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*Education for All 2000-2015: achievements and
challenges*

Evolution of Curriculum Systems to Improve Learning Outcomes and Reduce Disparities in School Achievement

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Evolution of Curriculum Systems to Improve Learning Outcomes and Reduce Disparities in School Achievement

Dr. Hülya Kosar Altinyelken

Abstract

Based on an extensive review of scholarly literature, this paper seeks to overview curriculum reforms aimed at improving learning outcomes and reduce disparities in school achievement in low and middle income countries in the past 15 years. The paper focuses on four major curriculum areas, including curriculum content, pedagogical approach, student assessment and language-in-education policies. Curriculum reforms in four countries, namely China, Turkey, Uganda and Bolivia, are analysed in order to illustrate the global reform talk, implementation in local contexts, challenges encountered, and the outcomes of these major reform efforts on learning outcomes and addressing discrepancies in school achievement. The paper concludes with specific policy recommendations for the post-2015 education agenda.

1. Introduction

This paper has been written as a background paper to contribute to the UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report 2015, which will review the influence of the EFA movement in reaching its six goals in the past 15 years. The paper will particularly consider the sixth goal on improving all aspects of education quality, by examining curriculum policies and reform efforts in low and middle income contexts. It is based on an extensive review of scholarly publications on curriculum change, and the analysis is conducted through four lenses: curriculum content, pedagogical approach, student assessment, and language-in-education policies. The paper identifies major curriculum challenges in 2000, and reviews various reform efforts to address these challenges, as well as their successes and difficulties with regard to implementation. It presents an in-depth analysis of these critical debates by focusing on four country cases including China, Turkey, Uganda and Bolivia. These country cases seek to illustrate the global reform talk in these areas; identify major concerns and challenges in low and middle income countries; review main policy interventions and reforms; underscore challenges and complexities encountered at implementation phase; and discuss the outcomes of the reforms in terms of improving learning outcomes and reducing disparities in achievement levels.

2. Main Curricular Challenges, Reform Efforts and Outcomes

Curriculum is fundamental to the teaching and learning processes and its various components have wide-ranging consequences on the quality of education. Due to space limitations, this paper will focus on four major curriculum areas that are central to curriculum policies and to improving learning achievements. These include curriculum content, pedagogical approach, student assessment, and language-in-education policies.

Before elaborating these curricular aspects below, it is important to note that processes of globalisation, in particular international donor agencies, have significantly influenced educational policies and reforms in the past 15 years, among others, via funding mechanisms and aid conditionality. Such processes have particularly altered the education policy landscape in developing countries as they are highly dependent on foreign expertise, information and financing. In these contexts, external actors, such as international NGOs,

donor agencies and international organisations (e.g. the World Bank and UNESCO) have increasing capacity –both material and ideational- to settle educational agendas and to define priorities for a particular country concerning education reform processes. Hence, the policy landscape, including that of curricular policies, is much more penetrated in developing countries in comparison to industrialised societies (Verger et al., 2012a).

Within this context, the EFA movement has played significant roles in terms of setting priorities and also defining strategies to achieve the mutually agreed education goals. As Verger et al, (2012b, p. 881) notes, “Education for All has been used as a justification for many policy changes and educational reforms” in diverse contexts. These global education targets also provided a framework for donor agency funding to primary and secondary education levels. Hence, in many countries, particularly in low-income contexts, the EFA goals have become the central reference points for discussing and developing national education policies, or often have become de facto education policies (Bhatta, 2011). For instance, within the context of SSA, curriculum change is perceived mainly as a way of responding to the challenges of promoting EFA goals (Alderuccio, 2010). Within a relatively short time, the GMR has acquired international recognition and credibility as the international report in education (Gustafsson, 2010). Moreover, the EFA movement has influenced the agenda and activities of various national and international civil society organisations which have been advocating and championing the right to education (Verger et al., 2012b).

Consequently, in the past 15 years, we have observed convergence around curricular reform talk, formal policy discourse and scripts globally (Anderson-Levitt, 2008). In this respect, we have witnessed that competency based curriculum, learner-centred pedagogy, and continuous assessment have acquired the status of ‘global education policies’ (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Altinyelken, 2010a). These developments rekindled the debate on globalization effects on education. The World Society Theorists argue that global diffusion of common models of curricula is largely a spontaneous aspect of the development of what they describe as a ‘modern world culture’. In other words, similar education policies are being adopted around the globe due to external and internal legitimation reasons, e.g. complying with educational reform imperatives (Meyer and Ramirez, 2000). Nevertheless, some others, such as the Globally Structured Agenda for Education, point out that the world capitalist economy is the driving force of globalisation, and it has a significant structuring influence over what educational and curricular ideas spread around the world (Dale, 2000). Furthermore, Steiner-Khamsi (2010) underlines the importance of the ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ of educational borrowing and lending. The economics of policy borrowing is particularly important in low-income contexts as they are dependent on external aid. Indeed, the time has often come for a specific reform when international funding for implementing that particular reform is secured, as in the case of outcomes-based curriculum in Mongolia (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). The economics of policy lending and borrowing also helps to understand why curricular reforms in low income countries are increasingly similar to those in Western societies.

