



Contribution
Some issues and challenges around quality secondary education
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I. Five initial questions

1. How should youth education address the multiple cultural, social, and economic challenges and opportunities to making compatible the global, regional and national expectations and demands? Should secondary education be understood as part of youth education?
2. What are the incentives, opportunities and hindrances to conceive of and carry out educational and curricular processes of reform with regard to access, quality processes, retention and achievements under common policy frameworks?
3. Is it possible for stakeholders, from inside and outside the educational system, to reconsider the identity, objectives, contents and scope of secondary education, as well as its role in educational and curricular reform and more broadly, in understanding and addressing youth concerns, demands and expectations?
4. Is it possible for stakeholders, from inside and outside the educational system, to agree on the necessity to develop a common curricular framework starting from early childhood care and education, with the view to develop core citizenship competencies through flexible and interconnected learning settings, provisions and processes?
5. What are the roles of various educational actors and the scope of their responsibilities and engagement in overcoming the traditional objective-based approaches to curriculum and gradually moving toward a competency-based approach, which is more attentive to life situations and life challenges, and presumably motivating to learners?

II. Some key policy issues

1. The role of secondary education: not only as a springboard for tertiary studies, but also to develop a strong identity

- Understanding education as being simultaneously a cultural, economic and social policy.
- Focus on student development mainly through life and citizenship competencies.
- Promote learning to live together.

2. Global Trends

- Division between lower and upper secondary education (generally, the latter is not mandatory).
- Traditionally, mainstream and vocational schools were separated (e.g. mainstream and technical-vocational), but nowadays, there is a trend toward a more comprehensive process of schooling grounded on the development of core citizenship competencies common to all secondary education branches and provisions (especially in lower secondary, grades 7-9).
- More comprehensive schooling processes with a competency-based approach imply strengthening the collaboration and joint work at the school level among all actors (i.e., teacher teamwork, project work, cooperative learning and mentoring/tutoring). Exchanges and team work among teachers can contribute to improving the relationships between students and teachers (more emotional and cognitive nearness).

3. Trends in Arab States (EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011)

- Secondary education continues to increase (more than one-third since 1999, reaching almost 30 million in 2008). The Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in Secondary Education was 68% in 2008. 4.6 million adolescents were still outside the education system.
- Secondary school attendance and completion are strongly influenced by poverty, location and gender. The availability of second-chance programmes remains scarce in the region.
- Comparative to primary education, prospects for gender parity are less promising in secondary education. The region has moved slighter to gender parity, reporting an increase in the regional GPI (Gender parity index) of the secondary GER from 0.88 in 1999 to 0.92 in 2008.
- Levels of learning achievements are low. Identification of serious problems in educational quality; i.e. data from the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Narrowing learning gaps require concerted efforts: (i) school matters (fairer distribution of teachers and learning materials is vital); (ii) equal treatment may not be enough

(support from teachers and the wider education system is required); and (iii) assessments play a key role (making the results public and informing parents and communities of weakness in school systems).

4. Achieving a high quality secondary education is challenged by:

- A curriculum that is excessively academic, traditionally subject-based and mostly irrelevant to the lives of young people.
- Strong hierarchical separation between different levels, schools and branches/provisions that contribute to curricular segregation and fragmentation, and to labeling and stigmatizing students (i.e. provisions targeting disadvantaged people or students defined as with special needs).
- Technical-vocational education suffers particularly from poor government coordination, limited budget, lack of qualified teachers, an outdated curriculum, lack of set standards, and inadequate coordination with the private sector.
- Strong societal perception of secondary education as an intermediary step toward tertiary education and of technical-vocational education as a “second class education”.

Educational reform processes should feature equity and quality as factors that go hand-in-hand and in particular, secondary education as a key component for strengthening life-long learning opportunities.

