



Conceptualising Inclusive Curriculum as a Multi-Dimensional and Highly Contextual Contraption for Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT

The development of inclusive education practices have led to worldwide discussion of how best to deliver a more equal education opportunity for all. In most developed countries this has led to the development of the concept of an inclusive curriculum for ordinary schools. African countries especially those South of the Sahara are still grappling with the etymological understanding of the concept of inclusive Education. This paper looks at the implications of an inclusive curriculum that has a common content for all pupils based on the national curriculum. This requires a significant paradigm shift in the way teachers thought both about what they taught and how they taught. It requires a common team effort within and across inter-sectorial agencies and every school. It is apparent that providing equal opportunity to raise standards of education for all the learners requires the recognition that teachers have to change their ways of thinking, every teacher matters. Reflections articulated in this article aim at including key stakeholders from inside and outside the education system, be informed by evidence as well as bear in mind ideological considerations, and contribute to the clarification of concepts as well as providing various regional perspectives and examples of a unanimous discourse of an inclusive curriculum. Indeed, it reaffirms that curriculum reforms represent a concrete opportunity for developing a consensual and comprehensive vision of the education system. The ponderings ended with recommendations on ways to develop and manage an inclusive curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is without doubts one major area that can foster the development of an inclusive education system and also in the worst case, can act as a barrier for inclusion. The causes for exclusion vary across the world and are both multi-dimensional and highly contextual, related to negative attitudes around diversity, a legacy of segregated educational facilities and settings, and the inadequacy of general educational provisions amongst other factors. However, in all contexts, the lack of a robust, motivated, relevant and flexible curriculum is often a common call for concern, playing a significant role in systemic exclusion and making education systems unable to effectively address all learners' needs. This paper intends to elaborate issues around the key role of inclusive curricula for democratizing learning opportunities for every learner in an inclusive classroom. At the same time, it seeks to identify certain emerging consensus and ongoing debates in terms of inclusive education and curricula at both theoretical and practical levels across different regions of the world.

At the beginning of the 21st century, UNESCO had defined inclusive education as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education ...” (UNESCO, 2004). Today outcomes have broadened this conceptualization of inclusive education with a view to achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals as “a general guiding principle to strengthen education for sustainable development, lifelong learning for all and equal access of all levels of society to learning opportunities”. This broadened understanding is grounded in the belief that education is a fundamental human right and this process involves learning how to engage with and value diversity, and how diversity can foster learning, as well as strengthen education systems, communities and societies towards the attainment of more inclusive and cohesive societies. Inclusive education helps to guide all educational policies and practices, interweaving different dimensions (access, processes, participation and learning outcomes), levels (formal, non-formal, adult education) and units (national frameworks, curricula, schools, classrooms, teachers and learners). Although this article intends to shed light on the role and implications of inclusive curriculum in the development of inclusive education, the interdependence of different strategies must clearly be taken into account, and will be addressed briefly in the section on supporting the implementation of the curriculum.

Defining Curriculum and the Development of More Inclusive Societies

UNESCO IBE (2010) recognizes the curriculum as a mirror of the complex interfaces of society, politics and

education. It is broadly defined as a reflection of the kind of society to which we aspire. The curriculum plays a crucial role as: (a) a definition of the outcomes and guiding principles for education; (b) an operationalization of pedagogical and administrative action plans at the core of the education system; (c) a means to ensure the coherence and consistency of educational and administrative action plans and those of educational activities in relation to the intended educational aims and purposes; (d) a way to facilitate the development and training of people within their context; and (e) an adaptation of the education system in relation to an educational project, as well as with respect to society and the world. With regards to complex feedback relationships between curricula and the achievement of both equity and quality, the curriculum has also been put forward as a way of contributing to the development of more inclusive societies. Indeed, the curriculum has been identified as a crucial tool to promote a broadened concept of inclusive education and to ensure the implementation of holistic educational policies from a long-term perspective. The latest UNESCO guidelines on inclusion (UNESCO, 2004), for example, have identified the curriculum as the central means by which the principle of inclusion could be put into action within an education system, respectful of cultural, religious, gender and other differences in line with common shared values.

