

Experiential Learning and Curriculum for Romanian Primary School Education in the Fundamental Acquisition Stage

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Abstract

Keywords:

experiential learning; primary school curriculum; key competencies; the primary school students' profile.

"No one left behind" is the main idea that the European Union operates on these days. Each person is extremely important; he or she comes with a valuable background. The educational system must help each individual to develop knowledge, abilities and attitudes so that at the end of an educational curricular cycle, he/she is able to successfully self-integrate into the next educational level or stage in life to become the graduate prepared to easily adapt to life. The Curriculum for Romanian primary school has gone through a significant evolution and, thus, it includes activities based on eight key competencies that express themselves in students' learning. In particular, we refer to learning by experience, learning by reflection, learning by conceptualization, learning by generalizing and about experiential learning. We have to focus on creating and delivering content to students with individualized profiles so they are ready to lead a productive, healthy life, and to be prepared to adapt themselves to the challenges in life whenever necessary.

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselworte:

Erfahrungslernen; Lehrplan der Grundschule; Schlüsselkompetenzen; Profil des Grundschulabsolventen.

"Niemand zurückgelassen" ist die Hauptidee, die die Europäische Union in diesen Tagen betreibt. Jeder Mensch ist extrem wichtig; er oder sie kommt mit einem wertvollen Hintergrund. Das Bildungssystem muss jedem Einzelnen helfen, Kenntnisse, Fähigkeiten und Einstellungen zu entwickeln, damit er sich am Ende eines Lehrzyklus erfolgreich in die nächste Bildungsstufe oder Lebensphase integrieren kann, um der Absolvent zu werden, auf den er vorbereitet ist leicht an das Leben anpassen. Das Curriculum für die rumänische Grundschule hat eine bedeutende Entwicklung durchlaufen und umfasst daher Aktivitäten, die auf acht Schlüsselkompetenzen basieren, die sich im Lernen der Schüler ausdrücken. Insbesondere beziehen wir uns auf Lernen durch Erfahrung, Lernen durch Reflexion, Lernen durch Konzeptualisierung, Lernen durch Verallgemeinern und über Erfahrungslernen. Wir müssen uns darauf konzentrieren, Inhalte mit individuellen Profilen für Schüler zu erstellen und bereitzustellen, damit diese bereit sind, ein produktives, gesundes Leben zu führen und bereit zu sein, sich bei Bedarf an die Herausforderungen im Leben anzupassen.

1. The need to activate experiential learning in school

Students need to be involved, heard, seen and understood. They need to take an active role in the educational process, and to learn by experience. Experiential learning is the appropriate field of students' development that fulfills their needs in this way. The Curriculum for Romanian primary school, that was edited in 2013, offers a new integrated vision over the teaching process and includes certain aspects of experiential learning.

In *The Praxiologic Dictionary of Pedagogy. Volume III (Dicționar praxiologic de pedagogie. Volumul III)*, experiential learning has a complex definition: "Type of learning centered on the learner's needs and desires; it unfolds starting from significant personal direct experiences, in real contexts, of the

subject of learning, experiences that generate the need of understanding and that are evaluated as learning occasions (the person learns by his/her experience)." (Bocoș, coord., 2017, p.42).

The emblematic researcher/scientist that spoke about experiential learning, David Kolb, in 1984, explained that experience by itself is not enough to learn. We need the other steps that complete the process and personal experience ensure "life, texture and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts" (Kolb, 1984, p. 21). It is a complex process that is circular and holistic, implying use of one's hands, the head and heart in order to have a healthy mind. The four steps in David Kolb's model are:

- Concrete experience

- Reflective observation
- Abstract conceptualization
- Active experimentation.

According to Mușata Bocoș' praxiological dictionary "practicing experiential learning and its outcomes stimulates the reflection over individual's own actions and learning motivation, the steps towards experiential conceptualization, active experimentation, the use of acquired acquisitions through experience in new contexts (they generate desirable experiences), enhancing the self-control in the learning process." (Bocoș et. al, 2017, p. 42).

