From Modern to Postmodern Curriculum

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Abstract

In the postmodern era, from World War II to the modern day, social and instructional changes have occurred in the contemporary school setting. The schoolhouse culture reflects the effects of these changes on all of its participants. New models of relationships between teachers and administrators or among teachers should try a new existence: that of alliances, connections, group strategies, and democratic collaboration. Several definitions were given to curriculum in the post modernist and post-post modernist times, each of them widening or narrowing the modernist approaches. The need to find key concepts in curriculum design in such a different postmodernist and post-post modernist world comes from the effort to improve the teaching process. This article is a theoretical approach to studying the definitions, roles and social implications of modern and postmodern curriculum. Basically, it is intended to discuss several points of interest in the study of curriculum in contemporary education. Considering that Romanian society is facing a variety of crises, one being the state of the national educational system, the need for improving teaching and learning styles has become both obvious and mandatory.

Key Words: *modern curriculum, postmodern curriculum, review*

1. Introduction

There are various definitions of curriculum coined by curricular researchers. Dewey (1902: 11) states that "curriculum is a continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies". According to Bobbitt (1918: 43), "curriculum is the entire range of experiences, both directed and undirected, concerned in unfolding the abilities of the individual; or it is the series of consciously directed training experiences that the schools use for completing and perfecting the unfoldment". Tyler argues that "the curriculum is all the learning experiences planned and directed by the school to attain its educational goals" (Tyler, 1957: 79). Cornbleth contends that "the curriculum is not a tangible product, but the actual day-to-day interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and the milieu of school life" (Cornbleth, 1991: 36). "Curriculum is the reconstruction of knowledge and experience that enables the learner to grow in exercising intelligent control of subsequent knowledge and experience" (Tanner &Tanner, 1995: 45).

2. Modern curriculum

In terms of curriculum design, Tyler's perspective (1957) opened new possibilities of interpretation, correlation and adaptation for all the researchers after him. The most famous modernists, Gagne and Bloom followed the rational path and created an instructional design (Gagne, 1985) and a taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) which are to be considered a peak of rationalism and order.

While Gagne's theoretical framework covers all aspects of learning, the focus of his theory is on intellectual skills. The theory has been applied to the design of instruction in all domains

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(Gagner & Driscoll, 1988). This theory stipulates that there are several different types or levels of learning and each different type requires different types of instruction. Gagne identifies five major categories of learning: verbal information, intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, motor skills and attitudes. Different internal and external conditions are necessary for each type of learning. Gagne suggests that learning tasks for intellectual skills can be organized in a hierarchy according to complexity: stimulus recognition, response generation, procedure following, use of terminology, discriminations, concept formation, rule application, and problem solving. This theory outlines nine instructional events and corresponding cognitive processes: gaining attention (reception); informing learners of the objective (expectancy); stimulating recall of prior learning (retrieval); presenting the stimulus (selective perception); providing learning guidance (semantic encoding); eliciting performance (responding); providing feedback (reinforcement); assessing performance (retrieval); enhancing retention and transfer (generalization). These events should satisfy or provide the necessary conditions for learning and serve as the basis for designing instruction and selecting appropriate media (Gagne, Briggs & Wager, 1992).

In 1988 Giroux (p. 5) was one of the most critical voices addressed to the modernist concept of curriculum. The author is concerned about the language of curricular analysis disabled by the modernist target of meeting the industrial needs and economic productivity. From the author's perspective, the new language should reinterpret concepts like: *rational* ('teacher-proof' instructional materials that reduce the role of the teacher to that of users of 'packages'; *problematic* (questions raised and questions ignored); *ideology* ('a dynamic construct that refers to the ways in which meanings are produced, mediated, and embodied in knowledge forms, social practices and cultural experiences'); c*ultural capital* (represents certain ways of talking, acting, moving, dressing, and socializing that are institutionalized by schools).

Therefore, modernist schooling is criticized upon the reasons that: rationality is rooted in curricular models based on the narrow concerns for effectiveness and knowledge, behavioral objectives and efficient students, ready to become part of the wider consensual society; the ideology guiding rationality is rather conservative as important questions are ignored.

