



The 48th ICE: one year forward.

From inclusive education to inclusive curricula.

<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/communities/cop/forum.html>

26 October - 13 November 2009

One year after the 48th International Conference on Education (ICE), the UNESCO International Bureau of Education will host a worldwide e-forum on the theme: "The 48th ICE: one year forward. From inclusive education to inclusive curricula." Participants will be able to contribute in all 6 UN languages, while their contributions will be translated into English. It will be moderated by regional experts and IBE staff and the findings will be published in a summary report.

The e-forum seeks to:

- Advocate and discuss the broadened concept of inclusive education reflected in the 48th ICE outcomes
- Facilitate high quality, cross-regional discussion about key dimensions of the design and implementation of an inclusive curriculum
- Share experiences and resources on inclusive education and inclusive curricula
- Mobilise the IBE Community of Practice members and other curriculum experts interested in inclusive education

Week 1 (26th Oct) - Curriculum Objectives, Structure and Content

e.g. over-emphasis on academic content, over-ambitious objectives, over-emphasis on details, lack of time and socio-cultural relevance

Week 2 (2nd Nov) - Curriculum Development and Implementation

e.g. teachers without the freedom to adapt the curriculum based on local or individual needs, limited range of teaching methods allowed by the curriculum, teacher training and rigid assessment systems

Week 3 (9th Nov) - Good Practices and Useful Resources

e.g. UNESCO Guidelines for Inclusion in Education (2009), checklists, other useful resources, tools

Discussion Paper Summary (see below):

"Curriculum is without a doubt one major area that can foster development of inclusive education or, in the worst case, can be a barrier for inclusion", state Hannu Savolainen and Irmeli Halinen. The following discussion paper is prepared by these two key experts of the Finnish education system, renowned for its success in terms of inclusive education and curricula. It starts from the 48th ICE and expands upon the challenges relating to curriculum content and implementation, highlighting major points and pertinent questions to consider. In the final paragraph, it also briefly looks at the new UNESCO Guidelines for Inclusion in Education (2009).



E-forum Discussion Paper on Inclusive Education and Inclusive Curriculum

Prepared by Hannu Savolainen and Irmeli Halinen

The preparation process of the 48th International Conference on Education (ICE) on Inclusive education identified five major areas of global challenges to be addressed in moving towards more inclusive education. The five areas were:

- Attitudinal change and policy development
- Ensuring inclusion through early childhood care and education
- Inclusive curricula
- Teachers and teacher education
- Resources and legislation

Curriculum is without a doubt one major area that can foster development of inclusive education or, in the worst case, can be a barrier for inclusion. While the remainder of this discussion paper concentrates on the role of curriculum in the development of inclusive education, it is good to remember that curriculum is always dependent on the other areas mentioned above. For example effective implementation of a curriculum with e.g. the textbooks and teaching aids it implies depends on adequate resources. On the other hand good curriculum does not guarantee good learning if the teachers are not willing and able to implement the curriculum. The experiences of countries with high learning results, for instance Finland, seem to prove that strong support and empowerment of teachers in their work and in curriculum implementation is crucial for success in learning.

The text that follows is arranged so that first a specific concern or challenge regarding the curriculum is presented and analysed and then some questions are raised as possible solutions for the concerns. There are two major areas that are of concern here, the curriculum content and the implementation of the curriculum. The choice of these two perspectives is deliberate as the nature and quality of any curriculum is defined only when it is implemented practically. And even a good curriculum can lead into less than satisfactory results if the practical implementation does not work.

The following are some of the challenges regarding curriculum content:

- Too much emphasis on academic content
 - The emphasis on academic content is seen as a challenge because it defines learning and learning outcomes in a narrow way. Such a narrow emphasis is often enforced by students evaluation that takes into account only academic knowledge
 - It is also a challenge because the content tends often to become more important than the goals set up for the healthy and balanced growth of a person and for strengthening his/her identity



