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Education Think Piece Series

UNICEF has commissioned 10 Think Pieces by leading researchers and practitioners to stimulate debate around significant educational challenges facing the Eastern and Southern Africa region. While the pieces are rooted in evidence, they are not research papers or evidence briefs, nor do they represent UNICEF policy. Rather, they are engaging pieces that aim to inspire fresh thinking to improve learning for all.

Busy going nowhere: Curriculum reform in Eastern and Southern Africa

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Despite repeated attempts to reform the basic education curriculum in many countries in the Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) region, learning levels have remained stubbornly low. The general movement away from a traditional curriculum (broadly defined as being 'academic' and teacher centred with a high degree of subject content) towards a 'competency' or 'outcome' based curriculum (i.e. learner centred and focused on developing skills and capabilities), has disappointingly done little, if anything, to improve learning outcomes. Changes to the curriculum have largely failed to change what goes on in classrooms: teaching remains largely didactic and pupils' acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy, the foundational skills on which future learning is built, is woefully low¹.

The challenges of curriculum reform have been well documented across many ESA countries – Namibia²; South Africa³; Botswana⁴; Ethiopia⁵; Malawi⁶ and Uganda⁷. Deep-seated and long-standing structural faults that run through many education systems, such as large class sizes, low levels of teacher competence and motivation, and books in the wrong language, are frequently ignored in the process of curriculum reform.

These elements of the delivery system are too often assumed to be working during reform. But a new curriculum is inevitably quite different, probably more difficult, and certainly more demanding than what the system has been used to. Given that it fails to deliver the familiar, why do we expect it to deliver the unfamiliar? Curriculum reform therefore all too frequently seems designed for a reality that does not exist.

¹ Chisholm, L. et al, Curriculum Reform in post 1990's Sub-Saharan Africa, International Journal of Educational Development Vol 28, 2008.

² O'Sullivan, M', Reform Implementation and the realities within which teachers work, Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, Vol 32 Issue 2, 2002.

³ Rogan, J. and Aldous, C., Relationships between the constructs of the theory of curriculum implementation, Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 2005.

⁴ Tabulawa, R., Teachers' perspectives on classroom practice in Botswana, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education Vol 11, Issue 2, 1998.

⁵ Serbessa, D., Tension between traditional and modern teaching and learning approaches in Ethiopian primary schools, International Co-operation in Education Vol 9, no. 1, 2006.

⁶ Chirwa, G. et al, Curriculum change and development in Malawi: an historical overview, Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences Vol. 5 No. 16, 2014.

⁷ Altinyelken, H., Curriculum change in Uganda: teacher perspectives on the new thematic curriculum, International Journal of Educational Development, Vol 30 (2), 2010.

This Think Piece challenges the current approach to primary curriculum reform, drawing evidence from a number of ESA countries. It takes as its central tenet that curriculum reform should never exceed the capacity of the education system to deliver. Largely politically driven, overly ambitious aspirations for curriculum change have very often ignored the prevailing context. Anticipated or assumed changes across other elements of the delivery system have not happened. Future directions for curriculum reform must be built on this starting point and be based on past lessons and experience. A new curriculum on its own will not transform learning.



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New curricula are overly complex: a step too quick and too far

Almost all ESA countries have attempted to reform their primary education curriculum over the past two decades. Without exception, new curricula have all embraced one or more of the following underlying concepts: competency based, outcome based, learner centred, child centred, or thematic. While it is important to recognise that these are not the same, they do often share key methodologies and features that aim to change what and how children learn and to make learning more relevant to the social and economic needs of the twenty-first century. National aspirations for education are largely built around notions of transformation into knowledge economies: a transformation that is not happening at any speed or scale in the majority of ESA countries. Meanwhile, education systems – the structure, organisation and delivery – continue to be rooted at best in the mid twentieth century.

As a result of these curriculum reforms, we can see they are struggling on two counts:

- it frequently complicates an already fragile learning process, adding further layers of difficulty where simplicity and greater concentration on fundamental basic skills are needed;
- the process fails to provide the basket of reforms required to deliver change. The interrelated challenges, such as teacher skills, appropriate teaching and learning materials, effective assessment as well as responsive support and supervision (e.g. school leadership, inspection, outreach programmes), are not addressed by curriculum reform and thus fail to lead to classroom change.

New curricula have generally proved too ambitious for the education systems in ESA countries; change needs to focus more on what can realistically be delivered. The acquisition of basic competencies in literacy and numeracy forms the essential basis on which much of the rest of the curriculum depends. Given the high proportion of children who are failing to achieve even minimal levels of literacy and numeracy⁸, this remains the single biggest challenge for any curriculum reform.

⁸ Bashir et al., Facing Forward: Schooling for Learning in Arica, Work Bank, 2018.