According to the same author, in order to understand the structure and meaning of schooling, the following concepts should be reconsidered: *culture* (contradictory cultures, both dominant and subordinate, should be present in the institution of school; *knowledge as neither neutral nor objective* should be important in its process and transformation within social and historical settings; *the wider functions of schooling* (teachers are trained to use different models of teaching, administration or evaluation, and to be able to combine theory, imagination, and techniques. At the same time, education should be approached by teachers and administrators with personal perspectives about society, school, and emancipation.

New models of relationships between teachers and administrators or among teachers should try a new existence: that of alliances, connections, group strategies, and democratic collaboration. Giroux (1992: 10) states that "our primary concern is to address the educational issue of what it means to teach students to think critically, to learn how to affirm their own experiences, and to understand the need to struggle individually and collectively for a more just society". He also mentions the rigid boundaries of the modernist cultural frame that excludes categories such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity, thus reproducing "relations of domination, subordination, and inequality" (p. 54). Moreover, the meaning of all the modernist language games is profoundly affected by the dichotomy "one" vs. "other."

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Giroux (1992) focuses specifically on such mainstreaming discourses as revealing a language of binary oppositions that establish practices and pass on customs reproducing biased assumptions and ethnocentric approaches. The vast majority of those alike share certain inherent and/or acquired characteristics that help them to conform with the socially accepted norms related to truth, reason, language, patterns, and linguistic alterations.

3. Postmodern curriculum

In the postmodern era, from World War II to the modern day, social and instructional changes have occurred in the contemporary school setting. The schoolhouse culture reflects the effects of these changes on all of its participants. According to Lyotard (1984: 14), "postmodernism is an ideological and political marker for referencing a world without stability, where knowledge is constantly changing and change is the only constant."

Postmodern theory espouses five overarching themes (see Cahoone 1996: 14-16), namely: '*presence*', i.e., from a postmodernist perspective, nothing "is immediately present, hence independent of signs, language, interpretation, disagreement"; '*origin*' – seen as "an attempt to see behind or beyond phenomena to their ultimate foundation … the road to authenticity"; '*unity'* – it is noteworthy that, "in postmodern thought, what has been thought as one, a unity, will ultimately be shown to be many; *'Denial of transcendence'*, i.e. "ideas are created at a certain time and place, to serve certain interests, and is dependent on a certain intellectual and social context"; as far as '*Constitutive otherness'* is concerned, it refers to "what appears to be cultural units - human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems". In this respect, it is noteworthy that "social organizations are maintained in their apparent unity only through an active process of exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization".

Postmodernism can be a set of ideas or an artistic style. Unlike any other period preceding it, postmodernism is highly reflective, acutely aware of its confounding mix of features in an endless array of possibilities. The never ending, limitless and all-encompassing state of affairs could possibly use any ideas to justify itself in a constantly recreating artistic style, in a world without pre-set references that could jeopardize fast-paced change verging on instability (Usher and Edwards, 1994). All this sort of constructive turbulence represents a "mutating mixture of risks and excitements, losses and gains, resulting from the destruction of the old and creation of the new" (Best and Kellner, 1997: 15).

Giroux (1992) considers postmodernism an age thriving on plurality, difference and multiple narratives that constantly regenerate and recharge themselves, that can be both expressed and professed. Other postmodern challenges to modernity include shifting identities, remapping borders, and non-synchronous memory. The relationship between culture and power has been altered due to the greatly increased access to knowledge around the clock and irrespective of location by means of technology. The new ways of reading history allow for a reconfiguration of the center/margin hierarchies, made possible by the blurring of the previous distinction between high and low (or popular) culture (Usher & Edwards, 1994). However, the displacement of the old postcolonial literature by the myriad of multicultural products of the pop culture has led to the McDonaldization of cultural exports (Ritzer, 2000). Popular culture's effect on contestation, struggle, resistance, and self-affirmation within cultural (re)creation can be perceived as an extension of the revolution of the "other" within the confines of the former modernity.

Starting 1991 specialists like Schostak (1991), for example, underlined the difference between *curriculum development* and *curriculum delivery*. The author is worried because the

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global industry has generated reasons for profit, power and control instead of education. The real curriculum is being transformed nowadays but not by the educators who were replaced by the great global systems of information, image making and attitude forming. The new educational reforms are generated by politicians in the name of preparing for the life created by the economic challenges of the new world order.