Such conceptualisations describe a curriculum that is flexible, relevant and adjustable to the diverse physiognomies and needs of lifelong learners, reflecting an inclusive society which ensures more equitable distribution of opportunities and the elimination of poverty and marginality. This conceptualisation of an inclusive curriculum strongly supports an understanding of student diversities as enhancing and democratizing learning opportunities. It combines the density and strength of core universal concepts (for example, the value of diversity, the right to lifelong learning, comprehensive citizenship education) with options, flexibility and consideration of all learners within schools and classrooms, thereby addressing and guaranteeing their individual right to education. It is indispensable to ensure that curricular processes, provisions, settings and content share common frameworks while at the same time providing tailored approaches to the personal needs of all learners. UNESCO IBE, (2009)

Rosa Blanco (1994a), states that the key element of inclusion is not the individualization but the diversification of the educational provision and the personalization of common learning experiences. This implies advancing towards universal design, where the teaching-learning process and the curriculum consider from the very beginning the diversity of needs of all students, instead of planning on the basis of an average student and then carry out individualized actions to respond to the needs of specific students or groups who were not taken into consideration by an education proposal based on a logic of homogeneity instead of

diversity. Indeed, traditional curricular challenges have implied fitting special needs curriculum within existing school structures and syllabus, which are organized in ways that reinforce the idea of students as fitting into separate categories. Contrary to this vision, inclusive educational provisions mean respecting learners' individual and unique characteristics, while extending what is ordinarily available to all learners within the general educational provision.

Therefore, an inclusive curriculum is one to which all schools subscribe to the needs of all learners, whether they are in mainstream or special schools. In countries where the current special school practice exists, each school follows its own curriculum and interprets the subjects they teach in a unique way. In such cases, the quality of the taught curriculum becomes weakened. This has two consequences. Firstly, the students in special schools are denied access to the educational culture of their able bodied peers and therefore denied equality of opportunity to learn. Secondly, the teachers do not have a critical community in which to develop the quality of the subjects they teach, because there is no shared cross-school appreciation about the nature of the content. When this happens there is no shared platform from which to raise standards of education for students with special educational needs. Therefore, an inclusive curriculum must relate to the key learning areas of the central curriculum and the values of one's central culture, Rosa Blanco (1994a),

Since each nation has its own culture and set of values to be transmitted; one curriculum for all learners should reflect these cultures and values taking into consideration issues of accommodation and modification. There may be problems of interpreting this culture and these values at level that is developmentally appropriate for students, but this is a challenge for the teacher to meet. Every learner needs to have a sense of time and their history, every student needs to have a sense of place and their geography, and every learner needs to have access to the arts and literature that is a national treasure. An inclusive curriculum does this by addressing the knowledge, concepts and values that are appropriate to all learners as laid out in the central curriculum documentation guidance.

Enabling students to gain access to new knowledge at their own individual level of understanding and at their own pace of learning is central to an inclusive curriculum. This means firstly that teachers need to understand how to give learners access to the same subject content but with different levels of response from the teacher. Secondly, this approach is much more effectively applied if the learners are in control of their own learning. There are many ways of facilitating learner control but it takes a lot of confidence for the teacher to move away from the more directive teaching standing at the front of the class where the teacher moves everyone along at the same pace. The curriculum must therefore promote differentiation through learner centered learning.

Forging the Agenda with Respect to an Inclusive Curriculum

Notwithstanding a general consensus on a broadened concept of inclusive education and the key role of inclusive curricula in its attainment, developing and implementing inclusive curricula remains a significant challenge across all regions of the world. A re-conceptualization of an inclusive curriculum in light of a broadened understanding of inclusive education may help educational stakeholders reflect upon various core curricular dimensions, connecting it to other efforts towards inclusion within the entire education system and related to other social sectors, as well as help find new ways of working together, across different dimensions, levels and regions. These reflections as indicated by this conceptual paper, should aim to include key stakeholders from inside and outside the education system, be informed by evidence as well as bear in mind ideological considerations, and contribute to the clarification of concepts and strategies, as well as alternatives in developing an inclusive curriculum.

Certainly, curriculum reform represents a concrete opportunity for developing a consensual and comprehensive vision of the education system particularly in developing countries. It should be seen as a major national undertaking, requiring, above all, strong political leadership, extensive consultation with stakeholders, technical expertise and the development of the capacity of civil servants and teachers. The following questions represent some of the major open debates in this article, which definitely have great policy implications for developing countries:

- What do we consider an inclusive curriculum? In particular, what are its main rationale, objectives, strategies and contents? Who are the main stakeholders?
- Are key stakeholders willing to re-consider the role, objectives and scope of education? Are key stakeholders also ready to consider in more depth how teachers and students position themselves, and how they respond to processes of curricular reform? What are the incentives to do so in terms of access, retention and achievement?
- Are the "conventional" subjects of curricula relevant to the skills and competencies that young people need today? How should education face future cultural, social and economic challenges and opportunities, such as citizenship education and education for sustainable development?
- Do key stakeholders agree on the need for developing an inclusive curriculum from childhood to adult education, based on a perspective of education as a human right and a pillar of personal and social development? Have the following key dimensions been considered: developing a common conceptual framework, addressing gaps in curricula, establishing common core competencies, facilitating

the navigability between the different tracks and promoting diverse strategies and options for students' learning and assessment?