New curricula have required a number of changes to classroom practice, changes that for the most part teachers are ill prepared for and resistant to make. With perhaps the single exception of changes in language of instruction, where use of learners' mother tongue in the initial years is increasingly the norm, observations of classroom practice today are worryingly similar to those of 30 or more years ago. Curriculum reform has not often led to the desired changes in the classroom, nor has it resulted in greater learning. Unrealistic curricula may well have inhibited more incremental change.

More specifically the curriculum reform process needs to consider:

- **Matching political expectation and the reality on the ground.** The initial impetus for curriculum reform is derived from longer term national development strategies with the general aspiration to shift economies from their long-standing agrarian basis to 'knowledge based economies'. The most common role models for this transformation are the tiger economies of South East Asia, most notably South Korea, where very different economic and cultural factors drove an intense effort to improve human capital. South East Asia is a long way from Africa, where persistent under-investment in education and failure to tackle the underlying malaises of corruption and performance widen the gulf between political aspiration and what can be, and is, achieved. Political aspirations must be tempered with the reality of education systems, and resources devoted to fixing chronic and persisting problems, if curriculum reform is to succeed.
- **The underlying cultures and practice of teaching and teachers, including their participation in curriculum reform.** New curricula require pedagogy to shift from didactic 'chalk and talk' routines, text reliant note taking and whole class methods with predominantly passive learners, to far more varied approaches that are child centred, involving activities that require learners to actively engage with a range of stimuli to foster understanding. Teachers have been ill prepared, unsupported, and poorly resourced. Ensuring teachers effectively participate in the curriculum reform process would raise these and other practical implementation issues early and have the positive externality of securing buy-in from teachers for the changes.
- **New curricula frequently demand teaching and learning materials beyond standard textbooks.** This has proved a major challenge, and materials to suit new curricula are frequently not available in time or are inadequate. Teachers have often lacked the motivation to create more interactive classrooms, and large class sizes have significantly restricted what is feasible. Teachers struggle to identify, source or create the additional materials often required to enrich the delivery of a new curriculum.

- **Ensuring reform to examination and assessment systems.** High level exams and tests drive the system: change to the way learners are formally assessed must be aligned to new curricula and is critical in changing teaching.
- **New curricula have placed emphasis on continuous assessment.** This requires teachers to constantly track pupils' acquisition of the curriculum. Teachers generally lack the necessary skills and resources to do this, and even capable teachers would still find it impossible with very large class sizes.
- **Use of mother tongue instruction in the early grades.** The majority of ESA countries now pursue policies of teaching in pupils' mother tongue in the lower primary years, a move away from national languages and/or English, French and Portuguese. Whilst this is strongly backed by research and evidence, both parental and political pressure for English often pulls in the other direction. Implementation is frequently hampered by factors including lack of orthography in minority languages, lack of appropriate written materials including textbooks, and deployment of teachers who do not have the required language⁹.

Uganda's thematic curriculum: a familiar story of over ambition and implementation failure.

Uganda started to implement its thematic primary curriculum in 2007. It was a response to the acknowledged failures of the existing curriculum to deliver adequate levels of basic literacy and numeracy. The thematic primary curriculum is built on three perfectly laudable principles: to rapidly improve early literacy and numeracy, to integrate learning around themes meaningful and relevant to learners and to use learners' mother tongue as the initial language of instruction and literacy. Ten years on, the problems of low levels of literacy and numeracy persist: a familiar tale of ambitious design undermined by failure of implementation. Training of teachers was deemed severely inadequate, poorly delivered and confusing; guidebooks were available but not textbooks; none of the many prescribed materials (flash cards, wall charts etc.) were available; on-going support and supervision remained ineffective. Uganda has 37 recognised language communities, 12 of which are used in schools to establish early literacy. This restricted coverage inevitably disadvantaged many children; even where mother tongue instruction was provided, the availability of books and teachers was varied. The net result: only one in four children has achieved a primary grade 2 level of literacy by the end of seven years of primary school¹⁰.

⁹ Trudell, Barbara, The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa, UNICEF, 2016.

¹⁰ Strengthening Education Systems for Improved Learning (SESIL) data pack slides. Extrapolated June 2018.

Keep focus, avoid complexity: Viet Nam's success.

The UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2013/14 drew attention to Viet Nam's primary curriculum reform¹¹. There are a number of key messages behind their success:

- Don't overload the curriculum: better to offer fewer subjects (they have six)
- Prioritise foundational language and numeracy
- In maths they focus on the application of basic arithmetical skills, avoiding more complex, higher order skills until these are mastered
- Employ language assistants to support minority language learners in the language of instruction.

There are other salient issues that need to be considered before or during a curriculum reform process.