Another important dimension of the debate on globalisation and curriculum has been on whether convergence around discourses and national curricular policies has resulted in the convergence of educational practices around the world (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; 2008; Carson, 2009). As will be further argued below, the curricular ideas that were imported from the West, e.g. learner-centred pedagogy, were re-contextualised and adapted in local contexts, resulting in a diverse range of understandings, interpretations and practices. Hence, convergence has often remained at a superficial level around new rituals and practices (Balarin and Benavides, 2010; Altinyelken, 2012).

2.1. Curriculum Content

At the start of the century, curricular policies in several countries tended to be subject-based, and often criticised for being generally out of date and overloaded. They were also criticised for being too theoretical and paying scant attention to the development of competencies and skills (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Dembele & Ndoye, 2005; Dello-Iacova, 2009). The changes in the labour market, the re-organisation of work worldwide, increasing pressure to improve the economic competitiveness of countries within globalised economies have led many countries to revise their curricular content and pay much more attention to skills, competencies and the notion of flexibility (Carnoy, 1999).

Hence, curricular changes in the past 15 years included an emphasis on developing literacy and numeracy skills (the so-called foundational skills), and a general shift from a highly specified content-based to a minimally specified outcomes-based curriculum, with increased attention to the development of a set of competencies and skills (see Balarin and Benavides, 2010; Lee, 2014). Consequently, competency-based curriculum was introduced in several countries across the globe. According to some, such reforms sought to subordinate education to economic needs and to align the development of competencies and skills with the needs of the economy (Wheelahan, 2007).

Furthermore, the content of curriculum has been an important site of contestation in many contexts. After independence, several post-colonial countries had to deal with the colonial legacies in education system in an effort to address the issues of nation building among various ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups (Benavot & Braslavsky, 2007). Hence, decolonisation of curriculum content and that of education in general has been an important challenge. As discussed later in the paper, Bolivia presents an interesting case study in this respect (see Lopes Cardozo, 2009; 2012 for a discussion on this).

Decolonisation of curriculum relates to the debates on the relevance of curriculum, which is often viewed as poorly relating to the socio-economic and cultural contexts where schooling is taking place. This was (and still is) a problem in countries where imported curriculum models or scripts were used at schools which poorly takes the local context into account. In the dominant curriculum paradigm, the Western canon is positioned as opposition to the knowledges of local, indigenous and/or minority people across the globe (McCarthy et al., 2003). The overt and hidden curricula in many developing countries advocate the supremacy of the dominant ethnic/religious groups or cultures. Most of the cases, education systems are used as a powerful tool of homogenisation, and of assimilation of other peripheral cultures and peoples.

For example, at the turn of the century, the Peruvian curriculum appeared to ignore the history and the identity of indigenous cultures and heroes. It also negated what indigenous students learn outside of the school and their sources of knowledge within the society; hence the curriculum was divorced from their own reality. The hidden curriculum assumed the superiority of Spanish culture and the students were socialized into accepting the supremacy of the Western knowledge (Aikman, 1999). Consequently, the curriculum reforms emphasized diversification and adaptation to the local needs. Although such attempts improved the relevance of curriculum in rural contexts, it also inadvertently led to the lowering of educational demands in such schools, and to teacher discourses which places only secondary importance to curricular content and coverage (Balarin & Benavides, 2010).

In several contexts, the gap between local and global knowledge still needs to be negotiated adequately, including finding ways to give impression to local knowledge in curriculum. Studies indicate that children in developing countries are likely to be more motivated and

better positioned to learn if their background knowledge and experiences are incorporated in their learning environments. Hence, there have been calls for indigenization of the curriculum (George & Lewis, 2011; Deyhle et al., 2008).

Furthermore, in many developing countries, the school curriculum contained a strong gender bias (e.g. gendered depictions in textbooks), restricting opportunities for girls (Watkins, 2000). Since children interact with textbooks on a daily basis, gender biases in learning materials limit the efforts to promote gender equality through schooling. Conversely, such curriculum would lead to reproduction of existing gender inequalities within the society (Aikman et al., 2005). Hence, in various countries, particularly due to pressure from aid organisations, the Ministries revised textbooks to offer a more positive image of women and girls and their role in society (see Foulds, 2013 for a discussion on this within the context of Kenya).

2.2. Pedagogical Approach

In the majority of classrooms in low and middle income countries, pedagogical practices are described as authoritarian, rigid, formalistic, teacher-dominated and lecture-driven (Dembele & Miaro-II, 2003; Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Leu, & Price-Rom, 2006; Drange, 2007). Students' activities are often limited to memorising facts and reciting them to the teacher or reproducing such knowledge during exams (Pontefract & Hardman, 2005). Various studies confirmed that this type of teaching and learning practices foster memorisation and rote learning. Such practices do not encourage spontaneity or taking initiative, nor stimulate cognitive development, or the development of conceptual learning, critical thinking and problem solving skills (O'Sullivan, 2004; Dembele, 2005). There has also been a growing understanding among educational stakeholders that traditional teaching styles do not facilitate student learning, and is largely responsible for low levels of education quality across low income countries.

