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Curriculum in the Education 2030 Agenda: Latin America and the Caribbean



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Open Note of the IBE

The IBE has launched the series In-Progress Reflections on *Current and Critical Issues in Curriculum, Learning and Assessment* to open a communal space for a global conversation, collective production and discussion on those issues of high concern for Member States. It intends to support country efforts in mainstreaming challenging issues within the processes of curriculum renewal and development across different levels, settings and provisions of the education system.

Initially, the focus areas of the In-Progress Reflections series encompass, among others,: (i) Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as a foundation of holistic child development and learning; (ii) Reading and writing in early grades to support the development of essential competencies; (iii) Youth Culture and competencies for Youth in the early 21st century (covering formal, non-formal and informal education); (iv) ICT curricula and inclusive pedagogy contributing to relevant and effective learning outcomes; (v) STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) curricula to foster sustainable development; (vi) Curriculum for Global Citizenship Education (peace, human rights, sustainable development, values, ethics, multiculturalism, etc.); (vii) Assessment to enhance and support learning opportunities; and (viii) Inclusive education as an over guiding principle of education systems.

The series of reflections covers a wide array of knowledge products, among them: discussion papers, policy briefs, frameworks, guidelines, prototypes, resource packs, learning tools and multimedia resources. These materials are discussed, refined, used and disseminated engaging education and curriculum agencies / institutes, and in particular curriculum developers and specialists, development experts, policy makers, teacher trainers, supervisors, principals, teachers, researchers and other educational stakeholders. In addition, they serve as reference materials for the IBE menu of capacity-development training on curriculum, learning and quality education – namely masters, diplomas, certificates and workshops – to forge policy and technical dialogue involving a diversity of stakeholders and to support sustainable country fieldwork.

Through blogs and e-forums, we encourage the audience to actively interact and bring in diverse perspectives. Effectively, the online space for reflection allows us to stay connected, facilitates exchange between experts from different regions of the world, and truly fosters continuous reflection on the issues concerned. The blog is structured to gather diverse resources, which include tools and documents (as previously mentioned) under specific themes to provide a complex and rich set of materials targeted to the specific needs of Member States. The In-Progress Reflections will capture relevant visions, views and comments shared by the audience, and serve as a key resource to support Member States' efforts in mainstreaming relevant findings and effective practices in national policies, curriculum frameworks and developments and in professional practices.

Dr. Mmantsetsa Marope: Director, International Bureau of Education



Curriculum in the Education 2030 Agenda: Latin America and the Caribbean

Abstract: “Curriculum in the Education 2030 Agenda: Latin America and the Caribbean”¹ discusses the importance of rethinking the curriculum in light of a transformational, humanistic and holistic vision of education. The Education 2030 Agenda, which emerged from the World Education Forum (WEF) 2015 held in Incheon, Republic of Korea, positions curriculum as a powerful education policy tool leading the way to effective, relevant and sustainable learning opportunities, processes and outcomes. Curricula have a positive effect as levers for the sustainable, inclusive, fair and cohesive development of a country. They reflect and help to construct the type of society envisioned. The article provides recommendations to strengthen the positioning of curriculum toward an inclusive and equitable quality education in Latin America and the Caribbean. It therefore addresses the following questions: 1) How is curriculum currently conceived?; 2) What role does it play in the reforms aimed at improving equity and quality of the learning processes?; 3) What are the main regional challenges in relation to curriculum development?; and 4) How could countries align their curricula with their development needs?

Keywords: Curriculum – curriculum change – education 2030 agenda – Latin America and the Caribbean – learning

¹ The original version of the article is in Spanish. It has been published by Santillana, one of the most prominent publishers of educational materials in the Spanish-speaking world and, can be found here: http://www.santillana.com.co/rutamaestra/publicaciones/edicion_15/mobile/index.html#p=8

A new opportunity for curriculum

The Education 2030 Agenda, which originated from the World Education Forum (WEF) 2015 held in Incheon, Republic of Korea (UNESCO, 2015a; United Nations, 2015), positions education as one of the fundamental tools for the sustainable, inclusive, fair and cohesive development of a country. In particular, the concepts of inclusion and equity are visualized as the foundations of a systemic approach to assure educational quality (Marope, 2014) within a transformational, humanistic and holistic vision of education, which will contribute to the improvement of the lives of individuals, families, communities and countries. Essentially, inclusion entails responding effectively to context-inequalities and ensuring personalized learning opportunities that are relevant to the diverse expectations and needs of all learners (IBE-UNESCO, 2016). Equity, on the other hand, focuses on guaranteeing that fair educational conditions, inputs and processes pave the way to equality in learning outcomes for all learners (López, 2005; Opertti, 2017).

