

FLEXIBILITY AND CULTURE – A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE TO THE FUTURE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Alina TURCULEȚ*

*Department of Psychology, Education, and Teacher Training, Transilvania University, Braşov, Romania

Abstract: *Future-ready students are the key-concept of “The future of education and skills 2030” project provided by OECD in 2018. It is well known that climatic changes, technological development and migration will transform the labour market in the next few years. Education is facing an important challenge: how to equip the students with the competencies, skills and attitudes of the future. According to the previous official document, the most important challenges of the human society are environmental, economic, and social. More than ever, we need to broaden our perspective from individual to community, from personal to collective interest. The working group members and partners proposed some design principles for curricula and education systems that include flexibility for the process design: the curriculum should be adaptable and dynamic, reflecting evolving requirements. Flexibility becomes an important value that will mediate the educational process. Therefore, we have decided to investigate the implications of cultural dimensions on flexibility and to highlight the flexibility in the stylistics profile of professors. The questionnaire-based inquiry was developed in the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020 among approximately 200 students from “Transilvania” University of Braşov. All students are enrolled in teacher training programs, so they can become future-teachers. Our findings show that flexibility or adaptability is considered an important value in teaching behaviour. Nevertheless, there is an inconsistency in students’ responses regarding the semantic content of the concept. Therefore, the teacher training programs should provide aspects regarding the cultural and intercultural dimensions of education.*

Keywords: *emotional factors; flexible mindset; cultural differences.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the explicative dictionaries, the flexibility represents the property of a person to adapt to the particularities of different situations. A specialized dictionary of psychology explains flexibility as a factor of intelligence and creativity that restructures the process of thinking in order to produce an effective reaction in relation to any new situation (Neveanu, 1978:273). Thus, older psychology dictionaries depict flexibility as the ability to orient thinking in as different directions as needed or the capacity to set new perspectives if required. The concept of flexibility is related to the development of thinking and creative thinking, to motivation and attitude. The implications of registering flexibility in the attitudinal area relate flexibility to learning, practicing and training. Therefore, flexibility is a pragmatic particularity depending on social learning. In the modern psychological literature, flexibility is a part of several models and explicative theories of emotional intelligence. For example, in the personality traits

model, adaptability is a domain of competencies including: the ability to test reality or to see things how they really are; flexibility or the ability to adjust feelings, thoughts and actions to the demands of reality; problem solving or the awareness of real problems and collaboration to solve them (Bar-On & Parker, 2011:358). The authors consider emotional intelligence a multiple factors assembly of aptitudes; flexibility is one of the ten factors (Bar-On & Parker, 2011:375-376). The mixed explicative model of emotional intelligence contains five dimensions with 25 social and emotional competencies; the second dimension deals with to be in charge of your own and includes the following competencies: self-control, honesty; conscientiousness; adaptability; innovative spirit (Goleman, 2018:143-165). One of the recent approaches to emotional intelligence identifies five domains of EI, including self-regulation with several components: postponing the decision and impulse breaking, troubleshooting; assertive expression of feelings; flexibility; directing nonverbal communication (Wood, R & Toley, H., 2003).

The relation between motivation and flexibility is enhanced in the development of *Achievement Motivation Inventory (AMI)*. The research instrument evaluates the motivation for performance. It investigates 17 dimensions, among which: flexibility, responsibility, self-control and self-discipline (Schuler *et al.*/ Miclăuș & Iliescu, 2007 cited in David, 2015:245). In a comparative study regarding the work profile, Romanians have lower level of flexibility than Germans (David, 2015:301). The summary of the psychological depth profile of the Romanians highlights similarities with peoples from developed democratic countries: appropriate intellectual and creative potential and a modern learning style; comparable emotional intelligence expressed as adaptability. The surface psychological profile reveals that the cultural environment have not favor the potential of the Romanians (David, 2015:304-305). The assumption is that a historical approach to the influence of the cultural environment on the psychological attributes explains some negative aspects like the lack of perseverance, the lack of trust and confidence in others, the lack of cooperation and selfishness, stubbornness. The positioning of the Romanian space at the confluence of several powerful empires have printed the psychological profile and have transformed the negative features into resilience mechanisms, into forms of passive resistance (David, 2015:310). In these conditions, flexibility is a resilience mechanism too, a form of adaptive resistance strongly influenced by the cultural environment.