2. Experiential learning and Curriculum for Romanian primary school, critical analysis, past and future

For the Romanian primary school students, when we speak about learning and experiential learning, we have to mention the learner's environment, the connections that he has with his family, with his neighborhood, his peer community and society. The fact that in such a learning context he experiences before being told or shown so, then he shares steps when he describes his experience and reaction, he talks about what was most important about what he did, he relates the life skill practiced to his own everyday experiences or he shares how he will use what he has learnt, his life skill practiced in other parts of his life. We found part of the four-stage cycle in Curriculum for Romanian primary school, mostly in the curriculum that was published in 2013 when the educational system was organized in a complex way as based on eight fundamental elements, on eight key competencies that are "adequate benchmarks for European educational system towards the knowledge society" (https://formare.educred.ro/resurse/CRED_P_M11_C_ompetentele_cheie.pdf, p.4.) and the pupil is prepared to set up long life learning tasks. School doesn't prepare students for a job, it has to prepare them for life, ready to adapt their skills in order to have a comfortable adult life.

Therefore, in this study we decided to analyse the vision, from the experiential learning perspective, between old curriculum that was published in 1998, *National Curriculum – School programs for primary school education (Curriculum Național – Programe școlare pentru învățământul primar)* and the new one *National Curriculum – Current school programs (Curriculum Național – Programe școlare în vigoare)*

published in 2013 on the Romanian national educational website <http://programe.ise.ro/>).

In the old document, as we studied it, we could read about competencies, but they are described separately for each discipline and they were expressed through general objectives and reference objectives. There we could find only activities that needed action, concrete experience. There was no reference to reflective observation, conceptualization, active experimentation/sharing, processing, generalizing and applying. When we searched examples of experiential learning in the whole document, for maths discipline we could find "that much more important are the activities of problem solving through trial-and-error, finding the solutions that are within the strict learning framework" and the teacher "facilitates the learning" (Curriculum Național, 1998, p. 87). Within the science curriculum important concepts included: "using and integrating the new information in the knowledge that student already knows from his personal experience" (Curriculum Național 1998, p. 115) and "expressing conclusions as a result of some personal experiences that were conducted in the class or in the close environment" (Curriculum Național, 1998, p. 120). We still found an expression such as "executing experiences using familiar instruments" (Curriculum Național, 1998, p. 125). For the geography discipline we found an emphasis on activities that took place exclusively in the middle of the nature through the direct contact with the studied object, matter and through the method "learning from experiencing" (Curriculum Național, 1998, p. 147).

3. Experiential learning and the actual Curriculum for Romanian primary school, new approaches

In the Romanian National Curriculum – Current school programs (Curriculum Național – Programe școlare în vigoare) from 2013, we discovered that there is a focus on three dimensions. The first is the manifestation of autonomy, through: a) affirming or defending personal needs, rights, responsibilities, interests or limitations, b) developing personal projects, c) the ability to take action in the big picture. Additionally, it is focused on interactive use of intellectual instruments through using interactive texts, symbols, language, knowledge or new technology. The third dimension is about working in heterogeneous groups developing relationships, cooperation, collaboration and conflict management. Therefore, the purpose is that school should offer an European training profile based on eight key

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competencies: 1. Communicating in the mother language 2. Communicating in foreign languages 3. STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) 4. Digital competencies 5. Learning to learn 6. Social and civic competencies 7. Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship 8. Cultural awareness and expression (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Key competences for lifelong learning, 18 Dec. 2006, 2006/962/EC).

