CONTEXTUAL ACADEMIC CURRICULUM:
AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

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This article attempts to substantiate the concept of contextual curriculum based on "context" as a meaning-forming category, "competencies" as learning outcomes (as a teleological category containing learning as the substance of knowledge domains), "innovations" (as a driving mechanism), active and problematic teaching methods (as a procedural category). The emphasis is done on substantiating the main idea of contextual curriculum, developing a paradigm for contextual curriculum, as well as methods for constructing and applying it.

Keywords: curriculum, contextual curriculum, context, competencies, learning outcomes, learning technologies, innovations, learning content, contextual curriculum models, learning process, paradigm.

CURRICULUM ACADEMIC CONTEXTUAL: O ABORDARE INOVATIVĂ

Acest articol încearcă să fundamenteze conceptul de curriculum contextual bazat pe „context" ca categorie de formare a sensurilor, pe „competenţe" ca rezultate ale învăţării (ca categorie teleologică care conţine învăţarea ca substanţă a domeniilor cunoaşterii), pe „inovaţii" (ca mecanism), pe metode de predare active şi problematice (ca categorie procedurală). Accentul este pus pe fundamentarea ideii principale a curriculumului contextual, pe dezvoltarea unei paradigme pentru curriculumul contextual, precum şi a metodelor de construire şi aplicare a acestuia.

Cuvinte-cheie: curriculum, curriculum contextual, context, competenţe, rezultate ale învăţării, tehnologii de învăţare, inovaţii, conţinut de învăţare, modele de curriculum contextual, proces de învăţare, paradigmă.

Introduction

In the specialized literature we find a great deal of approaches, paradigms/models and definitions of the phenomenon called "curriculum".

Looking back at the epistemic evolution of the educational curriculum we can identify several stages and concepts, the most valuable of which are represented by V.Deewey, who substantiated the curriculum from the perspective of correlating two aspects in educational process: the disciplines/subjects studied and the learning experiences [1]; F.Bobbitt conceptualized the curriculum focused on objectives and their correlation with learning activities [2]; R.Tyler, the first researcher who tried to substantiate a curriculum theory, and called it the rational curriculum [3]; H.Taba proposed a concept of curriculum focused on the interaction between its structural components: objectives - contents - methods - evaluation [4]; D.Walker founded a naturalist concept of curriculum, a curriculum built in reality, in concrete learning situations [5]; I.Rogan, I.Luckowski, M.Laballe, G.Mialaret, V.Kerri, A.Glatthorn, P.Horst and others approached the curriculum from different perspectives, but all emphasized the key steps of this phenomenon: objectives, contents, learning activities regarding interconnection and intercorrelation [*apud* 6].

In the context of these approaches, several conceptions of educational curriculum have been outlined: the conception of systemic learning of school/academic disciplines; the conception of curriculum focused on development tasks (C.Tyron, V.Lientienthal et al.); the holistic curriculum conception (R.Titone), the curriculum conception centered on the taxonomy of objectives (B.Blom, L.D'Hainaut et al.); the conception of curriculum centered on the learner (J.Piaget, S.Brumer); the conception of curriculum focused on transdisciplinary approaches (L.D'Hainaut); the conception of competence-centered curriculum (K.P. Torshen et al.).

These approaches and conceptions of curriculum generally have the appearance of a new category of education sciences - *the theory of curriculum*, next to *the theory of teaching*, *the theory of education*.

A curriculum in modern pedagogical theory is considered as an independent category of pedagogical science, along with the theory of education and the theory of learning. The theory of the modern curriculum is based, as an object of study, on the projection of learning outcomes within the framework of competency approach, as well as resolving the contradictions between the following: sociocentric and psychocentric approach; knowledge and competency approaches; humanistic and pragmatic approaches; teaching, learning and assessment; teacher and student; content, process and learning outcomes, etc.

