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CURRICULUM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:

CHALLENGES, TENSIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

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In this short text, we do not refer to the school curriculum as a collection of syllabi and study plans organized by discipline – the traditional and more common view. Rather, we refer to it as the outcome of a process intended to determine the essential skills, indispensable knowledge and most important values that must be acquired at school, and what are the fundamental learning experiences required to ensure that the new generations are prepared for life in the type of society that we aspire to build.

It is clear that the curriculum cannot cover everything that must be learnt for personal, social, professional, ethical and cultural purposes; there is, therefore, nothing substantially new to this process – which is more political and social than technical – of selection and legitimation conducted within national education systems. What is new, however, are the rapid and profound changes that are affecting our societies and the dilemma and tensions that have built up in the quest for political and societal agreement on what, why and how to teach in order efficiently to meet the expectations and demands of young people and the various sectors of society in a century characterized by uncertainties and rapid change.

Societies face intractable questions about the future and the sustainability of current patterns of production and consumption, including the role that education must play in the comprehensive training of the citizens of the future. We live in an environment saturated with information and are witnesses to an unprecedented explosion of knowledge, concomitantly trivialized owing to access through information and communication technologies; as a result, the school is not necessarily the main place for acquiring knowledge and the task of knowledge selection is increasingly complex and disputed.

The labour market is changing quickly owing to constant innovation, and it is very difficult to avoid the impression that there is an ever yawning gap between its demands and the training provided by schools. Economy, trade, finance, communication and migration have developed on a global scale and many of the current and future challenges have spilled over national borders, fuelling the growing debate on conflicting educational visions of the type of balance that must struck between local and universal identities, knowledge and values.

We attempt to summarize some of the tensions and open questions that characterize the current debate on curriculum, organizing them around four interlinked aspects, namely: (i) what principles should be considered and what essential content (in the broadest sense) should be included in twenty-first-century curricula; (ii) who should set curricula and how; (iii) what type of means should be used so that the intended curriculum translates into effective and meaningful learning; and (iv) how should content be taught.

PRINCIPLES FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

A quick review of contemporary discussions and debates reveals that the conception of education tends to be instrumental rather than integral, and that the vision of the school curriculum mainly highlights its shortcomings. On the one hand, education is generally perceived as a merely technical process that must produce 'results' strictly aligned with the demands of the economy, while its function is reduced to the training of individuals to compete in the local and global markets. The results of nationally and internationally standardized assessments in a very small number of curricular subjects (mainly language, mathematics and science) are interpreted in the light of these requirements and are becoming the main indicators of 'quality' (sometimes associated with 'competitiveness') which are used as justification for undeniably necessary reforms. It is further suggested that evaluation results – often falling short of expectations and sometimes frankly discouraging – indicate a 'global learning crisis', although it seems harsh to assume that human beings' ability to learn is in crisis.

On the other hand, the analyses and evaluations of the curriculum mainly concentrate on its deficiencies. For example, it is argued that the curriculum tends to look more to the past than to the future; it is based on highly traditional conceptions of learning and teaching, taking little account of the heterogeneity of pupils and the diversity of their learning styles; it is organized in a fragmented manner that does not reflect performance in real life; and it tends to focus on rapidly outdated knowledge and socio-economic requirements.

National and international assessments point to sometimes worrying shortcomings in the acquisition of essential skills and knowledge (literacy, numeracy) and significant gaps in their social distribution. In addition, they increasingly fuel criticism of the curriculum because its basic organizational principles have not changed much since the establishment of public educational systems and continue to favour the accumulation of facts, information and knowledge rather than fostering understanding of the use to be made of that knowledge.

One answer that is gaining ground to overcome these problems is the gradual shift in emphasis from content and input to educational results, expressed as generic and transferable competencies that pupils should have learnt to develop and apply at the end of general education. There are many proposals and frameworks of competencies that use a wide range of approaches, classifications and terminologies, which might lead to ambiguity and confusion. What is clear is that in order to promote the effective competencies development, it is necessary to rethink the traditional disciplinary structure of the curriculum, the organization of learning experiences, teaching methods and assessment systems. There is also the risk of regarding the competencies as abilities that individuals possess permanently and independently of action within a specific socio-cultural context in interaction with others. In other words, when there are no problems to be solved, 'problem solving' does not make much sense, in the same way as 'employability' is pointless when there are no job opportunities conducive to living a life in dignity.

Meeting the demands of a constantly changing economic system of production is a concern for which no convincing and consensual solution seems to have been found, although there is evidence in support of comprehensive basic education to enable people to understand, adapt to and act in ever changing situations. However, we know that building more just societies requires a set of citizenship values and behaviour patterns. Teaching and learning to respect and engage with different people, develop strong feelings of attachment to social justice, assume values of solidarity and peaceful resolution of conflicts, and change consumption habits in order to help to protect the environment all require strong cognitive, ethical and emotional commitment.

The Delors Report has for quite some time now advocated the validity of the pillars of education for the twenty-first century, highlighting the centrality of *learning to learn* at the cognitive level and *learning to live together* at the social level. Furthermore, the Report stressed the need to regard these pillars as a unitary whole, not as dissociated components of education strategies and curricular proposals. It is not appropriate to develop cognitive skills unconnectedly from the ethical and social values that guide the building of more just societies. Such a policy could lead to well-known outcomes in human history, in which people who had attained high levels of cognitive development were capable of committing the worst atrocities.

