connections and differences between these two concepts, as well as some current trends with regard to what is deemed desirable in terms of quality education and learning. Different perspectives on priorities and preconditions for quality learning in today’s ever changing world have been also addressed. One of such priorities is nowadays defined in terms of „competency development” for life and work, whereas the development of the so-called ”key competencies” play a major role in today’s (very often controversial) curriculum changes the world over.

A last part of Chapter 1, „*Philosophy, Education and Learning*” looks for instance into the contributions to the thinking on education of some major philosophers who are are though by no means „philosophers of education”, such as Whitehead and Wittgenstein. Some more room is devoted to the philosophy of education, as the systematic domain of inquiry with regard to the foundations of education and learning – even though it does not constitute a major area of the contemporary academic philosophy. Finally, several particular philosophical domains and approaches are being investigated, such as praxiology and analytical philosophy, from where several interesting ideas and methodologies have been translated into educational theory, pedagogy and the more recent „educational sciences” in a broad sense.

## *Chapter 2. Philosophical paradigms of education*

*A first introductory part explains the concepts of „paradigm” and „philosophical paradigm” as referring to:*

- (1) Philosophical streams/schools or movements that have influenced educational visions, policies and practices (through assumptions of philosophical nature and debates, as well as through some exemplary connections between education theory and practice they have inspired);

- (2) The philosophical attitude with regard to inquiring the underpinnings of our educational decisions and practices; and
- (3) The issue of „paradigm shift” – and how that happens in education.

A second part provides an in-depth insight into the contributions of some exemplar philosophers who have had a tremendous influence on education, such as Aristotle, Kant and Dewey. Among other, the relevance of their thinking to today’s educational issues and dilemmas is addressed, such as Aristotle’s views on scientific education; Kant’s conceptions of moral and intellectual education; and Dewey’s concept of student’s participation in „democratic schools” along with linking theory and practice (through „learning by doing”).

A third part takes a closer look to some contemporary philosophical streams/schools that impacted education and learning, such as constructivism; pragmatism and neopragmatism; postmodernism and relativism; and the social and political philosophies of the post-war era. Here we analyse the impact of such philosophical streams/schools on the pedagogical vocabulary (and their underlying concepts), as well as some controversies around different educational choices such philosophies inspired from the perspective of the so-called „paradigm wars”.

A fourth part discusses some cases of school networks that are explicitly connected to certain philosophies, such as the Waldorf school system and the schools of the International Baccalaureate network.

A fifth and last part explores the possible contributions of philosophy, as critical-reflective attitude, to the debates on education and learning, as well as to the establishment of the so-called „reflective practice”. While the idea that practitioners do not have time to question the underpinnings of their deeds is largely assumed, in this part we make an attempt to envisaging some avenues philosophy could be of help with in turning practitioners into „reflective” ones.

### *Chaper 3: Curriculum visions*

A first part defines „curriculum” and „curriculum frameworks” by stressing the fact that curriculum frameworks usually encapsulate the educational and curriculum vision of a country, based on which some broad guidance is being provided on how the curriculum should help implementing that vision. In shaping such visions philosophical assumptions play an important role.

As we can see from comparing the curriculum frameworks (and other curriculum policy documents) of several developed countries (among the first 20 in PISA over the last years, with results above the OECD mean in at least one PISA study since 2009), such countries embed a quite comprehensive vision in their curriculum documents whereas different policy choices are being explained with reference to matters of philosophical nature, *y compris*.

The next part synthesizes the results of several focus groups carried out between 2010-2015 in different countries with curriculum specialists and decision makers in charge with developing national curriculum frameworks. The participants in such focus groups have answered to a series of questions that inquired their views on what underpins their choices in terms of curriculum, as well as their choices with regard to teaching and learning. Their views on the role of philosophy in shaping such approaches have been also sought.

### *Chapter 4: România*

This part explains some of the elements and dimensions of the 1997-2000 curriculum reform in Romania with a view to emphasize their value and philosophical underpinning. The urgent need for a new curriculum framework to be developed is being evoked, especially since the end of the nineties no substantive curriculum policy document has been yet produced.

## *Conclusions*

At the end of our dissertation, several conclusions and recommendations are being provided with regard to approaching the complex relationships between philosophy, education and learning. While we can agree that philosophy does not constitute the only source of inspiration for education and learning, there is nevertheless an added value in strengthening this relationship.

Very often, changes in education are being introduced in an unreflected way, because they are fashionable or because they work with others. If we put philosophical approaches to work, we may though have more chances to escape the pitfalls of transitory fashions or loosing compass altogether.

Based on considering „philosophical paradigms ” and philosophical ways of thinking and action, we may be able to make sure that whatever ponctual changes are imbedded into a more comprehsnive „bigger picture”, which may include ideas about learning, human potential, knowledge and the mission of schooling in today’s and tomorrow’s world.

And last, but not least, in the context of liberal democracies making such assumptions/underpinnings explicit could contribute to more transparency and more legitimacy of governance in education, based on stakeholder’s adherence to the outcomes of inclusive consultations and informed decision making.

We deem the main original elements in our dissertation to be as follows:

- The choise of the topics, first of all, envisaging the discussion of the complex intertwining between philosophy, education and learning. Through exploring such relationships one cannot overlook the fact that some current educational debates and dilemmas are actually quite old. And the same goes for some of the solutions philosophers have tought for over time, some of which could be wort reviving today.

- The way the connections between philosophy, education and learning have been explored from different angles through the „philosophical paradigm of education” lenses, including a (new) reading of the contributions of some great philosophers and of the philosophy of education over time to improving education and learning.
- The way the discussion about philosophy, education and learning has touched upon curriculum development and curriculum frameworks, as the education vision holders within national systems (emphasizing, for instance, the understanding of quality learning; of learner competences as quality outcomes; and of the means to enhancing education quality and to document it based on relevant evaluations).
- The effort to synthesize and systematize an extended bibliography in different languages around several main axes defined based on the „philosophical paradigms of education” concept. While not overrating the „paradigm” concept, we deem it extremely useful in redefining some productive links between educational theory, vision, policy and practice.
- The results of the applied research in comparing curriculum frameworks of different developed countries in order to shed light on what is common in the way they structure their vision, including based on assumptions of philosophical nature.
- The results of focus groups that demonstrate the need for practitioners (teachers and curriculum specialists/developers) to be guided through the ”blended paradigms” situation they more often than not witness in their professional lives.
- The observations and conclusions with regard to the added value of philosophy, in its different shapes and functions (i.e. driver of ideas/thinking; critical instance; methodological tools; and metatheory of education), in improving the quality of educational theory vision, policy and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> FAM: Fără Autor Menționat.

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