At the same time, the modern educational curriculum as a category of pedagogical science is considered as: *the paradigm,* including a system of interlinking elements: goals/competencies, structure, content, process, set of pedagogical documents, etc.; *the objectives/learning outcomes* that include a hierarchical system of competency: key, transversal, interdisciplinary, disciplinary; *the content,* including a set of school subjects and a set of knowledge (theories, concepts, principles, laws, legalities, phenomena, data, etc.) on study subjects; *the process* implemented by pedagogical means (technologies, methods, forms, etc.); *the package of documents:* education plans, study programs, textbooks, manuals, tests, etc.

In connection with the emergence of a new paradigm of the modern curriculum (what is often called the curriculum approach), the question arises: what are the prospects for its development, especially in terms of resolving the above-named contradictions. In this regard, one of the promising areas is the contextual approach to the elaboration of an educational curriculum. In other words, namely the curriculum paradigm implies synchronization/integration of humanistic and competency-based approaches, with the "context" being presented as one of the links/elements.

Conceptual Provisions of Contextual Curriculum
Paradigm as Model and Set of Axiomatic Provisions, a Conceptual Framework
The paradigm notion represents a system of scientific performances (theories, methods, approaches) according to which (as a model), the investigative activity is carried out in a given field and in a specific historical period. The term *paradigm* has spread widely since the appearance of Thomas Kuhn's work "*Structure of Scientific Revolutions*". The paradigm, in Kuhn's view, is not only theory, but also a mode of action in science, a model for solving scientific problems.

Thomas Kuhn defines a paradigm as a set of rules, norms and methods used by a scientific community in the research process. In the postscript to the initial work Kuhn redefines the paradigm precisely through its relations with the scientific community. Thus, "a paradigm is what the members of a scientific community share and, mutually, a scientific community is composed of the people who share a paradigm" [7, p.243].

The paradigm is a mental construct which offers a society, a scientific community or a field of knowledge a necessary basis for creating an identity for itself, for solving problems or problematic situations that it faces.

A complete analysis of the concept of paradigm in the social sciences was also carried out by the sociologist Raymond Boudon. Thus, he defines the paradigm as "the language in which the theories or possibly the subassemblies imported by the theories issued within a discipline are formulated" [8, p. 236].

In another context, Boudon defines the paradigm as "a set of fundamental principles on which a scientific community is based. A paradigm is in a way the constitution, the set of basic rules that guide the researcher in his activity" [9, p.24].

The curriculum paradigm focuses on affirming the priority role of educational outcome at the level of any pedagogical project. Depending on the finalities, the other elements of the curricular model of training approach are structured, i.e. teaching-learning methods, assessment strategies and contents. This paradigm approaches the education at a global level, because it considers all its fundamental components: the central function (the formation and development of individual's personality) and the basic structure (the educator-educated relation), the outcomes that are at the basis of any project of personality's formation and development, the contents and the general forms of the education, achievable through the activities within the system and process of education/education and the teaching-learning-evaluation methodology [10, p.105-107].

Context as Linking Category
The context is a system of internal and external conditions of human life and activity influencing the process and results of perception, understanding and transformation of a particular situation, action and deed by a person. Accordingly, *the internal context* is the individual psychological characteristics, knowledge and experience of a person, *the external context* is informational, subject, sociocultural, spatial-temporal and other characteristics of the situation in which it operates. The context determines the meaning and significance for the person of the whole situation and its components.

Thanks to the context, the person knows what to expect, and can meaningfully interpret events and processes. Before acting, they seek to collect all possible contextual information – knowing what will happen in the future makes it easier to perceive the present. Purposeful behavior is violated if the memory of the subject does not hold the context in which it takes place; in this case, the organism is in the grip of instantaneous conditions that a person cannot regulate.

The inner and outer worlds are "given" to man not by themselves, but in certain subject and social contexts; the explanation of any psychological phenomenon requires the study of both the context in which it occurs and the inner nature of the phenomenon itself. Thus, *the context is a semantic psychological category* along with such recognized categories as "activity", "thinking", "motive", etc. [11, p.124-125].