One of the latest perspectives on the debated topic of socio-emotional intelligence relates it to the mentality or mindset (Dweck, 2017). There are two types of mindset: rigid and flexible. Several studies have identified a direct relation between the awareness of the importance of perseverance and challenges, and the flexible mindset (Dweck, 2017:21). The ability to transform challenge into success belongs to individuals with flexible mindset; the most important ingredients for creative achievements are perseverance and mobility (Dweck, 2017:23). Mobility implies adaptability. Therefore, only a flexible person will have a flexible mindset.

Some studies regarding teachers' mindset have divided it into two categories: deficit-based mentality and plus-based mentality; according to the deficit-based mentality, the winner takes all, meanwhile, according to the plus-based mentality everyone will achieve some goals (Raghunathan, 2017).

2. RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

The research question that guided our study has been: *How culture influences the perception of flexibility in a student approach to emotional factors?* Therefore, we have set the following research objectives: (1) To identify how students perceive flexibility in the professors teaching behavior; (2) To verify the influence of culture in students' perception regarding flexibility.

3. AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO FLEXIBILITY

3.1 Procedure. The research was carried out in the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020. The aim of our study was to enhance the influence of the cultural environment on the perception of some emotional factors. In a broader perspective, the enrichment of flexibility with cultural determination will help to adjust the educational strategies in higher education in order to develop the competencies profile of students according to the demands and challenges of the 21st century.

2.2 Participants. The participants in our research are 209 students from *Transilvania University*. They are aged between 19 and 52 years (N=207; Missing=2; M=22,59; SD=6,11; Mode=20). From a gender perspective, 202 are females and 6 are males (N=208; Missing=1; M=1,97; SD=0,16). The students are enrolled in the second year (144) and in the third (64) (N=208; Missing=1; M=2,31; SD=0,46). Some of them declare to have work experience (46) and the majority have no work experience (162) (N=208; Missing=1; M=0,22; SD=0,41).

2.3 Measures. In order to identify the real image of the professors in higher education interactions from a student perspective regarding flexibility, we used a questionnaire-based inquiry. The research instrument has items related to several values of the postmodern education identified or willing to be identified in teaching behavior. The students have been asked to choose five values from a list totalizing twelve postmodern values: *cooperation, critical thinking, creativity, entrepreneurship, respect for different, empathy, pro-social behavior, rightness, self-determination, lifelong learning, sense of humor, flexibility*. The self-administered questionnaire has been completed as a current task of the seminar. Thus, the students have not been exposed to additional stress. The participation in the inquiry has been freely consented.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Regarding flexibility as a perceived value in teaching behavior in higher education, less than 50% of the students have chosen this postmodern value (N=89; M=2,82; SD=1,52). Most often chosen score on Likert scale has been the equivalent of *least important* (25 respondents). However, 51,6% of the respondents consider flexibility as an important value in teaching behaviour: *less important* – 18, *important* – 13, *more important* – 14, *most important* – 19 students. The students' options regarding flexibility as perceived value in teaching behaviour are presented in Figure 1. The statistical analysis displays those 92 respondents willing to discover adaptability in teaching behaviour (M=2,98; SD=1,50). Most often chosen score has also been the equivalent of *least important* (23 students). The percentages of the respondents who express their desire to meet with flexibility in the teaching behaviour of their professors is higher: 59,0%. The options of the students are as follows: *less important* – 14, *important* – 18, *more important* – 16, *most important* – 21. Thus, 51,6% students declare flexibility is a value perceived in teaching behaviour and 59,0% students declare flexibility is a value they would like to record in teaching behaviour. A comparative approach of the results highlights similarities in the amount of the respondent who have chosen flexibility as important value in teaching behaviour: 42,5% - flexibility as existing value, and 44,0% - flexibility as desired value. The rate of more than 40% is significant since the listed postmodern values are well promoted in the pedagogical literature, in specialist current discourse, and in mass-media. Even if the semantic content is not always completely understood and properly used, concepts like cooperation, critical thinking, creativity, empathy are frequently encountered.

For a deepen analysis of the results, we have investigated the responses depending on age and work experience. The students who have frequently chose higher values are: 19 years old (N=8; M=4,38; Mode=5); 29 (N=1; M=3,0; Mode=3); 33 (N=1; M=5,0; Mode=5); 36 (N=1; M=4,0; Mode=4); 41 (N=1; M=5,0; Mode=5); 52 (N=1; M=3,00; Mode=3). The students who have chosen lower values are: 20 years old (N=39; M=2,59; Mode=1); 21 (N=26; M=2,85; Mode=1); 24 (N=2; M=1,00; Mode=1); 26, 28 (N=1; M=1;

Mode=1). In these terms, either the youngest respondents (19 years) or the more mature students (29, 33, 36, 41, 52 years old) have perceived flexibility as an important value in teaching behaviour. The analysis of the responses enhances a similar pattern for flexibility as desired value. Therefore, we may assume work experience has influenced the responses of the more mature students. The statistical analysis contradicts the assumption: 50% of the students with no work experience have chosen higher values for flexibility (33 from 66); almost 50% mature students have chosen lower values (10 from 22).