- How much are policy-makers, supervisors and teachers moving away from the objective based tradition and engaging in more competency-based approaches? Can bridges and links be established between different approaches?

Inclusive Curriculum: A Unanimous Perspective

Tani (2015) is of the opinion that when conceptualising an inclusive curriculum, the contextual or unanimous discourse has to concentrate on four main concerns, namely: the focus of the curriculum; the purpose of the curriculum; the relationship between national, local and school interests; and the question of how to effectively support the development of the curriculum. This conceptual article addresses these concerns in turns, with reference to various regional perspectives and examples.

The focus of the curriculum

The focus of the curriculum can be broadly understood as relating to curricular objectives, goals and contents, defining competencies, understanding and supporting the learning process of every pupil and how this can be combined in a coherent way throughout the curricular framework. The common threads in this delicate balancing act are the fundamental objectives of an inclusive curriculum, education system and society.

Curricular objectives, goals and contents

In terms of curricular objectives, goals and contents, it is important to note that, traditionally, subjects have played a key role in education systems. In fact, the mindsets and practices of education systems have typically been constructed around the study of knowledge and subject areas, within relatively stable epistemological definitions and boundaries of knowledge areas. Often, content has taken on a leading role compared to other dimensions of the curriculum, such as the curricular objectives (which may refer to good citizenship; healthy and balanced development of a person).

It is interesting to understand and compare how innovative school models have attempted to move away from this content-based approach in order to improve educational achievement in difficult social surroundings, as in the case of France. "Opening up the school to this culture radically transforms the elitist conception of knowledge as the instrument whereby power is exercised by the privileged social classes". It also means that under-performing children are not isolated or given special "treatment"; instead, the aim is to cater for them without singling them out in the collective learning process. Underpinning these reforms, the concept of knowledge has been broadened to reflect a combination of facts, understanding, skills and accumulated

experiences. The reforms have also aimed to clarify and simplify the structure in terms of curricular and syllabi objectives, so that they are more clearly conveyed to students, as well as provide a broader scope of what is considered to be a learning achievement.

Too much emphasis on academic content has been identified as a key challenge across all regions in terms of the narrow definition of learning and learning outcomes, as well as restricting teaching practices, amongst other things. In many regions, skills and knowledge learned in school may have very little relevance for the out-of-school lives of many students, especially those that come from socio-cultural backgrounds that differ from the predominant societal view embedded in the school's culture. Moreover, this also risks alienating parents from their children's learning as they cannot offer as much support. Similarly, in all regions of the world, many areas of curricula "bear little relation to the skills sought by employers and lack uniform standards". Research also suggests that an over-emphasis on academic content or an over-burdening of academic content within a curriculum also tends to create time pressures for teaching staff. In addition, teachers tend to hold a strong disciplinary ethos, which may hinder coordination with colleagues from other disciplines. (Tani, 2015).

Another key challenge is to expand access and democratize education while ensuring quality learning opportunities through relevant curricula. In Sub-Saharan Africa, access to secondary education is lower than in any other region of the world and highly biased against the poor, with girls at a particular disadvantage. A growing number of countries including South Africa, Rwanda and Tunisia are moving away from over-loaded and outdated content and are forging stronger links between technical and academic streams under common curricular frameworks. Others including Gambia, Ethiopia and Tanzania have started the process of developing curricula that focus on selected competencies in key knowledge areas and skills. Ethiopia, for example, has introduced an "alternative basic education" programme using low-cost community centres in remote areas aimed at helping 7-14-year-old children of pastoralists who may have missed out on primary school.

At the same time, rethinking the relationships between education and the labour market may entail a greater focus on the necessary qualifications for responding to local realities and opportunities. This is particularly pertinent when we take into account the growing need for more sustainable development initiatives, as well as more environmentally friendly production and consumption alternatives, which both address and harmonize global, national and local expectations and realities. Relevant curricular content should also help to develop knowledge, attitudes, and values as well as teaching-learning methods that support a genuinely inclusive society, with a focus on non-discrimination, human rights, removing stereotypes, and respecting diversity. For this purpose, a

comprehensive review of existing curricula and materials through an inclusive education lens has been recommended. In particular, this should consider to what extent inclusive education ideals are currently being promoted and whether, in fact, stereotypes exist in regard to, for example, gender, ethnicity, rural origin, and disability.

Lastly, it may also be worth considering whether curricular objectives are set too high; universal requirements which are rigidly defined and not contextualized cannot match the learning needs of all. Having high-level objectives can of course help teachers and learners reach good results, but only when teaching and learning processes can be organized flexibly according to the needs of individual learners and when learners are strongly supported in their learning. Finland is an example of a country where practically 100% of pupils in basic education (grades 1-9, years 7 to 16) complete their studies and reach the same (relatively high) goals. This is a contrast to what obtains in Sub-Saharan Africa where inclusive educational practices are still associated to social welfare issues (Tani, 2015).