The contextual approach to educational curriculum is applicable both to general education and to higher education (to a greater extent). In this sense, we place emphasis on the substantiation of contextual curriculum for the higher education system.

The university curriculum developed on the basis of integrating the subject and socio-cultural contexts of the future profession gives personal meaning to the learning, generates an interest in the learning/subject and in the future professional activity.

Theoretical Foundations of Contextual Curriculum

The theoretical foundations of the contextual curriculum are based on a number of theories: *theory of modern curriculum, theory of competency, theory of context, theory of active/problem-based learning, theory of learning social (sociocultural) experience, theory of innovative learning.*

First, it is necessary to formulate/define very precisely the concept of "curriculum" (since there is a wide variety of definitions of this concept).

The need for a systematic approach to the concept of "curriculum" allows us to determine how and in which of its structural elements the category "context" can be integrated. In other words, what and how should be done so that the modern curriculum can be called contextual.

The systemic approach is the foundation of projecting/conceiving the university curriculum. The concept of "system", "systemic approach" correlates with something unitary, consisting of components, in constant connection and interdependence. At the same time, each component can perform its own specific functions, correlated with certain endpoints, or each component is constituted by separate elements.

Integrity is the basic criterion of the system's unity, being the result of the interconnection of the components of this system. The way in which the connection is made between the components takes the shape of the structure.

In the context of these theories, at least six components of the university curriculum, which are in constant interdependence and interaction and, to a large extent, determine the efficiency/quality of higher education: curriculum concept/conception, curriculum domain, curriculum structure, curriculum product, curriculum content, curriculum process/action, curriculum finality/outcome. The structure of these components fits into the logic of building educational (sub)systems with inputs and outputs, their own functions, specific in the cyclical and spiral development/operation [12, p.15].

Within this approach to the university curriculum, it is possible to determine several directions and possibilities of including the category of "context" in its structure or the development of its separate elements.

Thus, the general theory of curriculum can be supplemented by a provision on the role of "context" in resolution of conflict between the psychocentric and sociocentric approaches, between theory and practice in the training of specialists, etc.

Competency-based approach can be complemented by contextuality principle in determining/developing a system of professional competencies/qualifications.

The category of "context" can also be used in the development of study content (including in it specific contexts of social and substantive experience), as well as in the development of didactic technologies, through the updating of problematic and active teaching methods, and also for self-actualization of students' personality to the fullest extent of revealing and developing their capabilities and abilities.

Considering the curriculum as a result of learning, expressed in the form of competencies, it can be concluded that valorization of the category of "context" in the reupdating of learning outcomes is promising and necessary, since it is the competency approach that is the object of integration with the humanistic approach. Moreover, it is the context of future professional activity that predetermines the typology of the necessary competencies for its implementation.

At the same time, it is very important to take this or that point of view on the concept of "competency".

Defining the concept of competency is a difficult task, and in the view of some authors it is even impossible, because it is a "vague concept" (Ruano-Bordalau, 1998). As a rule, the definitions of competency concept contain varied dimensions/substances and may have different theoretical positions depending on the context approached, the field of knowledge, the point of view of the competencies' conceiver.

At the same time, for any field of activity, competency is the condition and indicator of performance and effectiveness.

Competencies are therefore a transferable and multifunctional package of knowledge, capacities, skills, abilities, values and attitudes that allow the individual to achieve his/her fulfilment and professional development, social inclusion and professional insertion in the field [9, p.4].