Figure 1 Flexibility as existing value in teaching behaviour

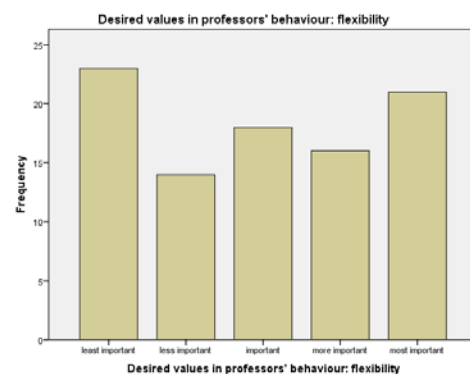


Figure 2 Flexibility as desired value in teaching behaviour

In order to realize the second objective of our study, we have started from the premise that culture influences the mental setting of individuals and cultural dimensions explain the differences between them (Hofstede, 2012). The research with the topic of a student approach to flexibility enables the access from the common professional image to real, manifested image of educators (Iucu,

2008:130). Our perception is strongly influenced by the cultural environment. Our depth and surface profile imprints our mindset and behaviour. The cultural imprinting affects our performance and, as a consequence, the teaching behaviour. If flexibility is an adaptation mechanism, then it contains a strong learning component. Nevertheless, the research regarding flexibility will need to be extended to a larger number of participants, to different levels of education. The data collected through the questionnaire-based inquiry will need to be enriched and validated through qualitative methods.

The inconsistency in the responses regarding perceived and desired flexibility might have origins in the deficient approach of the contemporary content of the concept of flexibility.

One of the limits of our study is the gender representativeness. The participants are 202 females and 6 males, which represent 97,1% and, respectively, 2,9% valid percentages. Another limit is students' specialization; all the respondents are enrolled in faculties in the field of humanities (Educational sciences and Letters).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The challenges of the 2020 are far beyond any educator could imagine. The predictions of the experts from the educational field worldwide have been available for the educational stakeholders since 2018, when the curriculum for the early childhood education was updated. The physical development and healthcare have become more important than cognitive skills. In the same year, 2018, OECD proposed new goals for the educational policies, a new competence profile, and a new learning framework (OECD, 2018). The competencies demanded by the next decade of the 21st century are related to attitudinal area: values, dilemmas, responsibilities. The socio-emotional competencies will be reframed according to the new reality and flexibility will be one of the most important emotional factors. The students enrolled

today in higher education belong to different generations, with different characteristics and personal attributes. They have been trained and educated according to different competence profiles. We can still add in their initial formation important acquisitions regarding flexibility.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bar-On, R. & Parker, J. (2011). *Manual de inteligență emoțională*. Bucharest: Curtea veche.
2. David, D. (2015). *Psihologia poporului român. Profilul psihologic al românilor într-o monografie cognitiv-experimentală*. Iași: Polirom.
3. Dweck, C. S. (2017). *Mindset*. Bucharest: Curtea veche.
4. Goleman, D. (2018). *Inteligența emoțională*. Bucharest: Curtea veche.
5. Hofstede, G. et al. (2012). *Softul mental. Cooperarea internațională și importanța ei pentru supraviețuire*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
6. Iucu, R. (2008). *Managementul clasei de elevi. Aplicații pentru gestionarea situațiilor de criză educațională*. Iași: Polirom.
7. Neveanu, P.P. (1978). *Dicționar de psihologie*. Bucharest: Albatros Publishing House.
8. OECD (2018). *OECD future of education and skills. Education 2030. OECD* [online]. URL: <http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/> [Accessed on March, 2020].
9. Raghunathan, R. (2017). *Dacă ești așa deștept, de ce nuștă fericit?* Bucharest: Niculescu Publishing House.
10. ***. (2019). Curriculum pentru educația timpurie. Approved by the Order of Minister no 4694/02.08.2019. *Ministerul Educației și Cercetării* [online]. URL: <https://www.edu.ro/ordinul-ministrului-educa%C8%9Biei-na%C8%9Bionale-nr-469402082019-privind-aprobarea-curriculumului-pentru> [Accessed on March, 2020].