- Questions for discussion:
 - How is the academic content structured and connected to the goals of education on the one hand and to everyday experiences of pupils on the other?
 - Should there be more emphasis on learning to learn skills?
 - Should a curriculum include guidelines for active, cooperative and creative learning processes, in addition to content description?
- Objectives are set too high for all to reach - curriculum for all with universal requirements does not match the learning needs of all
 - Having a school system where a large proportion of students do not reach the goals set in the official curriculum does not make much sense. Either the curriculum objectives are set too high or the teaching and learning processes do not support reaching the goals. Having high level objectives can of course help teachers and learners to reach good results, but only when teaching and learning processes can be organized flexibly according to the needs of individual learners and when learners will be 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 made possible only by giving pupils well planned, individually meaningful learning support and by high level of teacher competences.
 - Questions to be discussed:
 - Would it be possible to identify a core curriculum meant for all and attach to the core curriculum guidelines how the curriculum can be adapted for diverse learners (remembering both slow and fast learners)?
 - Is a national level core curriculum for all sufficient? Can necessary adaptations be done locally or should all adaptations be centrally prescribed?
 - Could the main forms of pupil support be described in the core curriculum in order to help teachers in the implementation of the support?
- Too many knowledge details create time pressures
 - It is often said that curriculum is too demanding because of the high academic contents and goals or the theoretical nature of learning content. However there is also evidence that it is not necessarily the academic content per se that is challenging but rather the scope of the content to be mastered or remembered in details. Many teachers feel the pressure of time, and they report that they have difficulties in completing the teaching of all the expected contents with the time allowed. Also many students, in many well functioning school systems too, report



that they have difficulties in following all the details of the content, and they fall behind because there is not enough time to ask questions and get help from the teacher in class. Sometimes these students are then defined as having special educational needs, although – as it could equally well be argued – their need is in fact caused by the mere lack of time created by the curriculum pressures.

- Questions to be discussed:
 - Is time a critical factor and cause of special educational needs?
 - How much of the time that is spent working on a curriculum content is spent on learning and discussing the core concepts or theoretical ideas and how much is spent on memorising and copying of details or doing detailed assignments given in textbook?
 - Should teachers be empowered to select contents and methods that would take the needs of their students into account?
 - If teachers have more freedom to select contents and methods, is this a risk for declining learning outcomes?
- Lack of socio-cultural relevance for (some) students
 - One challenge for curricula is that they do not take into account the learning opportunities that children and youth have outside school. Informal learning that takes place in everyday environments is thus usually not utilised in schools. On the other hand the skills and knowledge learned in school may have very little relevance for the out of school lives of many students that come from socio-cultural backgrounds that differ from view of society predominant in school cultures. Additionally because of the distance between these cultures many parents can feel alienated from school work and feel that they do not have much offer as a support to their children's learning.
 - Questions for discussion:
 - How could a national curriculum be more informed about the everyday realities of all pupils, including those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds?
 - Should there be guidelines for recognising outcomes of informal learning and should informal learning outcomes be taken into account in student evaluation?
 - Should parents play role in pupils' learning support and should their role be mentioned in the curriculum?
 - Should there be elements in the curriculum that seek to even out the disadvantage some students have because of their socio-economic background or personal characteristics (disability, minority language as a mother tongue etc.)



Challenges regarding curriculum implementation:

- Teachers are not allowed freedom to adapt the curriculum based on local or individual needs
 - Many school systems have a strict curriculum that dictates the content of teaching and learning up to the everyday work in the classrooms. Sometimes the following of this detailed teaching content is monitored by inspectors who evaluate the quality of individual teachers' work. Such working conditions do not encourage teachers to use their own skills and creativity to create learning conditions that they feel would be most conducive to learning with the specific groups of children they are teaching. Nor do they encourage teachers to use the environment of the school as a teaching and learning resource. In some case such creativity is even directly forbidden and differentiation from the expected is sanctioned, even if it seems evident that the national level curriculum does not fit well the local culture and conditions.
 - Is teacher creativity and independent adaptation of curriculum threat for the quality of teaching?
 - Does an inspector system of monitoring teacher performance increase quality of learning?
 - What other methods of quality assurance of curriculum implementation could be adopted?
- Range of teaching methods allowed are limited by the curriculum
 - Research findings show that the key factor for good learning outcomes is not only what is taught but how it is taught. For example, the quality of teacher's teaching can have much more significant role in determining the learning outcomes of students than other often mentioned challenges for quality like class-size or class heterogeneity. Much of this teacher effect is determined by the teaching methodology a teacher uses. One key finding is that a one method fits all principle will probably not provide best possible outcomes. Every class is always a group of pupils with diverse individual qualities, diverse in learning abilities, learning motivation and background knowledge. On the other hand, research shows that permanent grouping students by ability, for example, does not really pay off. Learning outcomes are better in mixed ability groups. On the other hand research on effective special educational interventions show that by and large the most effective interventions are those which use teaching methods that can be used and are commonly used in mainstream classrooms.