This definition is coherent with the basic characteristics of competency formulated by J.Henry and V.Cormier [13]:

✓ *is complex* – integrates knowledge, strategies, abilities, attitudes into a complex process of manifestations; mobilizes cyclically and repeatedly, in increasingly complex contexts, a process that simultaneously demands all its components, so it is gradually developed;

✓ *is relative* – although it is an outcome of education, competency never gets a final formula, and it develops continuously throughout life;

✓ *is potential* –unlike a performance that can be measured or found and refers to the past or present, competency can be projected and evaluated, the possibility of its mobilization generating different performances in the future in different contexts of independent learning;

✓ *is acknowledged and associated with necessities and intentions* – includes the idea of outcome and can be managed by the person holding it, thus advancing into metacognition;

✓ *is exercised in a certain situation* – is developed gradually through changing educational situations/contexts;

✓ *is transferable* – is applied to new situations/contexts (changing means or improving procedures).

The situational/contextual approach of the concept of competency focuses on the logical triple: action in situation/context, curricular and learning logics [*apud* 10].

The situational/contextual approach involves a set of situations/contexts prescribed in the training profile/ field of knowledge and which have a complex and multidisciplinary character [*apud* 1].

Situations/contexts are the "source and criterion" of competencies. Competency is the result of the interaction between person-action-situation/context.

Treating a situational/contextual competency is also related to curricular logic (competency as the outcome and form of manifestation) and is a curricular tool designed to provide the learning process (learning logic).
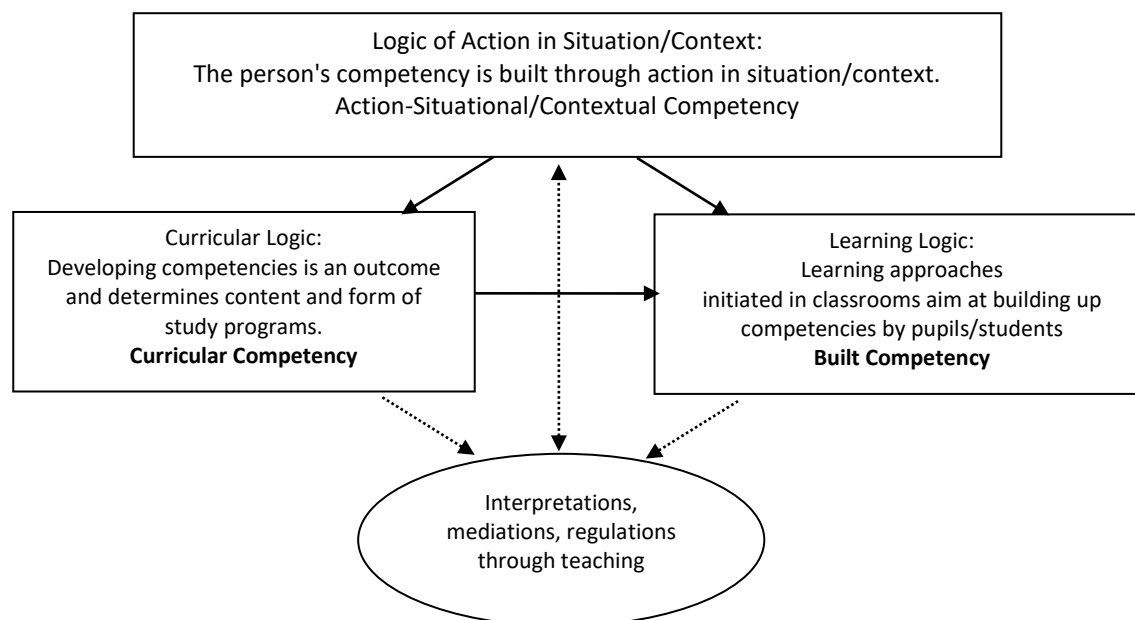

Fig.1. Concept of Competency from Triple Logic.