Who leads reform? The curriculum development department or unit within many ministries of education is generally under resourced. Staff are usually not recruited with any specific acumen for, or experience in, curriculum development and subsequently have limited access to professional development. Budgets are sufficient to cover staff salaries and basic running costs; but there is very little for research and development particularly with teachers who are the ones expected to implement any new curricula. Reform therefore tends to be supported by external agencies with teams of international experts, with all the risks of policy borrowing^{12,13}. Tensions exist between curriculum departments or units and other critical agencies e.g. assessment, teacher training, textbook production/procurement. Given that successful curriculum reform requires concurrent changes across the entire education system, why is this not led by those with that wider oversight and authority such as departments of educational planning?

Teachers' schemes of work emphasise coverage not learning. Perhaps the single biggest structural fault that fails to convert the curriculum into learning is the inflexible practice of ensuring teachers prepare and stick to schemes of work. Most if not all ESA countries require teachers to prepare schemes of work which set out week by week, term by term, how they will cover the curriculum. Supervision of teachers by their headteachers and inspectors often focuses on whether these schemes align with what the curriculum specifies and whether the teacher (not the child!) are at the point where they should be at any given time, and therefore on target to deliver the prescribed curriculum in the allotted time. Thus, the system ensures that curriculum is taught but not necessarily learned. The persistence of this ritual undermines a mockery of any notion of child centred learning, as most children are demonstrably not learning! Fixing this is far from easy. Simply removing the requirement for schemes of work will not help unless and until: 1) teachers have the skills to teach to the diverse needs of the children in front of them; 2) class sizes are reduced to allow this; and 3) additional resources (teaching assistants and materials) are in place to allow this to happen.



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¹¹ UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2014/15

¹² Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M. & Andrews, M., Capability Traps? The mechanism of persistent implementation failure. Centre for Global Development, working paper 234, 2010. The authors refer to 'isomorphic mimicry' in a wide range of contexts to describe inappropriate copying of processes and practice from more developed contexts in the expectation that they will work in a developing country context.

¹³ Chirwa, G., *ibid*, 2004 - cited as a cause of curriculum failure in Malawi.

Deliver the whole package: curriculum reform requires other concurrent reforms

A new curriculum will go nowhere unless serving, as well as future, teachers are oriented, trained and supported to be able to teach it. Instructional materials (textbooks, teacher guides and resources etc.) need to be developed and put in place before the new curriculum is introduced. Scripted lesson plans can be an effective way to ensure consistency and help teachers with new approaches. The assessment system needs to be revised to reflect the changes. The effect of not delivering the whole package increases the probability that the teaching and learning process will worsen in the confusion between the old and the new.

Governments, aided and abetted by donors, all too frequently approach change in education systems in a piecemeal way: 'doing' teacher training, or textbooks, or assessment, or data, or curriculum! There seems to be an underlying assumption that if you fix one part of the system the rest will follow, or there will be some 'collateral benefit' felt by other parts of the system. Although this might hold true for some parts of the system (more and better text books, for example, might improve teaching), the opposite holds true for curriculum reform: trying to fix the curriculum without fixing the other parts has the potential for 'collateral damage'. Much of the responsibility for unsuccessful curriculum reform is due to this singular approach, typically with curriculum departments or centres leading the charge. Other critical areas of the reform process are marginalised, and once the new curriculum is developed, the resources to assure delivery are unavailable. Also, there are often underlying institutional tensions between curriculum development and other areas (e.g. teacher education, textbook procurement or assessment) as each competes for scarce resources, protecting their specific interests. Such struggles over turf do little to help the wider cause of effective curriculum design and delivery.

The South African journey

In April 1994, the newly elected South African government inherited a racist, divisionary and conservative curriculum. It needed major reform to help move the country forward in terms of reconciliation and nation-building, which in turn required a new philosophical and pedagogical approach to education. The primary school curriculum in South Africa was revised several times during the 1990s and Curriculum 2005 emerged, "characterised by abstruse language and a host of new concepts for schools and teachers to digest" with virtually no content. The 2012 National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 is the current revised curriculum strategy, which includes the national Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) (akin to syllabi) that make the curriculum more accessible and effective for teachers. Every subject in each grade has a comprehensive and concise CAPS which details what content teachers ought to teach and assess on a grade by grade and subject by subject basis. National Curriculum Assessment guidelines are prepared for teachers to provide them with specific information on assessment for a particular subject. The Department of Basic Education has a five-year plan to support teachers, which includes in-service training. However, there remains continued concern over falling standards in South African schools through a failure to redress persisting problems of poor parental engagement, weak school governing bodies and poor school leadership¹⁴.



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¹⁴ Modisaotsile, B., The Failing Standards of Basic Education in South Africa. Africa Institute of South Africa, Policy briefing No. 72, 2012.

