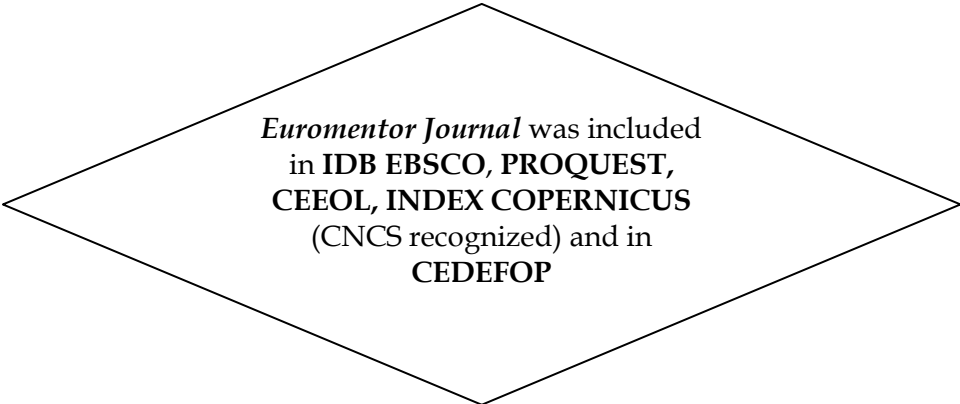


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CONSIDERATIONS ON CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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*"Education is considered the culture
of intelligence or of the spirit"*
B.F. Skinner

Abstract: *The educational phenomenon undergoes at all levels changes which are either natural, or caused, or directed, planned. Our study indicates some of the current education trends and guidelines, advocating for 'education for change' as a pivot of rethinking contemporary education. Firstly, we believe that school should be a central part of the change of mentalities. In this respect, the old type of learning based on learning retention can no longer be satisfactory, being replaced with innovative learning that is anticipatory, participatory and collaborative.*

Keywords: *education for change, "new educations", school, innovative learning, collaborative learning.*

The fact that education plays a decisive role in shaping and developing the human personality, in expressing an making full use of his creative potencies, is a truth that the world discovered many centuries ago. Of more recent origin seems to be the idea that education is a vital factor in the evolution and progress of the entire mankind, in ensuring, ultimately, the very future of the human species. When saying this, we take into account not only the dramatic realities the contemporary world is facing, but also, or especially, the fact that the solutions offered to solve these problems depend decisively on the scientific, cultural, political, socio-economic formation of those called to to collaborate. Or, to the extent to which our age really stands under the sign of democracy, each of us is called to contribute to the development and settlement, as fair as possible, of the pressing problems of our time.

Notable is the promotion of the "new educations" which represent the very answers of the educational and pedagogical systems to an emerging

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problem characterized by universality, globality, multidisciplinary and gravity.

Along with promoting the "new educations" (of which the most important seem to be: the education for participation and democracy; the education for understanding and peace, the education for change and development, the education for communication and media, etc.), the development of some key concepts such as "democratization of education", "lifelong learning" and, last but not least, "adult education" is defining for the modern pedagogy.

Education, far from being limited to a period of schooling, must span the entire existence, encompassing all fields of knowledge, being able to enrich through various means and favoring all the forms of personality development. The educational processes, in which children, youngsters and adults of all ages are engaged along their lives, no matter under what form, should be considered as a whole.

Placing any type of educational approach in temporality, therefore in historicity, requires the search action of finding out the trends manifested in this area of vital importance for the contemporary society. This is because the trends "bear suggestions, confirmations or replies". Depending on their strength and relevance, they may announce potential or favorable futures¹.

Knowing these trends can be helpful for researchers and policy makers to better place their projects and methodologies, to avoid possible errors and head more safely towards a desirable future of the school.