The author cannot see anymore the 'beginning' and the 'ending' point in Dewey's perspective. Making the difference between Modernism and Postmodernism, Schostak opposes the modernist generation of 'grand-narrative' to the post-modernist 'plurality of narratives' and also the perfect modernist architecture to the postmodernist 'eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past: it is both the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence. Schostak's conclusion is that: whereas a Modern, industrialized society depended on the mass-production of objects in a factory, the Post-Modern society depends on the segmented production of ideas and images in an office.

The postmodernist curricular engineering is based upon a series of questions raised by the different social, political and economic background at the beginning of the 21st century. Giroux (1992) considers *postmodernism* an age thriving on plurality, difference and multiple narratives that constantly regenerate and recharge themselves, that can be both expressed and professed. Other postmodern challenges to modernity include shifting identities, remapping borders, and non-synchronous memory. The relationship between culture and power has been altered due to the greatly increased access to knowledge around the clock and irrespective of location by means of technology.

From Giroux's (1992: 58) point of view, the ideal 21st century solution to teaching would be that of programmed learning employing the perfect teaching machine. So, the final result of such thinking would be "the computerization of National Curricula". The author strongly rejects such a solution as "…the computer is not a simple extension of the rationalist project".

The author's arguments against such a model are multiple and various: the teacher-student relationship is narrowed by the misconception that teacher is only a perfect deliverer of industrial objectives in a rational form whereas the student is the perfect learner without creative contribution; from the political perspective, the rational path is a way "to purify social institutions of contaminating influences; usually some form of liberalism; from the social point of view there is a strong connection between the crisis and the curriculum (*Counter-curricula* appeared in order to replace symbols in 'Great Books' about 'Great People' with children's personal lives, working lives, and pluralist society); from the philosophical perspective, the constant opposition between Marxism and the post - modernist representatives (Derrida, Levi-Strauss, Lacan) led to a phenomenon of competition among the many curricular approaches which ended in a separation between child-centered, democratic but authoritarian school curricula and the deconstructive exaggerated tendencies to deny the relationship between teacher and pupil; from the religious point of view, Modernism was beneficial in its trying to order the chaos, ignorance and confusion through a 'Protestant' way of thinking" (Jencks,1986) – a religious zeal which wanted to replace the confusion of the previous ages with the accumulated knowledge and wisdom. In this context education became the key to social advance.

By following Elliot and Goodson, the promoters of the Action Research approach, Schostak (1991) offers some ways of dealing with school curricula nowadays under a vision he calls "A Curriculum of Surfaces": teachers should be 'voices' (their role is switched from 'teacher-as-practice' to 'teacher-as-person'); the teacher is to be re-constructed and re-asserted as a person

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with multiple faces and masks (the teacher's biography becomes important in opposition to the institutional, the public or the political life); the narratives involved in the teaching process are like life-agendas, of vital importance in bringing together the oppositely criteria of modernist speech - good-bad, correct-incorrect, fair-unfair (dialogue is the main vehicle of such procedures); schooling becomes a 'meeting house' in which boundaries are rejected through the intensification of dialogue; the masks under which the teacher introduces himself to the students are 'the narrative', the 'biography' and 'the imaginary'; a 'gestalt-switch' between the worlds' views leads to new fields of research seen from the inside perspective of the personal experience (the unarticulated 'voices' in the public arena considered shameful or taboo, the socio-dialogic mechanisms and principles of 'meeting', issues linked to the new narratives of lives, the new paradigms of 'translation' and 'interpretation' of the narrative world; ethical issues; global structures (business mechanisms, media, information networks, political or military networks) intersecting the local communities and personal lives in the production of 'knowledge', 'taste-communities' and 'intelligence-communities'.

Several definitions were given to curriculum in the post modernist and post-post modernist times, each of them widening or narrowing the modernist approaches. By citing Oliva (1997), Marsh (2009) suggests that differences in the substance of definitions are due to purposes of goals of the curriculum (for example curriculum designed in order to develop reflective thinking); contexts within which the curriculum is found; strategies used throughout the curriculum.