In other words, this process is organized around four frameworks: a situational/contextual framework, an action framework, a resource framework and an evaluation framework [*apud* 14].
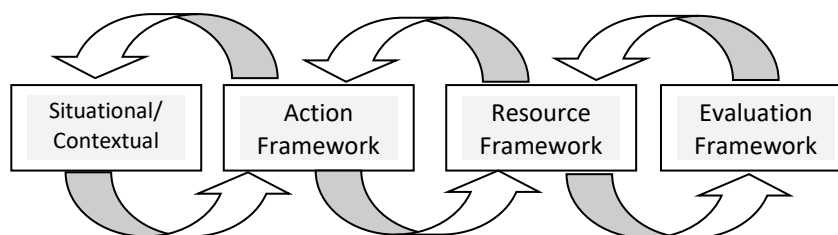
Fig.2. Interdependence Between 4 Cadres: Situational/Contextual, Action, Resource, Evaluation

This situational/contextual approach must lead to the formation of a person who activates competently. The competent action is based on several elements: understanding the situation/context; perceiving the goals of their own action; has the effect of treating the situation; possibility to use a plurality of resources, to adapt them and to build new resources; opportunity to reflect on its action, to validate and conceptualize it; possibility to adapt all constructions resulting from a situation/context or from a class of situations/contexts [15].

The experience *in action* is "the engine of developing a person and all its dimensions" [16].

A competency "is always built through a "situation/context learning", what implies the appropriation not only of the knowledge and abilities (*savoir-faire*), but also of the ways of interaction and the tools valorized in the context of the problem" [6]. The implementation of a competency is only possible if declarative, procedural (*savoirs-faire*) and conditional knowledge is *organized, hierarchized and integrated* in a synergic manner in various practical/professional situations/contexts.

Situational/contextual approach largely determines the structure of competency, and its forms of manifestation. There are several approaches to the competency structure.

The structure of competency can be established in relation to one or another definition/approach to this phenomenon, but also to the degree of complexity and manifestation forms.

Thus, from the definition of competency as "integration of knowledge, abilities, attitudes ..." we can deduce the triadic structure of competency: knowledge, skills/abilities, attitudes/values in their integrity.

Based on the mode of competency manifestation as the outcome, it can include the following components:
✓ action/activity represented by a verb;
✓ time indicator of the outcome (knowledge, application, integration/transfer);
✓ conditional aspect of the outcome (domain, discipline, subject);
✓ general indicator of the level of achieving the action or product in the given context of learning.

Table 1

Structure of Competency by Outcome [12, p.34].

RN	Verb: Action/ Activity	Domain/ Discipline/ Subject	Level/ Modality/ Norm	Context
1.	The didactic design	from the perspective of the curricular theory	on modules / units of learning in the discipline "X"	related to the respective frame of the qualifications and the level of students' preparation
2.	Research	of educational phenomena	by applying interconnected theoretical and experimental methods	and comparing the results obtained in dynamics, concluding and submitting the respective methodological recommendations

The advantages of this approach are in the following:
1. Action and context are the key elements of competency.
2. Achieving the integrality of knowledge, skills, attitudes in dynamics and phases.
3. Correlation of professional competencies with disciplinary and transversal ones.
4. Orientation on socio-professional issues.

Considering the curriculum as a process, it should be noted that the contextual approach is able to give to this process, as well as to the curriculum paradigm as a whole, an innovative impulse/character. In this regard, the most significant are the tools/technologies of active and problem-based learning.

The most famous approach to active/interactive training is related to constructivist paradigm in pedagogy, also called interactive, which in essence provides that new knowledge is built by the learner in a relational valoric process from cognitive and metacognitive perspective. In other words, the constructivist and interactive conception is based on the following:

- constructivist approach, which establishes the status of the learner (learner-centred);
- sociological approach, which determines the interaction framework between students and professors;
- curricular approach, which creates learning contexts related to subject interaction with curricular content as an activating factor.

The key idea of this approach is to promote student-centred learning - the activity of individual knowledge building; the learner informs themselves, selects, evaluates, analyzes, compares, classifies, transfers, discovers, solves, concludes, etc. In other words, the student builds his/her own learning trajectory/path in relation to the individual potential and the interactive framework.