In the past decades, several countries across the world have adopted reforms of teaching and learning based on constructivist principles. Such reform efforts often emphasised a move away from teacher-centred instruction to child-centred pedagogy (CCP), which was framed as student-centred pedagogy, active learning or learner-centred education in different contexts. These pedagogical approaches typically aimed at stimulating active learning by involving students more in their learning processes, encouraging the use of various teaching and learning methodologies, the use of learning materials, and stimulating classroom participation through increased interactions between students and between students and teachers. Grouping has become an important indicator of CCP, and in several contexts in Africa, it was the first and often the only indicator of CCP in classrooms (Nykiel-Herbert, 2004). It is important to note that the international development agencies have been rather influential in developing CCP into one of the most pervasive global education policies. Indeed, several of them prescribed CCP through their educational projects and consultancies (Tabulawa, 2003).

The examples of countries adopting pedagogical approaches based on constructivism include; in Asia, Tibet (Carney, 2008a), China (Carney, 2008b; Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Huang, 2004), Russia (Schweisfurth, 2002), Kyrgyzstan (Price-Rom & Sainazarov, 2009), Taiwan (Yang et al., 2008) and Cambodia (Bunlay, et al., 2009); in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa (Nykiel-Herbert, 2004), Botswana (Tabulawa, 2003), Namibia (O'Sullivan, 2004; Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Storeng, 2001), Ethiopia (Serbessa, 2006), Guinea (Anderson-Levitt & Diallo, 2003), Malawi (Mizrachi, et al., 2008; Croft, 2002) and Tanzania (Barrett, 2007;

Vavrus, 2009); in the Middle East, Egypt (Ginsburg & Megahed, 2008) and Jordan (Roggemann & Shukri, 2009); and in Latin America, Brazil (Luschei, 2004), Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador (de Baessa, 2002).

There is considerable research evidence which demonstrates that pedagogical practices are resilient to change, partly because pedagogy is complex, and multidimensional (Spillane, 1999). Various studies also pointed to a range of issues that make the implementation of CCP highly difficult and challenging in diverse contexts. These included a range of complex cultural and systemic factors, including mismatches with lived local realities (such as norms of adult-child relationships, teacher and learner backgrounds, identities and motivations); lack of policy alignment between various curricular aspects; inadequate teacher preparation and supervision; backwash effects of high-stakes examinations leading to ‘teaching to the test’; and unfavourable material conditions in schools (Schweisfurth, 2013). Furthermore, CCP seem to be inaccessible to ordinary teachers and it lacks operational clarity, hence it is subject to a variety of interpretations (Gauthier & Dembele, 2004). The effectiveness of such programmes with children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds is particularly questioned (Dembele, 2005) as well as their appropriateness for teaching lower-order cognitive skills, especially basic literacy and numeracy skills (Heneveld & Craig, 1996).

Consequently, although some authors report successful cases where teachers have modified their practices and adopted more ‘progressive’ teaching methods, e.g. Multigrade Program in Zambia, the Convergent Pedagogy Program in Mali, the Community Schools Initiative in Zambia, and the Community Schools Program of UNICEF in Egypt (see Farrell, 2002), many others argue that the idea of CCP has not taken root in classrooms (Akyeampong et al., 2006; Chisholm, 2007; O’Sullivan, 2004; Serbessa, 2006; Osaki & Agu, 2002), or that results are mixed and rather inconclusive (Gauthier & Dembele, 2004; UNESCO, 2005). Hence, some scholars question whether CCP is the most appropriate pedagogical approach to improve learning outcomes, especially in resource poor environments (O’Sullivan, 2004; Serbessa, 2006; Altinyelken, 2012). A few other authors argue that it would never be adopted effectively by teachers even if more financial and human resources were poured into such reforms (Tabulawa, 2004; 2013).

2.3. Educational Assessment

In the past decades, we have observed an increased attention to issues of measuring educational achievement worldwide. This growing interest or what some call as ‘obsession’ with assessment stems from a number of diverse factors including, 1) a shift in focus from input factors to educational outcomes, and from process to results; 2) increasing attention to accountability as a result of decentralisation policies and global managerial education reforms; 3) pressure to improve teaching and learning; 4) improving the efficiency of allocation of resources; and 5) enrolment pressure arising from population increase and growing numbers of primary graduates intending to make transition to higher levels of education (UNESCO, 2000). Furthermore, in recent years, international donor community have started to move away from a primary concern with education quantity and increasingly emphasized quality improvements in developing countries. This new focus is paralleled with a remarkable increase in the use of educational assessment in order to measure gains and losses in educational quality (Wagner, 2010).