- In what way should the curriculum define teaching methods or how teachers could be encouraged through the curriculum to choose and develop their own methods?
 - What are some of the most important teaching methods to be used in addition to 'chalk and talk'?
 - Why doesn't mixed ability grouping work? Do children learn from each other?
 - Is it possible for a teacher to use many teaching methods simultaneously?
- Principles of curriculum reform do not match teacher training and / or teachers' knowledge and skills
 - In most countries preparation of a national curriculum is the task of the Ministry of Education whereas the responsibility for designing teacher education curriculum is left with academic institutions. Or if both processes are lead by the Ministry of Education, different departments will be responsible and perhaps work independent of each other. Furthermore, in many countries the teacher education institutions are academic institutions with a long history and absolute reliance on that the true knowledge on good teaching resides within their walls. Sometimes this can create a gap between what the curriculum expects teachers to know and master and what teacher students are actually taught in their teacher education programmes. One example can be found in the current emphasis of wider competences instead of subject based knowledge promoted by many modern curricula. This view can be very new to many teachers as they have been trained with very different idea of subject knowledge and how learning outcomes are defined.
 - From where should a successful curriculum reform start: from Ministry of Education policies or from teacher education practices?
 - Can an inclusive curriculum become inclusive if teacher training does not change?
 - How could teachers participate and be involved in reforming the curriculum?
- Rigid assessment systems often relying on standardised tests do not allow or support individually or locally adjusted curriculum goals
 - Curriculum is always linked with student assessment. Sometimes the role of assessment 'steals' the place of curriculum in teaching. This is especially so when the standardized assessment given at the end of the year or a phase of schooling determines not only the students chances for further education but



is also used as a way to evaluate the efficiency of the teaching in a school. When this is the case teaching may be geared into preparing students for the examinations rather than guiding and supporting students to learn what is described in the curriculum. 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 (e.g. forms of informal knowledge) and skills in school. Many tests are also time-bound, which creates more time pressures to 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. Especially when the schools outcomes are evaluated by standardized exams, and these evaluations may also have financial implications, very little room is left for adjusting curriculum goals locally. Furthermore students that have individual barriers to learning may become a liability for the school, a risk factor for decreasing school performance.

- What kind of assessment or evaluation would be inclusive?
- Could schools evaluate learning outcomes on the basis of individual increase in learning?
- Or is it necessary that student assessment always is comparative and based on an assumption of normal distribution of learning outcomes?

The text above tries to outline a few challenges there are for inclusive curricula. The outline is by no means exhaustive nor does it intend to provide solutions for the challenges. Instead questions for discussion are provided and the intention is that discussion will lead us towards new ideas for developing inclusive curricula. Some further questions that are very important but could not all be discussed above are made in the form of a checklist in the recent Guidelines for Inclusion in Education¹ and are copied below as the conclusion of this discussion paper.

Checklist for inclusive curricula

- Are principles of non-discrimination, appreciation of diversity and tolerance being fostered through the curriculum?
- Are human rights and children's rights part of the curriculum?
- Does the curriculum address the coexistence of rights with responsibilities?
- Is the curriculum inclusive of all children?

¹Source: Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education. (2009) Paris: UNESCO.



- Is the content of the curriculum relevant to the needs and futures of children and youth?
- Are the programmes, learning materials and teaching methods well adapted and relevant to the lives of youth and adults?
- Does the curriculum allow for variation in working methods?
- Does the curriculum promote education on health and nutrition?
- Does the curriculum incorporate HIV/AIDS prevention education?
- Is the curriculum sensitive to gender, cultural identity and language background?
- Does the curriculum discuss education for sustainable development?
- Does the curriculum reflect visions and goals of wider development in your country?
- Is feedback gathered and integrated for regular revision of the curriculum to take new visions and circumstances into consideration?