Many definitions are incomplete or provide insights about common emphases and characteristics within the general idea of curriculum. According to such a definition, *Curriculum is the 'permanent' subjects that embody essential knowledge* (grammar, reading, logic, rhetoric, mathematics and the greatest books of the Western world – all of this considered 'essential knowledge'). Marsh offers the examples of the National Curriculum enacted in United Kingdom in 1988, based on three core and seven foundational subjects (content and specific goals included for each subject) and The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in United States in 2001 focused on two traditional subjects: reading and maths (annual tests for students 3 to 8). Besides the fact that such a definition limits knowledge to only some academic subjects, it was also severely amended by Goodson and Marsh (1996). Griffith also specifies in 2000 that curriculum 'is neither neutral, factual nor value free'.

A second definition states that *Curriculum is those subjects that are most useful for contemporary living.* Problems posed by this definition are multiple: students are precluded from making their own choices about the usefulness of the subjects; contemporary values seem to be more important than the long-lasting ones. Skills such as teaching students to think critically and to communicate complex ideas clearly are also taken into account.

From the perspective of a third definition, *Curriculum is all planned learning for which the school is responsible* (i.e. planned learning means documents specifying content, lists of intended learning outcomes, teachers' general ideas about what students should know).

According to a fourth definition, *Curriculum is the totality of learning experiences so that students can attain general skills and knowledge at a variety of learning sites.* This approach is heavily supported for economic reasons by business organizations, vocationally oriented groups and advocates of explicit competency standards. The narrow technical-functionalist point of view was contradicted by Kennedy (2005) who insisted on the idea that 'a curriculum should include a full range of skills and competencies relevant throughout the life span', and by Reid (2007) who

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enlarges the term 'competencies' by adding the value of 'capacity', emphasizing the need for capacities like communication, civic participation, health and well-being.

A fifth definition states that *Curriculum is what the students construct from working with the computer and its various networks, such as the Internet.* The pro-arguments for this definition are: the increasing culture of active learning with the help of new computing technologies; social skills can develop through connectivity, conferences and e-mail services. The cons arguments insist on ideas professing that technology is not a neutral instrument and the access levels are not equal for all students (Budin, 1999). Moreover, information is not synonymous to knowledge and the ethical and intellectual judgment play an extremely important role as they cannot be associated to artificial intelligence and programmed into a machine. In this respect, according to Pinar, the lack of ethical and intellectual judgment would transform the Age of Information into an Age of Ignorance (Pinar, 2004).

According to a sixth definition, *Curriculum is the questioning of authority and the searching for complex views of human situations.* From the postmodernist point of view, the main objective is to continuously find those lines that shake and reverse and, moreover, tactically intertwine within the globalised corporate order (Reynolds and Webber, 2004).

The need to find key concepts in curriculum design in such a different postmodernist and post-post modernist world comes from the effort to improve the teaching process. Marsh (2009: 12) admits that even if the degree of agreement over these concepts is rather moderate, it is important to 'make sense of our world and go about our daily lives by engaging in concept building'. The foundation of the key curricular concepts in his study is based upon some regular rules like:

a. It is commonly agreed that a lot of persons are implied in curriculum engineering: school personnel, researchers, academics, administrators, politicians and various interest groups.

b. The most used methods for conceiving the curriculum are: planning meetings, informal discussions, writing reports, papers, handbooks, textbooks, giving talks, lectures, workshops.

c. There is a generic category of key concepts used in describing a curriculum: curriculum planning and development, curriculum management, teaching perspectives, collaborative involvement and curriculum ideology.

d. There are also alternative perspectives like, student-centered perspective, politics of curriculum perspective, future studies, etc. as possible combinations and future theories to be improved.

4. Modern versus postmodern curriculum

Starting 2000, the ideated and practical rupture between the modernist curriculum and the post- modernist pedagogical thinking increased. Macdonald's (2003) studies upon postmodernism emphasize the general tendencies in the world in responding to the crisis in schooling and curriculum reform. The author briefly announces the features of the postmodernist curricula while analyzing and criticizing the modernist curricular approaches in Australia:

a. *Top-down*: teacher-proof curriculum in North America and the UK between 1960s-1970s. The teacher's role is decreased by the tight relationship among educational objectives, curriculum content, and assessment instruments produced by specialized curriculum writers. Teachers were meant to represent only the educational administrators. The model was also applied in France, England and Wales with the main aim of a new social order 'reflective of dominant groups'. The widespread contestation is generally addressed to the selection of the 'official' texts.