Active training is a superior type of training, which is based on the activation of trainees, respectively on their involvement and active and full participation (intellectual/cognitive, affective-motivational and psycho-motor) in the course of own training by establishing intellectual, verbal, social-emotional and affective inter-actions with the teacher and through establishing interactions with curricular contents and socio-professional contexts [6, p.186-187].

In contrast to the empirically arising "active" learning, the methods of problem-based learning are sufficiently substantiated theoretically. Many psychological studies have shown that a person's thinking is born in a problem situation. Due to a number of reasons, problem-based learning did not become a special type of learning, how-ever, it necessitated the implementation of the problem-based principle in the content of learning and in the process of its deployment in the dialogue (external and internal) of the subjects of educational process.

The next important aspect of the contextual approach to curriculum is the reliance on students' social and educational experience. It is the "context" that often becomes the basis for assimilation of social, professional and also educational experience (social and learning experience).

According to A.N. Leontiev, through vigorous activity a person is the appropriation of social experience, the development of his/her mental functions and abilities, systems of relations with the objective world, other people and themselves. From this point of view, the main goal of the student should not be just the assimilation of scientific knowledge and skills (they are necessary, but insufficient), but in *mastering the integral professional activity*, i.e. professional competencies.

It is also very important to take into account the existing contradictions between educational and professional activities, what is a serious problem in the higher education system (often there is complete dominance of educational activities or complete isolation of educational activities from future professional activities).

While the educational and professional activities have a common structure, the content of the structural units of each of them is completely different (Table 2).

Table 2

Differences in Content of Educational and Professional Activities Structure [15, p.127]

Structural Links of Educational Activities	Educational Activity	Professional Activity
Necessity	In learning	In labor
Motive	Cognition of the new, mastering the profession	Realization of the professional, intellectual and spiritual potential, self-development of the person
Purpose	General and professional development of the person	Production of material and/or spiritual values, services
Actions, deeds, operations	Cognitive, mostly intellectual	Practical, including theoretical and practical

Means	Mental functions and cognitive abilities of the person. Methods and content of learning	Methods and ways of professional activity, values and attitudes
Subject	Educational information as a sign system; system of educational competencies	Substance of nature (engineer), personality and psyche (teacher), body and soul (doctor)
Result	Active abilities of the person, the system of relations with the world, other people, themselves	Goods, education of people, their health; self-fulfilment of the person

The table reflects *the main contradiction of professional education:* mastering professional activity should be provided within the framework of educational activity qualitatively different in goals, content, forms, methods, means, conditions and process.

From this follows a number of *specific contradictions*:
- the educational activity involves the development of cognitive motivation, while the practical activity - the professional one;
- the subject of study is science, educational information, but in the doctor's activity it is the person, in the engineer's – the substance of nature, in the teacher's – the personality (psyche) of the child, etc.;
- the content of training is "distributed" in a multitude of practically unrelated academic disciplines, but in professional activity it is applied systematically;
- the student is required to focus mainly on attention, memory, thinking, and motor skills, whereas in professional activities they act as an integral person;
- the student is in an active position only in response to the teacher's control actions (they answer questions, solve the problems set by the teacher, perform tasks, etc.), while in production they are required to be active and take initiative;
- the student receives mainly static educational information, and in labor it is developed dynamically in time and space in accordance with the technological process;
- the artificial forms of organizing the students' educational activities, ideally suited to transmission of information to virtually any number of students, do not correspond to the forms of life and professional activity of people;
- the individual activity dominates in training, while any production process is carried out in the context of employees' joint activities.

Figuratively speaking, a student resides in a kind of virtual world of sign systems and artificial forms of organization the educational activities, does something completely different than a specialist in the workplace. Therefore, not every university graduate can quickly get involved in the realities of professional activity. It takes them 3-5 years of adaptation – substantive and social. Moreover, social adaptation is more difficult than subject-technological, because the student does not get the necessary experience of joint activity at the university [7, p.128].

Thus, the main postulate of the contextual curriculum is to propose such a project where the student's assimilation of theoretical knowledge and subject competencies is superimposed on their professional activities, when the subject and social content of their future professional activity is consistently modelled.