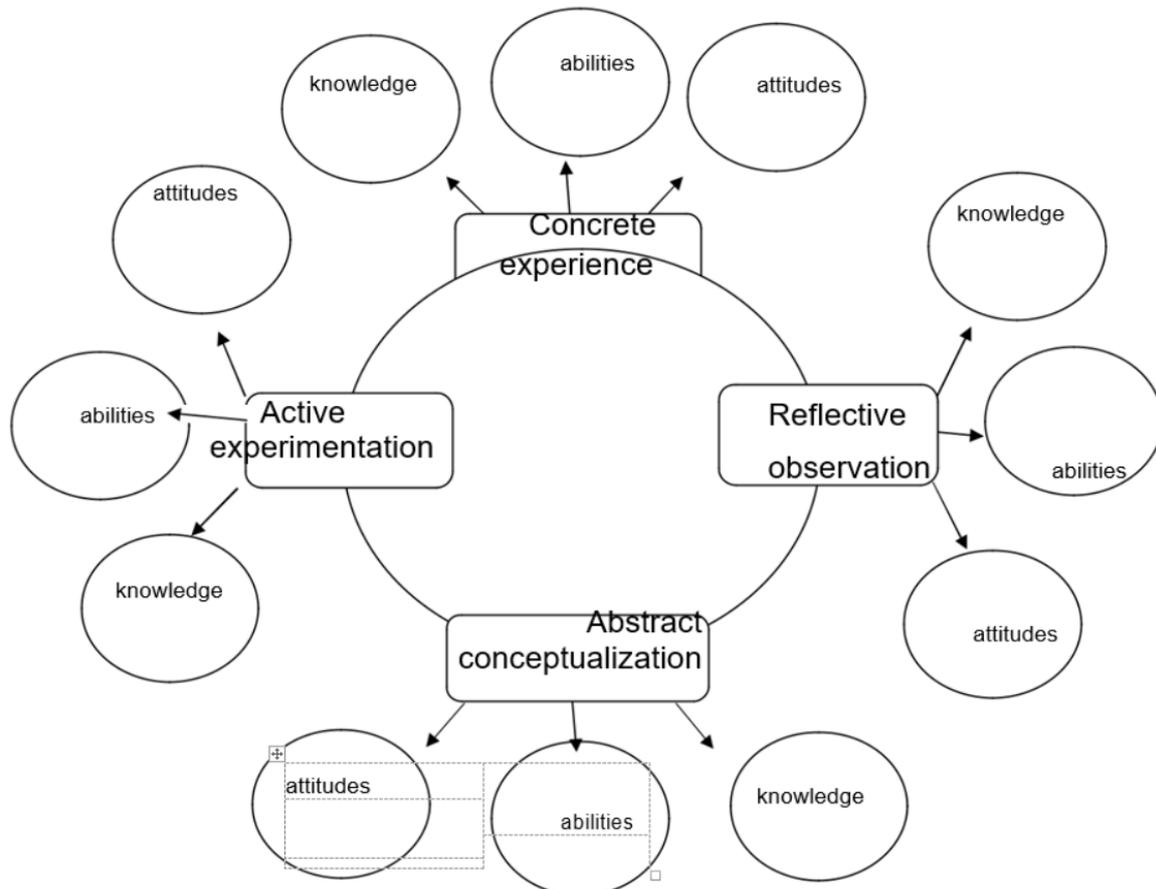
We see these key competencies as learning results, namely an ensemble of knowledge, abilities and attitudes that are to be developed for all our students, as tools for relevant learning. As we don't elevate individual academic subjects by themselves, they are not being taught as separate, distinct fields of study, but rather they are integrated into two or more disciplines in an educational course. Each domain integrates academic perspectives through some disciplines that were familiar in the traditional curriculum, for example mother tongue or foreign language, maths or science. What we discover is that a number of classical disciplines are actually gathered in the structure of the curriculum, personal

development or civic education. These eight competencies are fulfilled at the reunion of other educational paradigms, offering them inter and transdisciplinary perspectives.

For the first key competency, knowledge refers to vocabulary, language functions, verbal interactions, literary and non-fiction texts. These make up the main features of different styles of language. The abilities refer to collecting, processing the information, using useful resources, saying or writing oral arguments. Evaluating the aesthetic qualities, understanding the impact of the speech over the others and the need to understand and use the language in a proper way are the components of the first key competence.