Assessment involves some contested issues such as “who gets tested, what gets tested, when tests occur, how and why a test takes place” (Wagner et al., 2012, p. 510). Broadly speaking, student achievement is assessed through four different types of measurement tools. First one

is concerned with school-based assessment aimed at assessing student achievement levels at a regular basis against curricular goals. The second type is public examinations often administered at the end of primary or other levels for the purposes of certification and governing the transition to higher levels of education. Third, national assessments are conducted in various countries to regularly and systematically measure what students have learnt at school. The results of such exams are used to inform education policy making in order to, among others, allocate scarce resources, monitor standards or promote accountability. Finally, international assessments (e.g. PISA, PIRLS, TIMMS) are conducted by international committees that co-ordinate the work of national team of researchers. They examine samples of students from many countries and compare their achievement levels (UNESCO, 2000).

The assessment of students' learning within classroom environments is an integral component of teaching and learning processes. Research evidence indicates that the quality of how teachers assess their students might be deficient in various ways. These weaknesses include the use of poorly focused questions, predominance of questions that require reproduction of factual knowledge, often in brief answers, the evocation of responses that involve repetition rather than critical analysis and reflection, a lack of procedures designed to improve students' higher-order cognitive skills, and teacher bias (Kellagan & Greeney, 2005).

With some notable exceptions, classroom assessment has not received much attention in education reforms intended to improve education quality in the past decade. However, there have been interventions in various contexts to move beyond summative assessment and testing, and to incorporate assessment measures that help to evaluate the learning process as well. Such shifts in assessment policy often involved increasing the significance of continuous assessment as opposed to examinations (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). Nevertheless, studies have shown that continuous assessment is highly challenging for teachers due to inadequate in-service teacher training on assessment techniques, large classroom sizes, poor facilities, and a shortage of learning materials (Altinyelken, 2010a; 2010b)

Furthermore, in various countries, there are external, public examinations that allocate life chances through governing transitions between different levels of education, e.g. primary leaving examinations. They are typically high-stakes exams, and their consequences especially in low-income countries can be profound for students' future educational opportunities. Student performance at these exams may also have consequences for teachers, in terms of their promotion and career prospects (Somerset, 2011). For instance, a study (Altinyelken, 2013a) on the implementation of Curriculum 2004 in Turkey highlighted how the shift to competency-based curriculum in an exam-oriented education system influenced teachers' classroom practices. In this study, several teachers expressed concerns about the academic achievement of their students and their performance at the entrance exams for secondary schools due to convictions that the new curriculum emphasises the development of competencies at the expense of knowledge acquisition. These concerns were not only motivated by personal integrity or accountability to their students, but were also closely linked to their own performance as teachers and the success of their schools. Teachers often experience competition among colleagues for being one of the most highly esteemed teachers and being popular among students and parents. An important dimension of such evaluation is the academic success of their students and performance at the nation-wide exams. The perceptions of a schools' success is also very much dependent on the number of its graduates who are admitted to prestigious secondary schools. As a result, the majority of teachers

tended to supplement curriculum with additional materials to better prepare their students for the exams (Altinyelken, 2013a).

As the case of Turkey illustrates, high-stakes national exams can have wide-ranging consequences on the taught curriculum in classrooms since they send clear indicators as to what the teachers should focus on in their teaching in terms of topics, concepts and skills. Such unintended, negative influences include narrowing the delivered curriculum, ignoring what is not examined, emphasizing learning styles that are superficial or short-term (e.g. memorising, rehearsing and rote learning), and devoting much time to activities intended to prepare students for the exams (Kellagan & Greeney, 2005). Most national examinations in developing countries require a high level of factual recall, and do not assess competencies or critical/ creative thinking skills. The quality of such examinations influence teachers' pedagogical choices in various ways. Consequently, investment in strengthening the quality of national examinations would improve the quality of teaching and learning practices and education quality in general (Somerset, 2011). Nevertheless, as long as high stakes are attached to performance, whatever the quality of the examinations will be, they will still continue to have such negative backwash effects on pedagogical quality and content choice. Hence, it is unlikely to expect that their importance in most countries will be diminished until education systems can accommodate many more students (Kellagan & Greeney, 2005).

International assessments have been subjected to heated debates recently. As they employ standardised tests developed in accordance with internationally defined criteria and expectations, they can be instrumental in comparing achievement levels of students across regions and countries, and for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of education systems in diverse contexts (Benavot & Tanner, 2007). The results of such assessments receive much media attention and generate subsequent debates within policy circles and in broader public. Very often, they are employed as a point of reference by policymakers to advocate and legitimatise curricular reforms (see Figazzola, 2009).

Moreover, international assessments tend to focus on certain curricular areas (mainly Mathematics and Language) and exclude some others, such as history, geography, arts and moral education, even though these are highly central to the aims of education. Moreover, while they measure student knowledge, they rarely examine issues encompassing values, attitudes and other non-cognitive skills (Benavot & Tanner, 2007). Moreover, international comparability, in the form of league tables for instance, can be of value to some countries, but they are less useful for low income countries since their scores are too close to the floor and does not enable for meaningful comparison with OECD countries. Consequently, they have very limited policy value (Wagner, 2010).