The contextual curriculum ensures the transformation of educational activities into professional ones with a gradual change of cognitive needs, motives, means, and results to professional ones.

The integration of the subject and social contexts of professional activity brings in the educational process a number of new points:
- the space-time context "the past (models of theory and practice) – the present (the educational activity being carried out) – the future (simulated professional activity)";
- the systematicity; interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity of knowledge and competencies;
- the possibility of dynamic organization of the training content, which is usually given in statics;
- a simulated plan for the activities of specialists under appropriate technologies;
- the pre-professional acquaintance with official functions, duties and responsibilities of a specialist;
- the role "modeling" of professional deeds and actions;
- the awareness of official and personal interests as a future specialist.

Based on the above mentioned, the basic principles of contextual curriculum are the following:
1) psychological and pedagogical support of personal-semantic and active involvement of the student in educational activities;
2) consistent modelling in students' educational activities of the integral content, forms and conditions of the specialists' professional activities;
3) problematicity of training content and the process of its deployment in the educational process;
4) compliance of forms for organizing students' educational activities with the results and content of education;
5) leading role of joint activities, interpersonal interaction and dialogic communication of the educational process subjects (teacher and students, students among themselves);
6) psychological and pedagogical substantiation of the combination of innovative and traditional learning technologies;
7) openness, i.e. usage of any pedagogical technologies proposed within the framework of different theories and approaches to achieve specific learning outcomes in the educational process of the context type;
8) unity of training and formation of the future specialist's personality;
9) consideration of individual and psychological peculiarities and cross-curriculum contexts that affect learning outcomes.

Thus, the contextual curriculum places in the first plane the professional competencies and directs the learning process towards the integration of person-centered (student-centered approach) and competency-based approaches based on the principles outlined above.

The concept of contextual curriculum proposed for the higher education system as a whole, and the transfer of its theoretical positions to the projection of certain models of subject curricula requires their specification in accordance with the features of the student's future specialty/ profession.
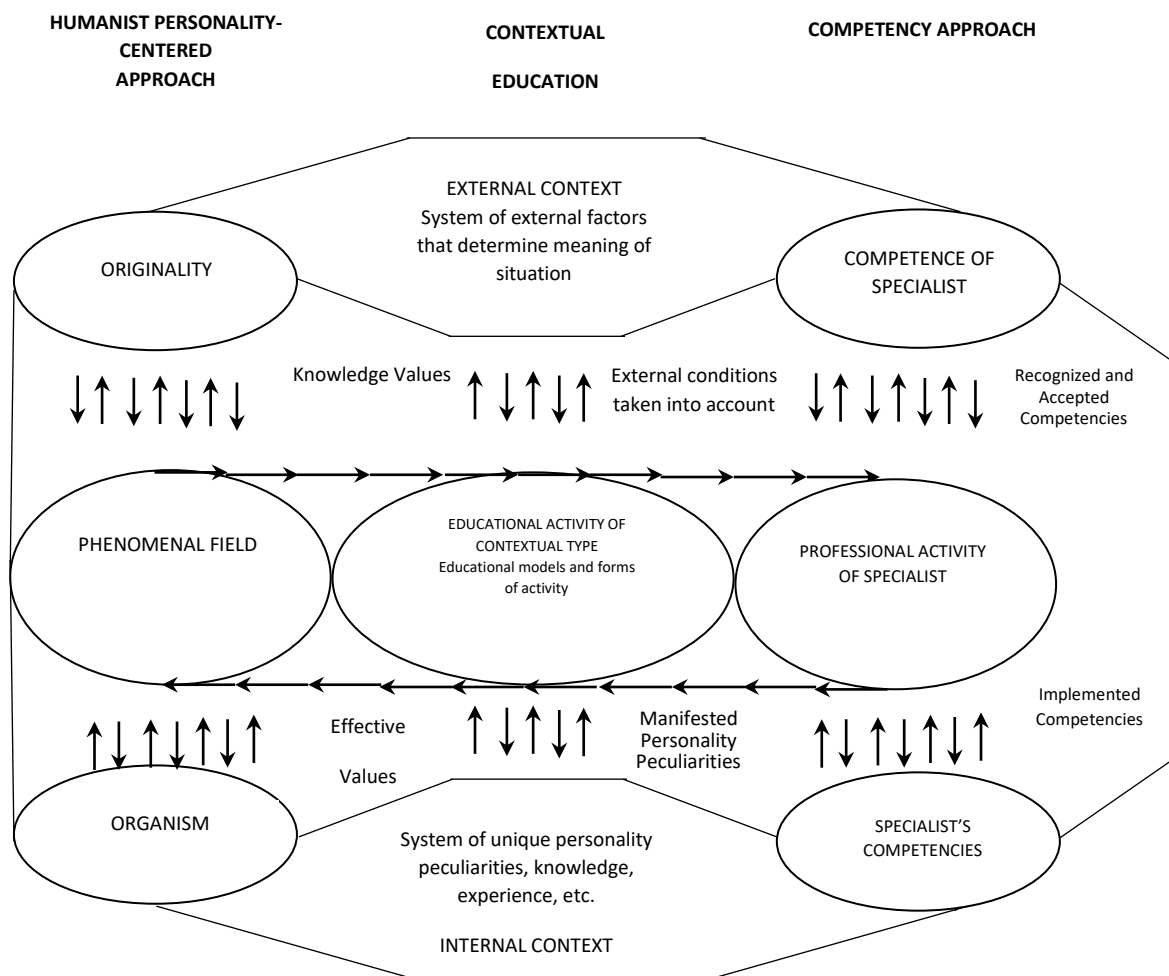