There are three aspects that need to be deciphered as to the trends in education: the trends as such, their play and identifying the most powerful trends (which must be encouraged if they are in favour of the social progress or, on the contrary, stopped or minimized if they develop destructive, hindering or insignificant directions). On the other hand, one can identify obvious, clear trends, as well as "hidden", latent trends, the latter ones manifesting themselves at first feebly, weakly in areas where measurement is difficult, and then evolving, becoming important or strong in some cases.

There is, naturally, a play of trends at world level. Thus, for instance, the interest in foreign language learning, in the massive use of computers for computerized learning, could be considered as major trends of

¹ Văideanu G., *Education at the Turn of the Milleniums*, Political Publishing House, Bucharest, 1988, p.70.

contemporary education. It is widely recognized that learning a foreign language (or more!) is both a useful spiritual exercise and a means of openness toward other horizons, dialogue and communication between cultures and, last but not least, of social improvement (mitigation of conflicts, disorganization, etc.). Similarly, computer use in industry complies, taking into account the specifics of this field, convergently, with the same type of goals mentioned above.

The trends might also be grouped according to the education levels or areas: objectives, contents, methods. Thus, as far as the contents are concerned, the main directions could be: **both the contents of formal education and those of non-formal or informal education; both systematic contents such as plans, courses and textbooks and "hidden" or latent ones, stemming from the school institution atmosphere, the culture and style of the educator; both objectives and knowledge, as well as the ways of organizing learning, considering that they carry messages and are part of "the way" of building up a personality.**

Finally, the trends could be also grouped in relation to the ways of approaching the oral educational processes.

Three would be the major trends in this respect: (a) the systematic approach, (b) the curricular approach, (c) the modular approach.

(a) The systematic design of the educational processes produces positive effects such as: increases the coherence of educational activities; provides the variety and balance of the means and methods used; favors the articulation of different types of learning; leads to a rigorous evaluation, beneficial for everybody, of the processes performed in the context of a learning activity etc.

The systematic approach to education "allows highlighting the specific functions and structures of the organization / school institution. This approach considers education as a whole that is organized institutionally, practically at the level of the entire society"².

The system analysis (of the education system) highlights the following four types of schools: **school-institution**, whose end is socialization based on the internalization of social norms; **school - reproducing apparatus of social relations of power** that grants the whole power to the social system, legitimating the differences among the social classes and categories (Bourdieu, Passeron); **multiple school**, open to varied experiences,

² Cristea S., Constantinescu S., *The Society of Education* Hard Iscom Publishing House, Pitești, 1988, p. 155.

depending to a greater extent on the activity of those involved in education (pupils, students); **school - "education market"** whose end is "socialization based on rule spacing"(designed entirely on the postulate of rationalization the individuals who choose according to interests and resources³–and which, as we can see, also promotes our current system).

These types / theories highlight the importance of social function engaged at the level of the education system for the social integration of the personality in various fields of activity. The methodological and practical opening (especially systematic method) due to the systems theory allows approaching school from the perspective of the organization theory and, respectively, defining school as an organization based on a set of educational resources (human, information, financial, material, energy resources etc.) engaged in achieving a common task oriented in terms of value to general ends (set on medium term and long term) attainable within specific hierarchical structures that determine the quality of the school curriculum (objectives / plan / program / methodology).

The structure of the education system also undergoes an evolution triggered by the reforms carried out in the latest decades around the world. Here appears the trend to articulate the three levels of schooling (primary - secondary -high) which is provided, on the one hand, by setting steps and / or school cycles, and, on the other hand, by opening the whole system, both vertically and horizontally toward lifelong education.

The reforms implemented during the past decades (especially after the events of 1968 in France) have attempted to settle the failures occurred in the context of "the global crisis of education" materialized, ultimately, in the contradiction between the supply and demand for training, between resources and results, reforms aimed especially at the basic structure of the system and at the level of compulsory education.