2.4. Language in Education Policies

The majority of countries in the world are characterized by linguistic and ethnic diversity. Hence, the language of instruction (LOI) in education policies has been one of the most intensely debated curriculum issues in the past decades. In various contexts, in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the languages of former colonial countries have frequently dominated languages of minority ethnic groups and have historically been installed in various institutional settings, particularly at schools. The colonial languages have become prioritized as the language of economic development, national unity and stability, international communication and scientific knowledge (Gandolfo, 2009). Many local communities and parents recognize the importance of English for socio-economic mobility and believe it to be

one of the most important aspects of good schooling (Watson, 2007). Nevertheless, language rights experts argue that this leads to a greater dependency on Western powers. The hegemonic influence of western languages and their corresponding forms of knowledge have promoted and legitimised both western linguistic and cultural dominance (Gandolfo, 2009). Moreover, according to some scholars, education policies emphasising English as the LOI devalue and marginalise indigenous languages, knowledge and cultural identities. Knowledge no longer becomes transformative and empowering to students and communities alike. In contexts where English is the LOI, it tends to act as a barrier to knowledge, and marginalise minority groups (Gandolfo, 2009; Watson, 2007; Brock-Utne, 2001).

Furthermore, a range of studies (see Baker, 2001; Benson, 2004) provide empirical evidence to the significant pedagogical advantages of using a child's mother tongue as the LOI in schools. First, children can better understand sound symbols and meaning-symbol relations, and learn the rules of the orthographic system of their language when they are taught in their mother tongue (Diaz, 1999). Second, students can more freely interact with each other and with their teachers, and while doing so they can negotiate meanings and co-construct knowledge. Third, when the local language is used as both the medium of instruction and assessment, it allows for accurate assessments of children and their aptitude. Conversely, when English is used, it is more difficult for teachers to determine if children have difficulty understanding the concept, the LOI, or the language of assessment. Finally, in multi-lingual societies, the use of local language also increases students' ability to learn a second language through communication and discussion rather than memorisation of words and sounds. By contrast, when children begin primary schooling in a foreign language, such as English, students find learning more challenging, and might feel discouraged and overwhelmed. Such experiences might lead to some unintended consequences, such as school alienation, absenteeism, lower academic achievement, repetition and drop-out (Webley, 2006).

Across SSA, colonial languages are used predominantly as the LOI with the exceptions of Tanzania, Ethiopia and Eritrea. At the secondary level, there is no country in SSA which uses a local language as the LOI. In the past decade, a number of countries, including Malawi, Uganda, Namibia, Mozambique and Kenya, adopted language policies which allow for the use of local languages at lower primary level (often the first three grades). Grade four is often designated as a transition year during which local languages and the official language (e.g. English or French) will be used simultaneously. The instruction in the remaining years of primary is envisaged to be in the official language. Primary leaving examinations are also administered in the colonial language. In these countries, private schools often continued offering education in colonial languages at all levels, which might result in a vernacular divide that characterises India.

Studies have confirmed that the use of local languages as the LOI has contributed to the improvement of literacy skills (Trudell, 2005; Bamgbose, 2005; Altinyelken et al., 2014). Higher levels of classroom participation, student engagement and parental involvement in education of their children were also observed. Teachers in various contexts also contended that the use of local languages helped to promote cultural expression, identity and maintain cultural heritage (see the Ugandan case study below). Nevertheless, experiences also revealed a host of problems with using such early-exit models. They showed that studying the colonial language as a subject for three years do not prepare students to make the transition at grade four. Such transition failures cause much stress and frustration among students and teachers, since even though they are expected to have instruction only in the colonial language in the upper primary, language proficiency of students is not sufficient. The fact that primary leaving exams are also administered in the colonial language intensifies tensions as parents, students and teachers alike expect that student performance at such exams will be lower,

especially compared to those who receive instruction in the colonial language from the start (such as those in urban areas and those enrolled at private schools). Hence, there was strong parental resistance in some countries, and concerns about intensification of regional inequalities (e.g. widening of the gap between urban and rural areas), and apprehensions about how such language policies might lead to ethnic segregation of schools, stereotyping and discrimination (Altinyelken et al., 2014).

Comparative studies on early- and late-exit models (where children continued learning in a familiar language in upper primary and secondary levels) found out that late-exit models yielded better results. For instance, studies in Nigeria (Bamgbose, 2005) and Ethiopia (Mekonnen, 2009) have shown that academic performances of pupils were much higher when they were able to study in a local language for more than two or three years. Furthermore, an experimental study in Guinea-Bissau and Niger (Hovens, 2002) suggested that students' academic results were better when schools introduced a second language as the LOI gradually, spanning over a few years, rather than abruptly in one year. Conversely, the evaluations of the longitudinal effects of a project implemented in Swaziland, Namibia, South Africa and Botswana, which used local languages solely in the first three years of primary schooling, indicated that there were no significant differences in learning achievement. Nevertheless, in many language-in-education policy developments, 'late-exit models' have consistently been ignored. One of the reasons for this omission is the fact that international donors, the publishing industry in the West, and African elite have vested interests in promoting English or other colonial languages (Brock-Utne, 2010).