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b. *Bottom-up*: the teachers' 'slippage' between conception and practice in applying the centralized curriculum between 1970s and 1980s. The goals of top-down teacher-proof curriculum were surpassed by the temporal, social, economic and cultural factors. New curricular approaches like school-based curriculum development and action research were consolidated into a trend towards locating schools and teachers at the centre of curriculum reforms. It was called a 'democratization' of curriculum development, but it was also poorly resourced and loosely assessed.

c. *Partnerships*: re-assessment of school strategies between 1980s and 1990s as a model of cooperation among administrators, curriculum developers, professional associations, researchers, teachers and parents. This model was created to meet local needs, data collection, monitoring, and revision. Nevertheless, this system did not work quite properly as it proved to be shaped by local contexts. The main critics involved were: incorrect implementation; bad design; a vision of schooling highly regulated in terms of time and space; a vision of knowledge as rational, linear and arranged in separate and distinctive bundles; a vision upon students as consumers of the official school curriculum.

It is noteworthy that Macdonald (2003) corrects the basic ideas by suggesting a postmodernist conceptualization: curriculum as an open system 'with constant flux and complex interactions'; interactive and holistic framework for learning, 'with students becoming knowledge-producers rather than knowledge-consumers'; a transformative curriculum rather than 'incremental with respect to change'. Moreover, Macdonald develops a theory about the new openings of a postmodernist curricular inquiry.

a. Death of the subject

By reiterating Goodson's and Bernstein's suggestions, Macdonald (2003) brings into discussion one of the fundamental issues concerning curricular engineering: the boundaries of a discipline. Recent studies have shown that contemporary curriculum documents are no longer translations of academic topics devised by groups of scholars in universities, into pedagogical versions of school subjects. They have become hybrid educational domains, knowledge being reconfigured in new and varied applications. The trial of 'new basics' – new ways of prioritizing and organizing interdisciplinary learning are seen as 'life-pathways' and 'social futures'. A curriculum of the future requires connectivity across subject matter 'in order to produce well-rounded and technologically literate learners with economic, political, cultural and sociological understandings' (Macdonald, 2003: 289).

b. *Equity*

Schooling is a reproductive process: it is active in 'reproducing the economic and cultural imbalances upon which a society is built'. Experience has shown that curricular reforms could not override the influences of the world students bring into school: neighborhood, social status, gender, and ethnicity. Consequently, educators have been trying to create and recognize new spaces and places for learning which are effective and engaging, but 'are beyond formal curriculum planning and reform projects'. The curriculum delivered by specialist teachers is to be replaced by 'coalitions of professionals and community members' who can become available to young people to enhance their learning. 'Curriculum-reform projects must broaden their sights with respect to who might constitute a partner and must look to where and how new spaces and places for learning might be created' (Macdonald, 2003: 289).

c. *Identity and the consumer curriculum*

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A curriculum is always asked to select a set of cultural attributes, knowledge, meanings, values and skills 'for conscious transmission' through syllabi. This selection is 'cost-effective' or simply privatization with 'profit-making companies taking over school districts'. This is the way students are reinvented through the interests of corporate capital.

d. *Global technology and free-range learning*

The information revolution demands new types of learning. 'In cyberspace the learner is free within the constraints of corporatized technologies to explore haphazardly without boundaries and prescribed directions, and take on many and varied identities' (Macdonald, 2003: 290).

5. Curriculum review

In 2009, Marsh revises the main postmodernist key concepts in studying curriculum at the end of the decade of the 21st century. He emphasizes the idea that ambitious large-scale curricular reforms initiated in many countries (UK, USA, Canada, Hong-Kong, and Singapore) based on international student assessments registered only short-term success. Marsh (2009) briefly mentions some authors and their most famous ideas: Smith and Lovat (2003) – professing that lived experience defies complete description either before or after it happens; Kennedy (2005) – in whose perspective, curriculum experiences are no longer confined to the classroom, but a new sense of community and common values are created within a context focused on unrestricted knowledge and on the much more powerful individual control.