At present the structures of compulsory education undergo the reforming changes initiated in the 1960s-1970s in the following important ways: **redefining compulsory education; extending its duration to the age of 16-18 years; making more flexible the relations between levels and stages (schooling cycles); contents focus around a common core of general education** designed in most countries in the terms of an identical basic program; **validation of compulsory education** through graduation certificate obtained through examinations or through the results of the ongoing evaluation process.

³ Ibidem, p. 156.

Higher education / secondary education, usually organized as compulsory further education, valorizes the trend of "extending a common core" whose diversity through areas will be carried out later during studies"⁴.

Its objective is to provide a continuous basic training and to diversify the learning opportunities according to the variety of requirements and aspirations, ensuring at the same time the effective equality of different types of education, training and students' mobility.

Higher education, oriented toward balanced general education aimed not only at cognitive objectives, but also at the affective and moral development trends, undertakes new trends such as: **the social openness required to prepare graduates in an increasing number of professions; restructuring the contents based on the fact that in a dynamic society specific skills quickly become obsolete; professionalization through research meant to strengthen the university's ability to produce the basic knowledge required for training the specialists; supporting the partnership between universities and public authorities**, especially for large projects; **promoting a philosophy of education** that allows the assertion of a curriculum design capable of solving the conflict between general and specialized training, not so much by providing wide knowledge from various disciplines, but by adopting, in the different fields of activity, a new learning style focused on the assimilation of some intellectual mechanisms and academic values.

The education systems from Central and Eastern Europe have been striving, after the 1990s, to meet these challenges in the context of some educational policies aimed at changing the relationship between the state and universities, following, on the one hand, the old system (centralization, lack of politicized autonomy, ideologization, uniformization etc.) and, on the other hand, achieving at macro-social scale some pedagogical objectives. This level shows the following trends: **expanding the network of higher education institutions** through the establishment of new institutions; **restructuring of higher education in three stages**: short-term education (2-3 years); long-term education (4-6 years); postgraduate education (Master's Degree, doctorate); **diversity of higher education institutions** (state, private, professional, military, etc.) and of their organizational forms (day, part-time, distance); **changing the relationships between the educational institutions and the government**

⁴ Ibidem, p. 161.

in the following ways: partial decentralization of the management system, increased institutional autonomy, the establishment of national academic bodies intermediary between institutions and government, etc.)

(b) The curricular approach to education promotes a new concept about the selection and organization of the contents, design and organization of learning: if so far the focus was on the learning contents (the "what"), currently, the focus is on the aim and learning outcomes. The great advantage of the new approach is that the "curriculum development methodology requires the teacher to select, use and articulate all the components and stages of teaching activity according to the objectives, avoiding isolation or overrating a component (method, method - tool) to the detriment of the others"⁵.

The curriculum reform, launched in the 1977-1978 aims, essentially, to radically change the outlook on the role of school: "School was, basically, the scene of a teaching-learning process, in other words, of assimilating knowledge. It needs become increasingly the institution which provides a total development of the personality. The new programs will focus on individual learning and on the development of the originality of thinking, learning will focus on the fundamental concepts."

Illustrative for this new way of understanding the mission of school is the program of measures adopted in 1976 by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Japan, in which, priority is not given to the targets for increasing the share of science and technology, but to those aimed at "stimulating the students' ability to think independently and make appropriate decisions; a calmer and more pleasant school life; stimulating the students' love for nature and people, developing sociability; cultivating the love for family, birthplace along with the openness toward the modern world."

The curricular design promoted within the modern didactics focuses on the objectives of the instructive and educational activity, prioritarily aiming at the "optimization of the relationships of pedagogical correspondence between the components (objectives - contents-methodology - evaluation), between the actions of teaching - learning - assessment subordinated to the "finalities engaged at the system and process level. Curriculum design development requires a pedagogical approach oriented toward three types of decisions (Seguin, 1991):

I. Macro-structural decisions of philosophical and political origin

⁵ Văidenu George, cited works, p.79.