Although there are some laudable efforts being put into curriculum reform, this Think Piece has argued that reform should never assume the education system's capacity to deliver. Thus, the table below looks at key elements of the system through which the curriculum is delivered, and provides key questions that can determine whether a system is ready to support reform. Unless the reform works concurrently rather than sequentially, to strengthen, orient and prepare in these areas, it is unlikely to work.

This table therefore might be useful for those working with ministries of education that are planning curriculum reform. UNICEF Education Specialists could use this table as a basic checklist to raise awareness among all stakeholders of the technical and financial requirements, as well as design and implementation risks. Early consideration of these may help avoid the repetition of mistakes that have yielded such poor results in many curriculum reform efforts to date.

Curriculum reform: key considerations and mitigating risks

Area	Key considerations	Mitigating the risks
Teachers and Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the current assessment of teachers: their motivation, knowledge and pedagogy? • To what extent will teachers be able to embrace and deliver the new curriculum? What additional support is needed? Can this be made available? • What are the risks around teacher deployment, attendance, support and supervision? 	<p>Consider and assess each aspect of the system's capacity to deliver.</p> <p>Do not try to implement beyond the capacity of all parts of the system to deliver.</p> <p>Reduce the scope of curriculum change if necessary to align with demands on each aspect of the delivery system.</p> <p>Develop strategies to address identified risks and challenges.</p>
Teacher training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What orientation and further training is needed for teachers? • Is there capacity (human and financial) to deliver this? • Will pre-service/initial teacher training institutions be able to accept and adopt the new curriculum? 	<p>Consider a phased introduction, monitor and adapt on evidence.</p>
Textbooks and other materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the processes, timelines and costs of producing new textbooks and supplementary materials aligned to the new curriculum? • Are these aligned to the planned roll out of the new curriculum so that teachers and pupils are not left stranded and frustrated? • Are materials available in all major languages? • What provision is being made for minority language speakers? 	<p>Estimate the total resources required for introduction and roll out. Don't embark on introduction if this is at risk.</p> <p>Initial success is vital in building ownership, belief and confidence across the system.</p>
The school environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is current school leadership capable of promoting the desired change? • Are classrooms suited to new demands, particularly in terms of class size and teacher pupil ratios? • Can teachers adapt teaching to different class sizes? 	<p>Fully engage all stakeholders from the outset (teacher training institutions, teachers and school leaders, textbook writers and publishers, assessment agencies, inspectorate, teacher unions etc.) – not as passive observers but tasked with design tasks for assured delivery.</p>
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do high stakes examinations drive the system? • How will the new curriculum be assessed? Are examination bodies involved at the start of the process and reforming assessment to align with the new curriculum? • Do teachers have the necessary skills and resources to understand their pupils' learning processes? 	<p>Communicate. Keep everyone informed about what is going on and what to expect.</p>

Conclusions

Where does this leave curriculum reform? What do we need to think about when involved in curriculum reform?

- There is no magic bullet! Curriculum reform is complex with many interdependent factors that will affect its success. Success requires a far broader set of changes across the delivery system.
- Insufficient attention is paid to the underlying context and culture in which education is delivered, resulting in an aspirational rather than feasible curriculum.
- Devote a far higher proportion of initial time and resources to considering the readiness of the system to accommodate the required change. This is an iterative process as the new curriculum takes shape; constantly test the feasibility of delivery, assessing strengths and weaknesses. Adapt the roll out to fit the resources.
- Ensure all children develop basic literacy and numeracy skills. This should be the core focus, so avoid the temptation to overload the curriculum which might detract from this fundamental objective. Focus heavily on the early grades that lay the foundation for future learning.
- Ensure that the curriculum is a 'curriculum for all' which considers the needs of girls and boys equally.

Reforming the curriculum so that it reflects what a nation wants to pass on to the next generation and reflects the world that children will grow up in is important. And thus it can be right to advocate for curriculum to be updated. However, it is vital that those working with governments on curriculum reform ensure that such reform is undertaken in a way that is congruent with the education system and does not add to the complexity and inefficiencies of already stretched education systems in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Recommended reading list

1. Westbrook, Jo, et al., [Pedagogy, Curriculum, Teaching Practices and Teacher education in Developing Countries](#), Final Report, Education Rigorous Literature Review, Department for International Development (DFID), 2013.
2. International Bureau of Education-UNESCO (IBE-UNESCO), ['Training Tool for Curriculum Development: A Resource Pack'](#), accessed June 2018.
3. International Bureau of Education-UNESCO (IBE-UNESCO), ['Curricula Resources'](#), links to 1600 curricula (including curriculum frameworks) from over 100 countries, accessed June 2018.



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