For the purpose of improving the quality of teaching and giving teachers the flexibility to use their judgment about how best to deliver it, the 'rationale' for curriculum review should be varied and it should also contain issues to be tackled, analyzed and settled by the several important modifications. At present, there are too many prescriptions of more outcomes and more subjects; all these take up more school time than initially intended. In this regard, an important first change is represented by the accelerated pace of changes within the original curriculum, which should be simplified.

The second change that would improve the quality of teaching regards the reduction in the bureaucracy and central control of the educational system. This can be done by establishing the essential knowledge that children should acquire and by leaving teachers to decide how to teach it in the most effective manner. Moreover, as far as the other needs of the student are concerned, a wider curriculum should also be taken into account; it should be placed outside school, based on the optional choice system.

A third modification aims at eliminating over-prescriptions and non-essential materials. In this regard, a stricter emphasis should be placed on content and not on the over-specified teaching methods from the old curriculum. Taking into account that students should become educated members of the contemporary society, the new curriculum has to focus on primary knowledge and understanding. Moreover, it should include the best of our cultural and scientific heritage, but attention should be paid as it must not deal with every conceivable field of human knowledge or discovery. A fourth important issue concerns the fact that the new curriculum should not become a political vehicle.

A fifth modification should have in view the number of core subjects, such as English, mathematics and science, which must be kept within the National Curriculum. Furthermore, special attention should be paid to physical education, which should become a compulsory subject in the National Curriculum; in this respect, this subject is focused on the objective that all pupils play competitive sport.

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Sixth, several pieces of advice should be taken into account regarding the fact that the content of the National Curriculum should be established on a year-by-year basis, in order to ensure that knowledge is built systematically and consistently. Another piece of advice regards the elements which should be replaced from the existing attainment targets and level descriptors, in order to better define the children's standards of attainment and assessment, at various points throughout their education. Moreover, we should consider the elements needed for the fulfillment of the expectations regarding progression, in order to support the least able and stretch the most able. We should also focus on how the National Curriculum can support the provision of more helpful advice and information to parents on their children's progress and on how the content of the National Curriculum can support the embedding of equality and inclusion.

The seventh modification regards the implementation of the new National Curriculum, which depends on issues such as the ways of introducing the new programmes of study in each subject. Another such issue deals with the type of support offered to the school workforce for the effective implementation of the new National Curriculum, taking into account, in particular, the implications of introducing new programmes of study in some subjects in one school year and others in the following school year. We should also have in view the issues connected to policy areas such as assessment, accountability and inspection, in order to ensure that all the aspects of the education system are coherent and aligned in accordance with the new National Curriculum.

The eighth change refers to the fact that precise information about timetable, governance and membership, and consultation should also be taken into account.

6. Conclusion

Considering that Romanian society is facing a variety of crises, one being the state of the national educational system, the need for improving teaching and learning styles has become both obvious and mandatory. It is noteworthy that the new curricular line has established new aims, high standards and created coherence in what is taught in schools - ensuring that all children have the opportunity to acquire a core of essential knowledge in the key subject disciplines, but at the same time, allowing teachers the freedom to use their professionalism and expertise to help all children realize their potential.

The new curricula provide young people with the knowledge they need in order to move confidently and successfully through their education, taking into account the needs of different groups including the most able and pupils with special educational needs. The content compares favorably with the most successful international curricula, reflecting the best collective wisdom we have about how children learn, what they should know, how subjects should be taught. The new curricula enable parents to understand what their children should be learning throughout their school career and therefore to support their education.

As already mentioned within this paper, in the postmodern era, from World War II to the modern day, social and instructional changes have occurred in the contemporary school setting. The schoolhouse culture reflects the effects of these changes on all of its participants. New models of relationships between teachers and administrators or among teachers should be improved and supported. The definitions given to curriculum in the post modernist and post-post modernist times, discussed within this paper, widen or narrow the modernist approaches. This triggers the stringent need for identifying key concepts in curriculum in order to improve the teaching process and to provide better education to the new generations.

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