3. Country Case Studies

3.1. China

Following the Dakar Action Plan, China prioritized compulsory primary education and the elimination of illiteracy as the national education strategy. Curriculum reform was an integral part of this strategy. The "New Curriculum Reform" was launched in 2001, and nationwide implementation started in 2005. The curriculum reform attempts to address some pressing concerns within the Chinese education system, hence it constituted a major effort to improve the quality of primary and middle schools. These concerns and criticisms included intense focus of the education system on rigorous examinations, past and future examination questions determining the taught curriculum at schools, urban bias of the learning content and disconnection with local culture and the context of the countryside, disconnection between formal education and practical life, and teaching styles which mainly relied on teacher talk, rote memorization, recitation and cramming, while failing to cultivate creativity, initiative, responsibility and the development of some other essential competencies and skills (Dello-Iacova, 2009). The rationale underpinning the reform effort was not only the modernization of education system, but also improving the economic competitiveness of China in the 21st century, and responding adequately to the new demands and challenges arising as a result of market economy and increased globalization (Zhao and Wenbin, 2007).

The new curriculum sought to transform the Chinese education system in significant ways, and addressed all areas related to curriculum, including educational philosophy, curricula structure, curriculum content and textbook policies, standards, pedagogical approach, student assessment, and teacher education. A major objective of the new curriculum is to develop a student-centred and inquiry-oriented education system, moving away from its highly teacher and textbook-centred character, and examination orientation. Curriculum change is accompanied with a curriculum reform of national teacher education, which was initiated in

2006 with the aim of moving teacher education from its strong disciplinary or subject-bound focus to one with a greater emphasis on pedagogy (Wang and Clarke, 2014).

Major changes in the curriculum content included the development of new textbooks and changes in textbook policy, introduction of new subjects, and attempts to improve relevance of curriculum and to emphasize the development of select competencies. Textbooks used in primary and middle schools were changed, to make the texts livelier, connect better with students' everyday lives, and adapt to local conditions. Previously, all schools across the country used the same textbooks, however the new curriculum stipulated that multi-versions will be used, allowing different choices in different cultural and economic areas. This is promoted with the slogan 'One curriculum, many textbooks'. In addition to textbooks, the curriculum also advocated the use of different learning and teaching materials. Science became a new compulsory subject in primary schools and an integrated subject at secondary schools. Moreover, English is made compulsory in primary schools from Grade 3 onwards (Guo et al., 2013).

Traditionally, the Chinese education system focuses on knowledge acquisition, however, the new curriculum emphasizes the development of some essential skills, which are identified by the government as the skills that China's workforce needs to acquire in order to sustain the modernization drive. Integrated practical skills and innovative ability were particularly highlighted to improve country's global competitiveness. The curriculum reform attempts to cultivate inquiry, problem solving skills, creativity, independent thinking skills, team work, and critical thinking skills (Guo et al., 2013). Developing students' sense of inquiry, encouraging communication and cooperation, and giving students opportunities for hands-on experience were also underscored (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). These selected skills point to the pressure to comply with international standards, and to respond to the demands of globalization and market economy.

The new pedagogical approach emphasizes the student-centred pedagogy, and seeks to consider students' own experiences and learning interests, make learning and teaching less textbook centred, stimulate self-directed learning, and promote the development of select competencies (Zhao and Wenbin, 2007). It aims to change teaching and learning from rote learning and mechanical training to pedagogical practices that encourage students' hands-on learning experiences and participate in exploration of knowledge. Furthermore, it strives to foster teacher student interactions in the classroom, encourage autonomous learning, and inquisitive spirit in practice (Wang and Clarke, 2014). The new assessment policy also endeavours to reduce the importance of examinations.

Bilingual education is encouraged in China, after the 1980s. The language in education policy is highly complicated due to presence of 55 minorities, 33 of them having no written language. In the minority areas a major emphasis of the reform drive has been strengthening the use and acceptance of Mandarin by ethnic minorities. As indicated earlier, under the strong influence of globalization forces, English is also made compulsory at primary schools from Grade 3 onwards in 2001. Proficiency in English is perceived critical to the nation's attempt to remain competitive in the global economies (Guo et al., 2013).

The new curriculum is said to be well-received by educators, however the implementation process was subject to serious challenges. These included lack of funds, lack of qualified teachers (especially in rural areas), inadequacy of teacher preparation for the implementation of the new curriculum, poor working conditions for teachers (including job insecurity, extended working hours and heavy workload), resource disparities between urban and rural schools, insufficient learning resources in remote areas (e.g. while the new curriculum promotes the use of different learning recourses, rural schools did not get additional funding

to cover those), and large classrooms up to 60 (Wang and Clarke, 2014). Moreover, the new textbooks were reported to lack cohesion with many jumps in topics. Consequently, some teachers felt obliged to use bridging materials, such as old textbooks to supplement the new curricula, increasing the workload for teachers (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Marton, 2006).