Defining proficiencies

With respect to defining proficiencies or competencies, it is important to consider that “There is a growing sense that ‘what you know’ is less important than ‘what you are able to learn’”, yet many education systems continue to follow rigid curricula based on traditional disciplines. Along these lines, competency-based approaches have been put forth as particularly useful for developing and implementing an inclusive curriculum, to address the diversity of all learners and increase curricular relevance. Indeed, educational and curriculum reforms around the world are increasingly guided by competency-based approaches. Interest in such approaches, especially at the secondary level, can also be explained by the approach’s key objectives of quality, efficiency and usefulness of educational provision in terms of economic and social development.

Proficiency can be defined as “knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, accompanied by the ability to use them in a certain context”. Others have described competencies as “complex processes of achievement with qualification in certain contexts, integrating different kinds of knowledge (knowing to be, knowing to do, knowing to know and knowing to live together), in order to carry out activities and/or solve problems with the aim of contributing to personal development, construction and strengthening of the social network, the permanent search of a sustained economic-entrepreneurial development, and the concern and protection of the environment and the living species”. In overall terms, Watkins (2007) is of the opinion that the following four core elements should, at least, be taken into account when adopting competency-based approaches as a principal axis of curriculum design and development:

- Developing competency-based approaches can imply the generation, mobilization and integration of resources, such as knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, in order to face diverse types of learning situations and their links to real-life situations; it is not solely a matter of applying knowledge and capacities, or developing skills.
- The different types of situations are the criteria to conceptualize and define the exit (graduation) profile as well as to orientate the selection and prioritization of disciplinary contents (the syllabi) and to set up the assessment criteria and tools. The situations should reflect what is expected from the curriculum with regards to societal demands and needs.
- Competencies are socio-historical constructions developed through diverse situations. General life and/or citizenship competencies should be conceived and developed in different types of situations.
- There are different ways of developing competency-based approaches at the school and classroom levels, but for any of them to be truly effective, competencies should be selected and prioritized based on gathering, interpreting and prioritizing the demands and needs of societies.

Unique of the main advantages of competency-based approaches lies in their inherent adaptability to a multitude of real-life settings for a range of learners and schools, providing an optimal combination of content and contexts. For example, in several developed countries such as the United States, Britain, Norway and Sweden, a competency-based approach has helped diversify learning objectives and strategies based on a more flexible and relevant exit profile. Competency-based approaches may also help teachers better understand their own role as facilitators who are empowered to adapt their learning strategies to the diversity of learners. At the same time, several elements of competency-based reforms must be contextualized; key questions remain about how to define and select core competencies, taking differing contexts and needs into account. Indeed, a main concern relates to how to integrate and connect competency-based approaches to curricula and syllabi, which are mainly grounded on knowledge.

Roegiers (2010) for example, distinguishes between two approaches to implementing a competency-based curriculum. The first one is based on the development of transversal competencies at school. It promotes interdisciplinary and introduces life competencies by inviting students to resolve problems and situations through active learning. Along these lines, the curriculum does not prescribe competencies, but rather provides the ingredients to allow for their development. This approach implies serious changes to study programmes in terms of their content, design and presentation, as well as well-trained and effectively supported teachers, for its adequate and sustainable implementation. Peters (2004).

The second approach named by Roegiers (2010) as the “pedagogy of integration” does not exclude the first approach, but proposes another way of considering the needs of learners in a way that may be more accessible to a wider profile of teachers and their contexts. It distinguishes between two levels of curricular design:

A first level to develop basic competencies geared towards a general exit profile and a second level to develop more complex competencies, which provide for a specific exit profile. This approach is based on a definition of competency that entails “the spontaneous mobilization of a set of resources in order to apprehend a situation and respond to it in a more or less relevant way”. Addressing complex problem situations may encompass, for example:

- School experiences: knowledge, skills and behaviour;
- Situations of everyday life; and
- The relevant mobilization of competencies. This approach has been developed in several

European and African countries with apparently positive results.

Another useful perspective is to view competencies as the bridges to pre-existing subjects within a new competency-based curriculum, that is. a “curriculum organiser”. Viewed as such, competencies can:

- Enhance the relevance of content by encouraging the application of knowledge to simulated life situations;
- Facilitate the formulation of expected student outcomes in concrete and practical statements;
- Integrate subject content that is traditionally separate in the curriculum; and
- Provide a mechanism for gathering accurate and meaningful data on student performance and achievement for assessment.