In our opinion, as the European Union demands and also the students' needs move towards learning from experience and developing knowledge, abilities and attitudes, we adapted Kolb's cyclic model of experiential learning so that for each step of the circular teaching process the primary school teachers should integrate them into their teaching. We have to be aware of every step in this complex process and associate it with those three landmarks.

Figure 1. Kolb's Learning Cycle with the involved landmarks for each domain in acquiring the key competencies Source: adapted after Kolb (1984, p. 33)



In the newest version of the curriculum for Romanian primary school education, that was published in 2013, as we looked for experiential learning examples and outcomes in the document, we noted that there was a significant change in this perspective. So, the curriculum is based on a new model of project-based competencies in order to fulfill the students' needs and to provide the proper formation of the Romanian primary school student. Those competencies are in deep relationship with the eight key competencies that we mentioned above, they underline the purpose of relevant learning and the action dimension in creating the students' personality. More than that, they are formed by the learning-based knowledge, abilities and attitudes and they allow problem solving in one domain or general problems in different contexts.

As starting with the school year 2013, the Romanian primary school system was enriched with the addition of a preparatory class. We have now five years of schooling instead of four in primary school. In the first year, the focus is on learning through games. "The actual curriculum prioritizes a student-centered, active learning approach. The curriculum notes that learning is not a passive process that occurs in students' lives, but it is a personal experience they have to take part in." (http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/2013_CP_I_II/01_C_LR_CP_II_OMEN.pdf, p.2).

The curriculum for Romanian primary school is separated in two subsections that are related to the curricular cycles. Preschool education, the first three classes, the preparatory class, the first class and the second class belong to the *fundamental acquisition stage (ciclul achizițiilor fundamentale)*. The third form through the sixth form together with secondary school belong to the *development stage (ciclul de dezvoltare)*.

In primary and elementary school, the study of mother tongue, at the curricular area *Language and communicating (Limba și comunicare)*, the discipline *Communicating in Romanian language (Comunicare în limba română)* lasts till the end of the second form and ensures an evolution of the competencies by evaluating the experiences that are specific to this period and by creating significant learning contexts for real life. Everybody learns better if he or she understands why he or she learns the learning content.

For the *development cycle* the discipline is named *Romanian language and literature (Limba și literatura română)* and it is scheduled and organized

according to *Common framework for the development of communication skills in the mother tongue (Cadrul comun pentru dezvoltarea competențelor de comunicare în limba maternă)*, that was developed in 2014 as a result of the POSDRU 35279 research *An efficient education based on informed decisions – Strategies for capitalizing on international assessments of learning outcomes (Un învățământ performant bazat pe decizii fundamentate – Strategii de valorificare a evaluărilor internaționale privind rezultatele învățării)*. International research such as PISA or PIRLS established a set of identical processes for measuring students' learning in reading acquisition, without considering their mother tongue.

This methodological approach suggests that for receiving oral or written messages students should follow the four steps that are connected to experiential learning steps. These include: identifying clearly explained information, producing simple deductions, integrating and sensing the meaning of ideas or of the information, critically evaluating the content or the textual particularities. LiFT – *Literary Framework for Teachers (Cadrul de referință pentru literatură)* values European didactic experience and is interested in creating a positive attitude towards finding the world through the process of reading. ([http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/Curriculum/2014-12/01-](http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/Curriculum/2014-12/01-Limba%20si%20literatura%20romana_clasele%20a%20III-a%20-%20a%20IV-a.pdf)

[Limba%20si%20literatura%20romana_clasele%20a%20III-a%20-%20a%20IV-a.pdf](http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/Curriculum/2014-12/01-Limba%20si%20literatura%20romana_clasele%20a%20III-a%20-%20a%20IV-a.pdf), p. 12)

We decided for this paper to identify experiential learning approaches in the first subsection-*The fundamental acquisition stage* for all the curricular areas. This way we shall go on with the study of *Maths and science area (Matematică și științe ale naturii)* and for the discipline *Maths and exploring the environment (Matematică și explorarea mediului)* we found that the evaluation process will insist on recognizing the learning experiences and the students' acquired competencies in non-formal or informal contexts. "Contextualizing learning by referring to the surrounding reality increases the depth of understanding of the concepts and the used procedures"

(http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/2013_CP_I_II/25_Matematica_explorarea_mediului_CP_II_OMEN.pdf, p. 27).