Fig.3. Integration of Person-Centered and Competency-Based Approaches in Context Curriculum [14].

Examples of contexts that can be included in the university curriculum. For example, the following contexts can be included in the curriculum for the "Educational Management" discipline:

Subject: "Leadership styles, methods and techniques"

Objectives/ Competencies Units	Contents Units	Modeled Contexts
• Identification and characterization of leadership styles, methods and techniques of leadership. • Analysis of different leadership styles, methods and techniques of leadership. • Arguing the advantages/ disadvantages of different leadership styles. • Solving problems, case studies, conflict situations by applying different management methods and techniques.	• Typology of leadership styles. • Participatory style. • Democratic style. • Authoritarian style. • Bureaucratic style. • Motivational leadership methods. • Convincing methods. • Analytical methods. • Prediction methods. • Training methods. • Leadership techniques.	• The manager of educational institution promotes the democratic style of leadership, but the results of the institution are low, the students and parents are not satisfied with these results. • The manager of institution promotes an authoritarian style of leadership, the students and parents are satisfied with the results of the institution, but the teachers do not agree with the management mode. • The educational institution is characterized as one with a low rating, without perspective, with the sharp decrease of the number of students and the insufficient financial support by the local public authorities.

Conclusions

1. The contextual curriculum has the properties of integrativeness, rationally combining the aspects of person-centered and competency-based approaches.
2. The elaboration of contextual curriculum involves the following:
   - development of conceptual provisions of the theory and methodology of university curriculum through the inclusion of "context" category (with a complete description of this concept and its functions in the curriculum structure);
   - elaboration of a system of competencies for teachers and future specialists (or their transfer from National Qualifications Framework);
   - elaboration of a system of "contexts" in the structure of subject content;
   - elaboration of educational technologies implementing the capabilities of different contexts.
3. The approach proposed by us is not aimed at elaboration of a conceptually new curriculum paradigm. At the same time, it develops both the theory and the methodology of university curriculum by incorporating in it the innovative element - the context.

The perspectives of this approach are to develop and experimentally test a contextual curriculum on the necessary subjects for a particular specialty.

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Prezentat la 27.10.2020