THE SOCIAL PROCESS OF CURRICULUM CONSTRUCTION

One new development is the extension of participation in curriculum design processes beyond the traditional technical, academic and pedagogical contexts. The curriculum has evolved into a major topic of policy discussion in which the visions and proposals of various sectors in society and interest groups do not always coincide. Public consultations, parliamentary debates, social concertation processes, commissions and councils comprising trade union representatives, employer organizations, professional associations and sectors of civil society are some of the ways in which stakeholders try to ensure that the curriculum represents the result of a process that engages citizenry and reflects the type of society to be built, committing a diversity of institutions and actors.

The political and social debate around the curriculum, linked to social imaginaries which should be inclusive and achievable, has the advantage of highlighting the dilemmas and many tensions that characterize our changing societies. For example, what combination is appropriate and what kind of balance should be struck between local identities and the global dimension, tradition and modernity, individual and universal values, individual and collective interests, competition and solidarity, economic goals and democratic requirements, general education and preparation for work? These are important topics for discussion that should help to build a broad social consensus on the aims and content of education. There are, however, at least two risks. First, the political connotation that is being given to the curriculum could overload it with myriad expectations and expected 'results' that far exceed what can be reasonably expected from the school. Second, in the consultations and negotiations, the opinions and visions of the most organized sections of society and interest groups, which have a greater capacity to exert pressure, could prevail, as is often the case in many contexts.

Another new development in national curriculum design and development is the growing influence of transnational frameworks and models, international comparisons, trends, agendas and 'standards', as well as the results of international assessments. We live in an interconnected world in which we face common challenges; it is therefore no longer considered appropriate or sufficient for the curriculum to take only national needs and priorities into account. Moreover, in several cases, models that 'work' well in terms of results are used as a reference, although they tend to be considered independently from the processes and the context within which these results have been achieved.

LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Closing the gap between intentions and the aspirations reflected in the curriculum documents from the reality of daily life in schools and what pupils actually learn is possibly one of the greatest challenges facing any education system. The results of both national and international standardized assessments are useful for identifying existing gaps and for setting priorities for education policy and curriculum reform. Such summative assessments – assessments of learning – focus, however, on results rather than processes, they are limited to a few disciplines (language, mathematics and science) paying little attention to the wealth and variety of learning experiences for which the curriculum provides in order to contribute to the holistic human development, and they leave aside aspects that have a considerable influence on learning such as social and emotional development, commitment, motivation, physical well-being and formative assessment – assessment aiming to support the learning process –, not to mention the impact of the hidden curriculum and teaching practices.

It is undoubtedly desirable to assess and measure the extent of school learning against criteria such as standards, objectives and competencies, but there is also great concern about a dominant discourse that values the quality and wealth of learning solely on the basis of what can be measured in a few disciplines, however fundamental they may be considered. In fact, there is a risk that decisions taken on such a narrow basis of 'evidence' could distort the meaning of curriculum reforms and adversely affect teaching.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the debate on centralization and decentralization is still open regarding both curriculum development and implementation. It is quite common for educational authorities to consider questions such as which decisions should be made centrally and which should be left to schools and local education communities, the most fitting balance to be struck between core content and locally defined content, the extent to which the centrally designed curriculum should be prescriptive and the degree of decision-making autonomy that should be given to teachers to adapt the curriculum for classroom use. It is clear that these tensions cannot be resolved definitively and that there is no ideal and universally applicable model. It should nonetheless be noted that the debate is currently influenced mainly by economic criteria (cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability and accountability) rather than pedagogical concerns.

Lastly, it is clear that expectations concerning the task of educating and the teacher's role have changed considerably. To mention but a few highlights in contemporary educational policies and curricula, there is now a demand for education that promote active learning, focuses on the needs and expectations of learners as the main players in building and regulating their own learning, acknowledges that the cognitive, ethical and emotional dimensions of learning are interrelated and cannot be arbitrarily dissociated, is adapted to the diversity of pupils characteristics and learning styles, facilitates understanding and the application of knowledge rather than its accumulation, and make optimal use of the potential of information and communication technologies. Teacher education and professional development programmes as well as the traditional role of teachers are often criticised, and there seems to be a growing lack of confidence in teacher professionalism.

It is nonetheless acknowledged that teachers continue to play a key role as facilitators of learning processes and experiences,

and that their tasks have become more complex. However, burdened by a multitude of non-teaching functions and responsibilities, required to solve all kinds of social problems, overwhelmed by never-ending lists of performance standards and objectives to be achieved, asked to be accountable for results that are not contextualized, and frequently obliged to accept precarious and unsatisfactory work conditions, the teachers have to cohabitate with the inconsistencies and tensions that mark the curricular proposals (often developed without their participation) and can easily lose sight of the most challenging and exciting aspect of their work – educating the citizens of tomorrow. Against that background, one of the major questions facing contemporary culture – and education as a social process – is whether we have anything legitimate to transmit to the new generations and how it must be transmitted.

OVERCOMING SCEPTICISM

The challenges of educating and learning in the twenty-first century are considerable; tensions and open questions abound and there is no shortage of sceptics when it comes to the aspiration to provide quality education for all. However, if building more just societies and guaranteeing equitable access to relevant and effective learning for all is not considered a necessary and achievable Utopia, what, therefore, is the alternative?