The implementation process was particularly criticized for lack of adequate training for teachers and guidance to schools, leading to theoretical and conceptual confusions about the requirements of the reform. Moreover, some concepts such as constructivism and inquiry-learning are viewed as foreign concepts, and their relevance and applicability to the Chinese context is questioned. Some studies point to how the massive curriculum change perpetrated substantial pressure, dilemmas, ambivalence and constraint among teachers. Some of these studies also suggest that teachers' own voices and feelings tend not to be recognized or appreciated in the curriculum development and implementation processes (Guo et al., 2013).

The examination-orientation of the system appears to have large ramifications on the curriculum implementation. Since student evaluation largely remained quantitative, relying mainly on paper and pencil, and the test score is the only indicator to review students' performance, rote learning has persisted as the most common teaching method across schools. Moreover, Gaokao (the university entrance exam) constitutes the only assessment determining the access to university, and remains as the single most important standard by which schools, principals and teachers are measured. Even the principals of elite schools are said to be anxious about the consequences of the curriculum reform on their rate of graduate university enrolment. Therefore, few teachers want to experiment with new concepts and teaching approaches, or focus on the development of competencies, since they fear drifting away from exam preparation, which is largely perceived as their primary mission (Wang and Clarke, 2014; Yun-peng, et al., 2006). Hence, China's education system has remained committed to preserving examination defined quality. Concerns about the exam success was rather evident among parents as well. Some studies indicate that the majority of parents have not supported the new curricular efforts due to concerns that these measures will constrict their child's examination success (Dello-Iacovo, 2009).

Consequently, the studies show that despite some inspirational examples of change in classroom settings, particularly in top-quality, elite schools in urban settings, the basic orientation of Chinese education has remained largely unchanged. Studies point to little change in classroom teaching as the majority of teachers persisted with rote learning and memorization methods. This is particularly evident at secondary level of schooling (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Wang & Clarke, 2014; Marton, 2006).

3.2. Turkey

Turkey has revised its curriculum for primary education in 2004. According to the Ministry of National Education (MONE), a substantial revision of curriculum has become imperative due to a multitude of reasons. These included addressing persistent concerns with regard to education quality and equity, making education more responsive to social and economic needs, improving student motivation and achievement levels, and equipping students with skills and competencies that are crucial to live and work in the contemporary world (MONE, 2005a). Furthermore, the low achievement level of Turkish students at various international tests (such as TIMISS-R, PIRLS and PISA) has been also influential in education policy debate (Gultekin, 2007; Aksit, 2007).

Echoing similar reform efforts in countries in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, the revised curriculum for primary education focuses on development of select competencies and skills, and strives to promote constructivist, student-centred pedagogy and authentic assessment (MONE, 2005a). The amount of content and number of concepts taught were reduced and emphasis was put on the development and reinforcement of select competencies. In contrast to the previous curriculum, in which the terms such as ‘goal’, ‘objective’ and ‘targeted attitudes’ were commonly used, the revised curriculum makes frequent references to competencies (Educational Reform Initiative, 2005). In Social Studies, for instance, the development of 14 competencies are prioritized, including critical thinking, creativity, communication, inquiry, problem solving, decision making, using information technologies, entrepreneurship, perceiving change and continuity, and social participation (MONE, 2005b).

In terms of pedagogical approach, the new educational programmes adopt constructivist pedagogy and aim to move away from teacher-centred to a student-centred model. It advocates active learning methods and techniques such as problem solving, dramatization, co-operative learning, project work, and brain- storming. During the lessons, instead of lecturing, more time and attention is diverted to student activities. The role of the teacher has been redefined as ‘facilitator’ or ‘guide’ who is responsible for creating learning environments and for facilitating students’ learning processes. The new curriculum also advocates increased use of learning and teaching materials, and aims to incorporate information and communication technologies into classrooms (Educational Reform Initiative, 2005).

In an effort to assess not only the product but also the learning process, the new curriculum introduced a variety of alternative assessment methods. Teachers are expected to evaluate their students’ progress in development of defined competencies, concepts and skills. The objectives of such an assessment include determination of students’ individual needs as well as their learning difficulties. In this way, the assessment is viewed as an important tool for generating information about students, which can be in turn used by teachers to provide adequate feedback and stimulation to their students. Such information is also expected to be used by students for self-evaluation purposes and for setting individual goals. The variety of assessment methods has been increased substantially in order to align assessment with student-centred pedagogy. According to MONE, the focus on the individual differences within student-centred pedagogy requires assessment methods that would allow the assessment of diverse competencies, abilities and knowledge. Therefore, an assessment system based solely on written and oral exams was viewed inadequate. In addition to these traditional methods, the curriculum suggests the use of observations, discussions, project and performance assignments, portfolio, self-evaluation and group evaluation forms (MONE, 2005b).