From this perspective, inclusion and equity shape a systemic concept of quality education (Tawil, Akkari and Macedo, 2012). This involves interrelating and giving unitary meaning to the various components of the education system with the aim of forging and facilitating personalized learning opportunities. Quality is then defined as the capacity of the education system to foster relevant and sustainable learning that reinforces both education as a common good, and the right to education and learning (Tawil, 2012; UNESCO, 2015b).

The idea of education as a common good implies that individuals act upon their rights by being in contact with one another, reaffirming the collective character of education and sharing a common set of values and references – for instance, on solidarity and justice. Indeed, the notion of the common good is essentially a political, historical and socio-cultural construct that recognizes the diversity of contexts, points of view and systems of national and local knowledge as sources of their legitimacy and development. The common good rests upon inclusive processes covering the variety of institutions and stakeholders involved in formulating and implementing policies (UNESCO, 2015b).

As the Education 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2015a) positions learning as the core purpose of education, a new opportunity arises for the curriculum to lay key foundations for relevant and sustainable learning (IBE-UNESCO, 2015). Indeed, global evidence shows that any successful education reform rests upon a robust curriculum proposal. Implicitly or explicitly, the evidence also shows that underrating the discussion and collective construction on curriculum design and development is to forgo a fundamental tool to change education in a convincing, profound and sustainable manner (Amadio, Opertti and Tedesco, 2015; Tucker, 2011).

The traditional image and vision of curriculum may hinder its opportunity to play a significant role in the new agenda. On the one hand, for many stakeholders within and outside the education system, curriculum is an impenetrable, thorny and indigestible topic. In addition, addressing delicate curriculum issues, such as the interpretation of the past and present of a society as well as the envisagement of their future, overcomplicates the implementation of the educational agendas and carries high political and corporative disputes and costs. When curriculum changes are discussed with decision-makers, they are generally restricted to the number of educational centres to build, textbooks to distribute, or laboratories to equip. The curriculum is essentially understood as an input, which supports the teaching and learning processes. The emphasis is therefore on learning conditions and inputs, rather than contents and curricular strategies.

On the other hand, the curriculum bears the weight of having been mainly assimilated to study plans and programmes, or more generally to the syllabus (Jonnaert and Therriault, 2013). These are often reflected in an endless number of disciplines and content areas with no common bond, having little to do with the expectations and demands of a society and being unrelated to what learners think, feel and how they relate with their peers and their teachers.

We also encounter situations where educational outcomes hold out scant hope and are often unrelated to the size of the investments made. The weakness of the educational provision may give rise to meagre results and a generalized dissatisfaction with the state of education observed in governments and civil society, and among citizens at large (Opertti, 2011). Doubts are raised about the presumption that inputs, regardless of their sophistication, are not turned *ipso facto* into better educational outcomes – for instance, the technological illusion of programme-delivering devices devoid of strong curricular and pedagogical references. The critical point is that if the educational provision is not robust in all its aspects - the communion and conjunction of the educational institution, the curriculum, the pedagogy and the teachers -, the results will continue to disappoint. There is no evidence of a magic jump from learning conditions and inputs to positive outcomes (Tedesco, Opertti and Amadio, 2013).

The curriculum: A friendly hand

The Education 2030 Agenda necessitates revisiting the theory and practice of curriculum. It specifically raises the question of whether the curriculum can serve as a friendly hand to support processes of educational change and contribute to the robustness of the educational proposals. Two elements are central: explaining how curriculum is perceived and, specifying its role in the educational proposals.

Essentially, the curriculum expresses the process of collective construction and the political, policy and technical agreement among the various institutions and stakeholders, from both inside and outside the education system, on *why, what, how, when* and *where* to educate and learn. The curriculum is a powerful agent of the education policy that contributes to the realisation of the type of society pursued. It comprises the interstices and synergies among different dimensions. Firstly, the ‘prescribed curriculum’, which assumes that everyone can learn. Secondly, the ‘implemented curriculum’, which is related to what indeed happens in the classrooms. Thirdly, the ‘hidden curriculum’ that refers to key assumptions underlying the school ethos and actions. Fourthly, the ‘forgotten curriculum’ that is related to what it is supposed to be taught but it is not done. Fifthly, the ‘achieved curriculum’ that embraces the competencies and learning outcomes at large. Lastly, the ‘experienced curriculum’ that entails what students think and feel, and how they learn and connect with their teachers and peers (Amadio, Opertti and Tedesco, 2015; IBE-UNESCO, 2013a; IBE-UNESCO, 2013b; IBE-UNESCO, 2015).