For example, Belgium has established curricular cycles based on a set of standards in order to address both general and specific competencies relevant to everyday life, work and learning situations: the “foundation competencies”, which are developed during the first eight years of compulsory education; and the “diploma-level competencies”, which students are expected to have by the end of secondary school. Other concerns, which have been raised with regard to competency-based approaches, relate to their implications for assessment. Across many regions, there is often a clear tension between innovative competency-based curricula and pre-existing techniques of assessment (traditional written tests which determine students’ transition to higher grades). According to some authors, competencies are not taught “for the sole purpose of testing them; following the progress of each student is

just as important and depends on the teacher’s ability to use diverse observation and diagnostic techniques”.

Understanding and supporting the learning process of every Learner

It is important to consider how the curriculum supports learners. The curriculum needs to understand how learners learn in different ways and have different needs with regard to curricular goals, contents, time, methods, materials, learning environments, as well as supports, and assessment, amongst other things. In particular, it is crucial to reflect on increasing participation in learning processes not just who gets to be included, but how and what is recognized as achievement in a learning community. Participation should relate to the quality and meaningfulness of learners’ experiences, incorporating the views of the learners themselves. Achievement should relate to outcomes of learning across the curriculum, not solely test or examination results, and should not be restricted to academic attainment (William, 2000),

China, for example, presents a new school-based curriculum reform which attempt to better stimulate the active engagement of learners through collaboration and peer coaching, while encouraging students to address and resolve problems through open discussion. It also aims to develop more democratic relationships between teachers and students, with teachers playing a more facilitative role. The reform also provides for alternative assessment criteria and techniques to the traditional exam-oriented system. It is also imperative to understand, identify and remove barriers to participation and learning within school communities. As part of this process, consideration should be given to those groups of learners that are most vulnerable to marginalization, exclusion and underachievement. This means recognizing the fact that, because of the systematic use of categorization, some learners may currently be excluded from participating in education (in the classroom, school activities). This prioritisation of policies and programmes towards certain learners should be done in a way that is conscientious of not perpetuating isolation and segregation once participants are involved within mainstream educational provision. Peresuh M 2000.

Analogously, in many regions, the way curriculum frameworks are structured has been shown to be a huge barrier to participation and learning within school communities. Indeed, a strong hierarchical separation between primary and secondary education, between lower and upper secondary education, and between general and disciplines create interruptions and discontinuities in learning. Separated and segregated institutional, curricular and pedagogical provisions have also been linked to inequalities in terms of access and achievement, as well as student dropout, while many learners are also excluded from the education system due to early tracking and academic selection. Peresuh M 2000.

Similarly, disconnected assessment standards and techniques may present a key challenge in terms of inclusive curricular processes to avoid stigmatization and exclusion. Furthermore, most of the standardized or other traditional tests can measure only certain types of academic learning outcomes, leaving little value to other types of knowledge (forms of informal knowledge and so-called “non-curricular” subjects) and skills in school. Many tests are also time-bound, which creates more pressures for both teachers and students. Time limited tests further fail to measure the true knowledge of students for whom, for some reason (for instance dyslexia, intellectual disability, teaching language proficiency), reading and writing and completion of exams take more time than for average students. Assessment must be utilized for supporting learning and not for penalizing learners, especially those learners who are most disadvantaged. Black & Williams, 2005)

This suggests, amongst other things, avoiding the temptation to over-emphasize the importance of standardized outcomes in relation to pre-established targets of content knowledge relying on narrow assessment methods, often used for comparing students. This kind of information does not necessarily correlate with adult success in social, vocational or other indicators of quality of life. This is especially the case when summative assessment is the only means of evaluation. In contrast, formative assessment techniques for learning (personalized, multi-faceted feedback), have been shown in Europe to work as a much more effective tool to give feedback on the participation and achievement of learners, to allow teachers to identify areas for development and to plan their lessons, to motivate learners, and to develop pupils' skills of reflection.

Ensuring coherence throughout the curriculum framework

It is clear that the components of curricula and education systems are highly interrelated and dynamic. For this reason, it is essential that an inclusive curriculum reform be developed from a holistic perspective and in a sound and coherent way, taking into account the entire curriculum framework. In this context, a curriculum framework may be described as “documents that provide general orientations on what knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes should be incorporated into school programmes and how this should be done, by stipulating the parameters to be considered when setting curriculum goals and contents, when choosing learning methods and materials and for assessment of the attainment of education standards”.

The curriculum framework has also been defined Black & Williams (2005), as a foundational basis and constitution for the education system, by combining: (i) the main regulatory framework for decisions that incorporate the broad orientations of why, what, how and how well students should learn; and (ii) a quality

reference in the form of standards-setting documents. In particular, these broad orientations consider:

- Why students should learn, by defining the aims and goals of general education and learning, as well as the specific learning objectives;
- What students learn, by establishing the content of learning, including the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be acquired and developed as well, as the learning areas, objectives and issues;
- How students learn, by deciding on the concept of learning, for example, how time is allocated, how learning is developed, how extra-curricular activities are considered; and
- How well students should learn by setting the performance levels, the learning outcomes, as well as the means of assessment.