For the *Art. Technology area (Arte. Tehnologii)*, the discipline *Visual arts and practical abilities (Arte vizuale și abilități practice)* gives some examples of

learning activities that “value the student’s concrete experience, integrating appropriate teaching strategies to different learning contexts”, those examples of learning activities are proposed for guiding teachers only. Inside this discipline, educators and students can create various connections between other disciplines, it can be easily create a significant learning context for real life, for example writing, mathematical operations, awareness of beauty that surrounds us, personal development (http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/2013_CP_I_II/37_A_VAB_CP_II_OMEN.pdf, p.2).

Within the area *Advice and Guidance (Consiliere și Orientare)*, *Personal development (Dezvoltare personală)* is included. The aim of this discipline is to develop "students' capacities of self -knowledge and of expressing their interests in a positive way, attitudes, personal feelings, abilities to relate and communicate reflections over learning. First of all, this discipline forms abilities and develops attitudes, with the purpose to gain pupils' self -confidence, well -being, to prepare them for life and for the future" (http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/2013_CP_I_II/37_A_VAB_CP_II_OMEN.pdf, p.2). This document was developed in accordance to the international recommendation of the European Council in the two Resolutions (2004, 2008, http://register.consilium.eu.int/, http://register.consilium.europa.eu/). As this document says when students authentically learn, there is a relationship between what they think, what they feel and how they behave. "A special attention is accorded to exploring interests, to applying learning abilities, to identifying previous experiences and being aware of students' expectations related to the activities that are intended to develop." (http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/2013_CP_I_II/55_D_ezvoltare%20personala_CP_II_OMEN.pdf, p. 11).

In our opinion here we can find the most appropriate example for what we are looking for: students are supposed to experience, then they express their feelings about what they have experienced or discovered, they reflect together over the individual or collective products, over their own progress, they evaluate the results offering each student feedback, then they analyze the experience. Using this model, students can involve their parents, other teachers or students, and the community in the next steps. The teacher's role in this process is to organize and offer learning and gaming opportunities that allow students to discover and experience their own abilities and

attitudes, to customize and facilitate their transfer of knowledge into real life. This discipline implies students' direct involvement. There are some questions that relate to teaching with this model: What I liked best ...? What I disliked ...? What have I learnt ...? What will I use ...? for the learning experiential process

(http://programe.ise.ro/Portals/1/2013_CP_I_II/55_D_ezvoltare%20personala_CP_II_OMEN.pdf, p. 12).

4. Conclusions

With this paper we wanted to underline the importance of practicing experiential learning for Romanian primary school students, this time from *the fundamental acquisition stage*, in order to provide an educational process that is appropriate to students' realities, their environment, their connections with all that surrounds them including family, neighbors and community. Primary school teachers have to study the curriculum at the beginning of the school year. This document has to be their instrument leading them to creating a better educational experience. Educators can improve their teaching and their students' lives. We searched the old document Romanian *National Curriculum – School programs for primary school education, 1998 (Curriculum National – Programe școlare pentru învățământul primar, 1998)* and there were only few resources and few examples of experiential learning. In the newest document, Romanian *National Curriculum – Current school programmes, 2013 (Curriculum Național – Programe școlare în vigoare, 2013)* we found much more material that is directly related to experiential learning. Experiential learning activities are supposed to be incorporated into formal education. An educational system may also enrich its teaching and learning with non-formal experiential educational based activities or, why not, informal ones. Experiential learning involves life long, continuous learning and we strongly believe that "practicing learning according to real life, being part of real experience, of trying, is a social skill and necessary, until the end of time" (Bocoș et al., 2017, p. 42).

Authors note: The authors have equal contributions to this article.

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