From this dual political-technical angle, the curriculum nurtures the educational proposal in four basic aspects:

1. It harmoniously combines the development priorities and needs of a given society and the learning and personal development needs of students;
2. It facilitates an ongoing process of social dialogue and collective construction that involves the diversity of institutions and stakeholders, both from inside and outside the education system, around the type of curriculum needed for the welfare of the people and the kind of society and citizen it seeks to forge;
3. It contributes to the education policy in actual manners of teaching and learning as well as to guide strategic decisions on what, how and where to invest resources and inputs in order to sustain the teaching and learning processes; and
4. It orientates the pedagogical practices and supports the teacher as a guide, not solely as a facilitator of the learning processes, considering that the teacher is the quintessential decision-maker in the classroom (Amadio, Opertti and Tedesco, 2015; Fullan and Langworthy, 2014; Halinen and Holappa, 2013; IBE-UNESCO, 2013b; IBE-UNESCO, 2015; Roegiers, 2010).

This comprehensive view of the curriculum is increasingly reflected in various regions of the world, and in markedly dissimilar contexts in terms of political, economic and social development. As never before, the curriculum is mainstreamed in the development plans and educational visions for 2020, 2030 and beyond. This is, for example, the case of Malaysia, where education is understood as a vital tool for forging sustainable development, improving the quality of human resources and strengthening the country's competitiveness in the knowledge society (Ministry of Education of Malaysia, 2013).

Specifically, the role of the curriculum in the processes of educational change is mainly presented in the five following points:

1. It serves as a compass that transforms the educational vision and purpose into effective teaching and learning processes, classroom practices and learning outcomes;
2. It empowers students to take the lead and be responsible and accountable for their learning (Aguerrondo, Vaillant et al., 2014; OECD, 2013);
3. It gives meaning, clarity and distinctiveness to a broad range of concerns and themes (Amadio, 2013), which, from various sectors (for example, government, civil society and citizenry), seek to either incorporate or strengthen their presence in the curriculum. This is mostly notable in the cases of crosscutting themes, such as global and local citizenship education, education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, inclusive education, intercultural bilingual education and universal values respectful of diversities.
4. It stresses the significance of the role of learning areas and subjects in the processes of curriculum design and development. Firstly, the content areas and subjects should be aligned with the country's social and educational priorities. In addition, they should acknowledge the changes with regard to the generation, legitimation and dissemination of knowledge (i.e., new disciplinary arrangements). Lastly, what needs to be taken into consideration is their transformation into thinking tools that pave the way to an active and competent citizen performance (Masciotra and Medzo, 2009) at global, national and local scales and within a framework of common values and references.
5. It is a friendly teacher hand that connects the *for what* and *what* with the *how*. This is achieved through a vast repertoire of pedagogical strategies that cater for the diversity of all learners, support personalized learning in interactive spaces between teachers and students using hybrid-learning models, and highlight the relevance of assessment as to support learning.

Curriculum challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean

The regional debate on curriculum as well as its development may take stock of three core issues. Firstly, the historical predominance of relatively close disciplinary approaches, supported by strong disciplinary ethos and corporative interests, in defining the core of the curricula. Secondly, the institutional, curricular and pedagogical discontinuities among different levels of the education system, particularly between primary and secondary education, and their implications with regard to hindering the smooth progression of learners across the education system. Thirdly, the insistence on approaching curriculum change through piecemeal interventions devoid of a systemic understanding of quality education. In overall terms, curriculum has not been clearly visualized as informing the process of rethinking education systems as facilitators of effective opportunities to educate and learn.

What could some of the main challenges of the region be regarding curriculum development and how could they be tackled? We can identify at least five aspects:

1. Conceiving the curriculum as a powerful tool, which helps to forge the bases of sustainable, inclusive and equitable development and lifestyles. Its role should be clearly stated, recognized and underpinned in the country's social and educational plans and programmes. The curriculum matters for the integrated development of education as a policy treble: cultural, social and economic.
2. Ensuring that the initiatives and investments intended to improve learning conditions and inputs respond to a vision of the curriculum that lends its meaning and determines its value added. This is essential to support the development and attainment of relevant and sustainable learning outcomes. The curriculum is a central node of the ensemble of teaching and learning inputs and processes (IBE-UNESCO, 2015). Sound curriculum change and development process do not start by discussing instructional time and contents relating to learning areas and disciplines, but by understanding the challenges of each country in securing its development, and the type of individual and citizenship competencies required to make this happen.
3. Ensuring articulation between key components of the curriculum (rationale, purposes, crosscutting themes, curriculum structure, syllabus, training materials, and assessment criteria and instruments), through different tools (i.e., curriculum frameworks) that strengthen the sustainability, consistency, unicity, materialization and impact of the proposals for curriculum change and development. Closing the gaps between the curriculum as designed and as applied, and concentrating more on the understanding of the curricula experienced and achieved are pending issues. A clear regional example is illustrated by competency-based approaches, where statements of intention do not generally find expression in effective classroom practices (Opertti, 2008).
4. Strengthening the synergies and processes between educating and learning, lending meaning to and contextualizing the diversity of learning experiences – overcoming the dichotomies and hierarchical grading between hard and soft knowledge and skills – as well as linking the curriculum and pedagogy as an inseparable pair. The matter of how to respond effectively to the disparities (to overcome) and diversities (to promote learning) of students must necessarily refer to the purpose and content of education representing the relevance and capacity to connect education with society.
5. Understanding inclusive education as the spirit and matter of education systems (Ainscow and Messiou, 2014; IBE-UNESCO, 2016; Opertti, 2017) with the view to realise the right of each student to have and enjoy a real opportunity in education and learning. Inclusion is crosscutting to policies and programmes encompassing issues relating to access, processes, participation and outcomes. It involves harmoniously combining the collective nature of the learning processes and the singularity of the educational response to each student. This is achieved under the assumption that personalizing curriculum and pedagogical responses is the correlate of understanding and building upon respect for the diversity of all learners as well as responding to learning contexts and circumstances that hinder learning.

Avenues to move forward

Curricula have a positive upshot if they are effective levers for the development of a country. Otherwise, they run the serious risk of playing just a token role in the processes of educational change in Latin America and the Caribbean. As an initial and incomplete inventory, we suggest seven aspects that could help strengthen the positioning of curriculum in the Education 2030 Agenda, with a focus on Latin America and the Caribbean:

1. Conceiving the design and development of curriculum as inextricably linked to the country's development aspirations and goals. This should engage multiple stakeholders embracing the diversity of values, ideologies, approaches and postures. It is a matter, which both involves and transcends educators.
2. Encouraging decision-makers, policy planners, curriculum specialists and developers, trainers and assessors to work together throughout the process of curriculum design, development, monitoring and assessment. Curriculum changes should not be looked upon as project-oriented in parallel with the regular functioning of education systems.
3. Clearly defining, understanding, disseminating and firmly casting the principles and directions of the processes of educational change that should guide all the constituting elements of the curriculum in a binding and unitary manner. Curriculum approaches (i.e., standards and competencies) – and disciplines are not ends in themselves, but tools for giving effect to the purpose and content of education.
4. Rethinking education cycles in accordance to the needs, continuity and fluidity of the learner's journey in addition to the life and citizenship skills they are expected to develop. The curriculum frameworks, understood as the ensemble of agreed directions, regulations and requirements that guide the application of the curriculum at the local and school levels (IBE-UNESCO, 2013b), may help rethink the education cycles mainly with regard to basic and youth education.
5. Relating the curriculum – including assessment – and pedagogical changes in a common and shared vision among the designers, developers and assessors of the curriculum. Likewise, avoid splitting it into disciplinary plots and into units/departments.
6. Rethinking the curriculum organization of knowledge into learning areas and disciplines along with instructional time and contents, in light of three main issues. Firstly, the understanding of the learner as a leader and as a regulator of his or her own learning. Secondly, the acknowledgement of the relevance of crosscutting themes as a form to connect the curriculum with the concerns and claims of society as a whole. Thirdly, the increasing expansion of hybrid learning models – combination of face-to-face and online sessions - to personalize the learning processes, thus making proactive and readily manageable use of the findings of neuroscience and cognitive psychology.
7. Strengthening trust and supporting teachers with their roles in guiding the teaching and learning processes. This enables them to effectively co-develop the curriculum, assuming a responsibility shared with the national and local authorities, regarding the ways in which to educate and learn in the context of a growing and inevitable digitization of the curriculum and regarding a necessary redefinition of the *what's* and *why's* of education.

In conclusion, curriculum change, which embraces the cultures, the mind-sets, the policies and the practices of curricula, is claiming a place and a new opportunity to pave the way towards inclusive and equitable quality education in Latin America and the Caribbean. Traditionally, the preferred path has been to go from the curricular provisions and the disciplines towards society. However, what is being proposed is that society, as justified by and respectful of the diversity and plurality of credos, affiliations, approaches and postures, should guide the curriculum agenda by means of political, policy and technical agreements on *why*, *what*, *how*, *when* and *where* to educate and learn.

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