The purposes of an Inclusive curriculum

When conceptualizing an inclusive curriculum for national benefit particularly in Sub Saharan Africa, the second main concern that the interregional discourse needs to focus on are the fundamental purposes underlying an inclusive curriculum as a tool for inclusion. The national vision of the curriculum and its expression in an appropriate framework informs critical decisions with respect to other levels and dimensions of the system. Therefore, there is a permanent need for a close and careful look at how curricula are conceptualized and organized. This allows for a sound way of designing and developing reforms linked to core definitions of the kind of society which is sought and the expected role of education in society. At the macro level, curriculum change has been seen across many regions as a key foundation of educational concerns and reforms, in terms of policies, curriculum philosophy and content, classroom methodology and teacher education and professional development (Acedo, 2011)

According to UNESCO IBE (2008), high-quality curricula are seen as reinforcing education as an instrument for social mobility and change, combating poverty and inequity. An inclusive curriculum may be seen as a tool to encourage both equity and quality, and to support competencies for citizenship education and personal development, as well as a crucial factor in the improvement of the welfare of the poorest population by supporting key social and economic policies with a view to attaining social cohesion and inclusion. In the Arab States, “curriculum development and reform has been noted as a key engineering endeavour during all periods of reform, to reflect the new political and social realities”. At the classroom level, one perspective of an inclusive curriculum is that of a common learning process and an empowering pedagogical tool for teachers. This view perceives an inclusive curriculum as one which provides the scope for teachers to ensure that the opportunities provided for learning are relevant to all learners within the community of a class or school. From this perspective, an inclusive curriculum aims to bridge all

dimensions and levels of learning, while also providing access to lifelong learning opportunities from a rights-based perspective for achieving Education for All (EFA) goals. It also aims to support the diversification of teaching methods and learning materials to address the cultural, social and individual diversities of all learners. More broadly, it creates an essential tool for putting inclusive education into practice at the classroom level, while incorporating the multiple levels, that is, global, national, and local and school levels and dimensions involved in the process. Mutepfa MM, et al 2007

The relationship between national, local and school interests

When conceptualizing an inclusive curriculum for national educational system, the third main concern which the interregional discourse has tended to consider is the appropriate relationship between national, local and school interests, with a particular focus on school-based curriculum. Lock & Munby (2000) states that across all regions in the world, there is a pressing need to develop curriculum content and pedagogical practices that recognize how everyone brings different prior learning and life experiences to the classroom. A “glo-local” curriculum can help create an effective learning environment that fosters such content and practices by respecting and integrating global, national and local realities, expectations and needs, as well as understanding and recognizing the relevance of individual learners’ experience as they participate in the community and culture of a school (Roegiers, 2010)

With this in mind, there are currently two main prototypes of curricular reform that stand out across the regions of the world. The first model of reform focuses on the processes of curriculum development and implementation through phases of adoption, implementation and then generalization. This model generally takes a top-down approach, which is adopted by education authorities. It usually entails assuming a centralized planning approach, which may create tensions between the prescriptive, implemented and attained curriculum. The resulting gap has been described as the “hidden curriculum”. Another concern is that this model risks creating a perception of isolation between the different actors involved, and, therefore, resistance to change Ahuja, 2005).

The second model of reform focuses more on the dynamic of actors in terms of phases of appropriation, the generalization of practices and the integration of the reform within pedagogical routines. This interactive and dynamic relationship between teachers, schools and communities is increasingly understood as critical to all inclusive transformative curricular processes, moving away from previous perceptions of the school and its stakeholders as “non-controversial recipients” of curricular reform. In a review of sixteen different national contexts, it was concluded that efforts for making school management participatory and consultative, involving teachers, parents and other

stakeholders, was crucial to promote inclusive schools⁵⁹. In contrast, in one study of the introduction of inclusive assessment approaches, it was found that professional development had little effect if participating teachers were later hindered by the context of the teaching environment and by beliefs about teaching and learning. Various combinations of these two models have also been put forward. For example, in Morocco, a vast national initiative of curriculum reform is taking places at all learning levels of compulsory schooling engaging diverse actors of the educational system (Mpofu E, et al 2007).