Educational reforms throughout the world increasingly focus on curriculum-based approaches as revising and changing the structure, the objectives, the content and the assessment of the curriculum as a key factor to democratize educational opportunities. The curriculum reflects the kind of society pursued and necessarily entails political, policy and technical discussions and agreements around the why, the what and the how to teach. It is essentially a societal matter engaging politics, civil society and the educational community at large.

The curriculum guides and ensures the organization of pedagogical and administrative action plans of an education system, that is, the relevance of unified and powerful curricular frameworks from early childhood onwards. Nowadays, a curriculum is increasingly seen as a tool to foster and sustain educational policies.

III. Strategic directions

There are two basic options:

(a) Taking a gradual and piecemeal approach addresses specific aspects of the education system as separated interventions, for example, through investments in physical infrastructure and equipment or resources/materials to support the teaching and learning processes, or through narrow curricular adjustments. Basically these types of

approaches are grounded on the interests and needs of disciplines/subjects (narrow vision of the curriculum) and not so strongly on students' expectations and needs.

(b) A transformational and holistic approach addresses the expectations and needs of students by promoting and supporting the integrated and coherent design and implementation of policies and educational programs in different:

- dimensions (access, processes, participation and learning outcomes; the prescribed, experienced, implemented and attained curriculum);
- levels (life-long learning opportunities, friendly learning environments and diversity of inter-connected provisions); and
- units (national curriculum frameworks, school-based curriculum, classrooms practices and students development)

Strategic directions imply, among other things:

- Expanding and democratizing basic education encompassing the traditional branch of lower secondary education.
- Providing diverse and flexible options regarding academic disciplines and the technical-vocational education at the level of upper secondary education.
- Smooth transitions between the different education levels, from early childhood care and education (ECCE) onwards. Bridging the gaps between the mindsets and attitudes of primary and secondary teachers, and in particular sharing a common inclusive approach towards learning (valuing learners' diversities and supporting the needs of all learners).
- Diversifying learning opportunities and in particular promoting second chances within universal public policy frameworks. Avoid the temptation to focalize policies and programmes as separated settings and provisions.
- Promote late differentiation between types of schools and disciplines ensuring common foundations, objectives and contents of a comprehensive citizenship education from childhood to lower secondary education.
- Forging an inclusive curriculum as addressing the needs of all learners and as an instrument to develop educational policies aiming to democratize learning opportunities. The relevance of assessment for learning instead of assessment of learning, as a key dimension of an inclusive curriculum.
- Engaging a diversity of stakeholders in the development, implementation and evaluation of the curriculum. Changing the role of teachers from deliverers to co-developers of curriculum.

IV. The relevance of competency-based approaches

Competency-based approaches are generally seen as a progressive opportunity to achieve an inclusive curriculum. It provides an innovative way of conceiving and organizing the curricular structure and objectives as well as the disciplinary content and assessment in order to develop autonomous, critical and assertive citizens.

It does not replace traditional knowledge and disciplines. It aims to strengthen the learning processes and outcomes attentive to the diversity of learners' backgrounds and profiles. Competency-based approaches can help in going from understanding diversity as a hindrance to learning, to a source for deeper and better learning.

In overall terms, at least four core elements should be taken into account in light of adopting competency-based approaches as one principal axis of curriculum design and development in secondary education and more broadly relating to youth education:

- (1) Developing competency-based approaches should imply the generation, mobilization and integration of resources such as knowledge, know-how, attitudes and values, in order to face diverse types of learning situations and their links to life situations. It is not just a matter of applying knowledge and capacities, or developing skills.
- (2) Competencies are socio-historical constructions developed through diverse life situations. General life and/or citizenship competencies should be mainly developed through different and complementary life situations.
- (3) 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 regard to societal demands and needs bearing especially in mind the youth cultures.
- (4) Competency-based approaches could be very useful in working out a curriculum framework common to secondary and technical-vocational education. This facilitates the navigation between different branches and levels sharing a common understanding and equivalent developments regarding life and citizenship competencies. It also contributes to break down stratification and social stigma.

Inclusive and Quality Education for All in Secondary Education