Likewise, in the Asian context, it has been suggested that a limited national core curriculum of essential knowledge, goals, and values should be defined, while the delivery of this standard curriculum should be adapted through the promotion of teaching processes such as differentiated instruction, multilevel instruction and teaching to multiple intelligences. Such curriculum differentiation intends to help teachers respond to the diversity among learners in any one classroom by using student characteristics such as student background, experiences, interests, learning modalities, abilities, and needs. In other words, different content can be used in different ways, with different materials and methods, through innovation, flexibility and adaptation, in order to teach the required curriculum. Along these lines, flexibility act as a strong tool to democratize learning opportunities within robust conceptual frameworks, guidelines and follow-up mechanisms implemented by the government at the central level, precisely with a view to ensuring equity at large in terms of access, processes, participation and outcomes (Mpofu E, et al 2007).

It is clearly necessary to achieve a sound combination of national strategies, school based curricula and local concerns, while facilitating genuine dialogue and cooperation among the different actors at national, local and school levels and across multiple sectors. In particular, it is crucial for teachers, parents and students to work together actively. Indeed, cooperation and interdisciplinary teamwork appears essential for extending and enhancing the educational provision in ways necessary to address the increasing diversity amongst learners in schools (for example, collaborative teaching), making an asset of the expertise of people with different perspectives from their own. In Latin America and several Asian countries, for example, education systems are now beginning to implement some of these approaches. One example of these approaches is by allowing a certain percentage of the standard curriculum in basic education to be adapted to the local context. In the Arab region, some decentralization of curricular development and reform of content has taken place, although curricula are generally more centralized (content, disciplines and school class times are prescribed at the national level). In some European countries, a core curriculum with complementary provisions that provide room for flexibility and/or guidance on various contents has been

developed. In other European contexts, a common national core curriculum has been implemented, outlining common goals as foundations upon which local curricula are built (UNESCO IBE, 2010).

However, many limitations have also been identified, even with a combination of the two prototypes. For example, without the local openness, competencies and skills to adapt and develop curricula to local and more inclusive contexts, curriculum differentiation can have a limited effect in practice. Indeed, the building of teachers' capacity to be curriculum co-developers is seen as an important part of this process. Similarly, it has proven difficult to adapt a curriculum if it is undermined by a rigid assessment system that does not take into account curricular adaptations. In China, other challenges in terms of implementation have also been identified. Some of these challenges are gathering organizational support at the different administrative levels, while implementing capacity development activities around the new curriculum policy, in terms of funds for training and research programmes at national and local levels, setting up of resources Centre's at the local levels.

Supporting the development of the curriculum

A fourth main concern that emerges from the international discourse is the importance of understanding how the curriculum interacts with other elements of the education system, and how, as a consequence, an inclusive curriculum must be supported and empowered by education systems as a whole. Some of the key areas of these discussions, that is, those most regularly featured in interregional discussions, are highlighted below, namely legislation, public policies, and teacher education. Legislation is seen as playing an essential part in the efforts towards inclusion. In particular, it can provide: the combining of principles and rights in order to create a framework for inclusion (legislation for inclusion, alongside anti-discrimination legislation, in schools and the workplace); the reform of elements in the existing system, which constitute major barriers to inclusion (policies preventing specific groups to attend their local school); the mandating of fundamental inclusive practices (schools should educate all local children); and the establishment of procedures and practices to facilitate inclusion (a flexible curriculum, community governance). (Nguyet DT, 2010).

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is seen as a significant step in binding governments to guaranteeing free, high-quality and inclusive education systems for all. Moreover, this legal obligation, which encompasses, among other key elements, inclusive policies, systems and legal remedies, aims to achieve high-quality education, not only for learners with disabilities, but for all learners. This represents an important paradigm shift from focusing on the problems of learners (the so-called medical model or defectology approach) to placing the

focus on the provision of equitable learning opportunities for all learners, taking into account their specific needs and existing barriers.

It is also commonly agreed that an inclusive education system requires a high-level and visible policy commitment to inclusive education, promoting diversity as a way to enhance learning opportunities. This commitment does not only have a symbolic significance but it also helps to orient all actors around a common goal of inclusion and supports a change in attitudes and culture towards inclusion. According to interregional research, a crucial step towards inclusion is to convince stakeholders that diversity is not a hindrance to the attainment of good learning outcomes by all students (UNESCO IBE, 2008)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- This article suggests that a policy commitment in developing countries should take the form of a comprehensive, inter-sectoral National Action Plan, with immediate, transitional and long-term targets. These targets should be meaningful and measurable, with a clear timeline and statement of resources. For example, a clear plan of action could be constructed to enable the progressive transformation of specialized institutions into resource centres and to develop close collaboration between specialized and general education systems. Along these lines, policies should be backed up with adequate financial and human resources and a comprehensive needs analysis (based on statistical and qualitative tools) in order to enable strategic planning.
- Another area of interregional consensus is that planning should be done by the government in active consultation with key partners; the curriculum is both a policy and technical issue involving multiple stakeholders from inside and outside the education system, as well as a continuous and dynamic development of processes and outcomes. Understanding the articulation between the system's overall policies and school and classroom policies may allow the whole education sector to break the vicious circle of reciprocal demands made by governments on teachers and by teachers on governments.
- The article also recommends that teachers should be active agents in analyzing their own practices and their own students' progress, and should be involved in policy formulation. Indeed, recognising teachers as co-developers of an inclusive curriculum can support their ownership of a curriculum reform within their own local, national and regional context. It can foster greater respect for teachers and the teaching profession, and can ensure sustainable investment in the learning competencies of teachers within teachers' professional development strategies.

- Greater attention should be given to curriculum engineering as a basis for curriculum design, and more specifically, as a guideline for selecting curricular approaches that can make positive and lasting differences in learning processes and outcomes. Within this vision, curricular approaches emerge as a cross-cutting dimension to syllabi development. In particular, curricular approaches also encompass pedagogies and assessment, which have been traditionally addressed outside the domain of curriculum. For example: are the assessment criteria and tools co-existing outside of the curriculum and presenting entrenched learning barriers to attain inclusion?; how do they contribute to the democratization of learning opportunities bearing in mind the diversity of cultural and social contexts, as well as learning profiles?
- It is recommended that teachers should feel supported as well as challenged in relation to their responsibilities to keep exploring and developing effective ways of enhancing the learning of all students. In particular, teachers need to be recognized, engaged and supported to be professional curriculum co-developers, whose confidence, competencies, knowledge and positive attitudes can invaluablely reinforce the principles of inclusion and inclusive curricula.

In contrast, in most regions of the world, many teachers are still under-trained, underpaid and work in difficult conditions. There have been numerous calls for governments to value and support the teaching profession through teacher education for inclusion and improve their working conditions. Many of the new expectations and recommendations about inclusive teachers have not necessarily been considered in the principles of curricular reform (in school curricular content and timings, which can put pressure on teachers, as well as on their relationship with learners). For example, this could be the case in countries where teachers are not free to creatively adapt the curriculum based on local or individual needs, due to a strict curriculum that dictates the content of teaching and learning up to the everyday work in the classrooms. In some contexts, such creativity is even directly forbidden and differentiation from the expected is sanctioned by inspectors, even if it seems evident that the national level curriculum does not fit well with the local culture and conditions.

Similarly, there is often a mismatch between basic and secondary curricular reforms and teacher education curricula. In most countries, preparation of a national curriculum is the task of the Ministry of Education, whereas the responsibility for designing teacher education curriculum may be left with academic institutions or different departments. One example can be found in the current emphasis on wider competencies instead of solely focusing on subject-based knowledge. This view can be very new to many teachers compared to how they have been trained in relation to subject-

based knowledge and how learning outcomes are defined.

It is also important to highlight that expectations with regard to teachers' roles have evolved across different interregional contexts, particularly in connection with issues of diversity and inclusion; "teachers are now expected to have much broader roles, taking into account the individual development of children and young people, the management of learning processes in the classroom, the development of the entire school as a "learning community" and connection with the local community and the wider world".

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The consensus that formed around a broadened conceptualization of inclusive curriculum can be understood as an effective way to deepen the policy responses to the startling high numbers of excluded learners existing in the world today. While progress is being made towards the Education for All (EFA) goals, there are still an estimated million children of primary school age who are not enrolled in school and about 796 million adults lacking literacy skills. There is also concern that this situation could certainly get worse, as important global issues are not sufficiently addressed, such as climate change, financial crises, as well as economic and social inequities. This systematic approach to main stream education creates a seamless curricular provision link between special schools and mainstream schools (Tilstone & Rose, 2003).

As a consequence the teachers in mainstream schools should benefit from a greater appreciation of how to respond more effectively to their low attaining students. They will gain a better appreciation of the early nature of the key learning area content and also different approaches they can use to teaching and learning. A significant additional benefit will be that instead of the students being seen as being at the bottom of the traditional mainstream level of attainment, the teachers will now see the students as being well advanced in their attainment levels. This in turn will significantly influence the self-esteem of the learners themselves. There is a clear need for courses for professional development at many levels. These courses should not be generic academic courses; they should be focused within the clear paradigms that have been identified and be professional development courses that have academic rigour for all teachers of students with special educational needs. There is a need for political commitment and financial backing if students with special educational needs are to have the same human rights and equality of educational opportunity as their able bodied peers. This commitment to the raising of educational standards for the students with special educational needs depends on the support given to the teachers. Education needs to reach out to the entire human capital of a country and must not reject any talent, no matter how hard it is to encourage and no

matter how peripheral it may seem. Unequal access to the education system is an incalculable loss of human potential that generates enormous costs and threatens social cohesion. Universal, quality and equitable education is now the best social policy, in addition to the best insurance against unemployment. It is a determining factor of equity, as well as social and personal advancement.

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