Studies show that teachers mediated and in some instances rejected curriculum change proposal, creating a mosaic of different implementation profiles at school and classroom level (Altinyelken, 2012). Hence, the Curriculum 2004 appears to have changed its shape and focus in the course of its implementation, echoing similar experiences in other countries, for instance as described above in China (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). There was a consensus among teachers that the previous curriculum was overloaded with too many facts and subject matters, however, the new curriculum was also criticized for being ‘too light’. Although some of the reductions in content load were positively received, such as in mathematics, some others were opposed as in the case of Turkish grammar. Similar to the majority of Chinese teachers, those in Turkey also appeared to supplement the curriculum with additional

information, introducing concepts or topics that they considered important. For this reason, teachers conducted research, primarily on the internet, and shared their resources with fellow teachers and with their students (Altinyelken, 2013a).

The change proposals in the pedagogical approach were generally positively received. Some aspects of the new pedagogical approach were easily embraced, while some others were left out. For instance, increasing student talk, use of a variety of learning and teaching methods and materials, and incorporating ICTs were adopted by the majority of teachers, yet opportunities for co-operative learning and group work were rarely exploited. In none of the classrooms, students were seated in groups, and teachers admitted that they rarely organized group work or created opportunities for students to interact with each other. Lastly, assessment emerged as one of the most problematic aspects of the new curriculum as the majority of teachers continued to use traditional assessment methods and made modest use of alternative methods introduced by the Curriculum 2004 (see also Gelbal and Kelecioğlu, 2007; Yapıcı and Demirdelen, 2007).

Teachers had strong criticisms about in-service training, pointing to the inadequacy of teacher preparation prior to the implementation of Curriculum 2004 (Bikmaz, 2006; Educational Reform Initiative 2005; Gomleksiz 2007). Its quality, both in terms of content and presentation, was found weak, and lack of demonstrations and practical work were disappointing. Therefore, teachers felt ill-prepared to implement the new curriculum, particularly in applying new pedagogical approach and using alternative assessment methods. This has resulted in misconceptions, wide divergences in interpretations of curriculum materials, and as suggested by some teachers, even in resistance to change proposals. Teachers also identified some other implementation challenges including large classroom sizes limiting student participation and group work; lack of adequate teaching and learning materials and increasing reliance on parents for material supply; and the poor use of teacher feedback by the Ministry of Education (Altinyelken, 2013a).

3.3. Uganda

Uganda has engaged in various curriculum reforms in the post-independence period after 1962, echoing similar efforts in other Sub-Saharan African countries. A new curriculum for primary schools, called ‘Thematic Curriculum’, was developed and implemented nationwide starting from February 2007. The new curriculum is intended to improve education quality by increasing students’ achievement levels in numeracy, literacy and life skills and by improving the relevance of education to local communities.

Three principles are highlighted within the Thematic Curriculum: 1) Rapid development of literacy, numeracy and life skills at lower primary; 2) The treatment of concepts holistically, under themes of immediate meaning and relevance to the learner; and 3) The presentation of learning experiences in languages in which the learners are already proficient. Although, it covers almost the same subject areas that existed in the previous curriculum, the knowledge and competencies are organised thematically for the lower three grades, while a subject-based approach was applied for upper levels (NCDC, 2006a).

In terms of pedagogical approach, it adopted child-centred approach by highlighting children’s interests, experiences and needs at the centre of learning and teaching processes. The curriculum stipulates that children’s interaction with each other and with their teacher should be encouraged during the lessons; various class activities, involving handling of learning and teaching materials, should be organised to enable students to learn by doing. The lessons should also reflect children’s interests, abilities and concerns (NCDC, 2006b).

Furthermore, the new curriculum adopts continuous assessment and requires teachers to assess their students on a daily basis. The purpose of such assessment is considered to be diagnostic and remedial. It is assumed that frequent assessment would facilitate appropriate feedback and corrective action on the part of teachers. For instance, it would enable teachers to identify individual problems and provide adequate help so that the child would catch up with the rest of the class. Likewise, high achievers can be identified and given more challenging tasks to stimulate their learning (NCDC, 2006a).

A new language-in-education policy was also implemented around the same time, though it was formulated much earlier. The new policy stipulates that wherever possible the child should learn in the home language or at least in a language that is familiar to the child. It is based on the conviction that higher achievement levels are reached in literacy when children study in a language in which they already have a strong oral command. Therefore, all learning materials used in the first three years of primary education will be provided in the child's own language or a language familiar to the child. In addition, all written tests that are used for assessment purposes will be administered in the local language except for the assessment of English language competence. However, English will be the language of instruction in schools in which there is no predominant local language or area language. At Primary 4, both English and the local language will be used during teaching and learning, yet a gradual transition from local languages to English is expected. Written materials, including textbooks will be in simple English and all assessment will be carried out in English (NCDC 2006a). During the remaining three years of primary education, English will be used as the language of instruction across the country. The Primary Leaving Examination is also administered in English.

Studies on the curriculum implementation in Uganda (Altinyelken, 2010a, 2010b; Vermeulen, 2013) reveal that teachers were in general enthusiastic about the Thematic curriculum and appreciated the improvements they have noticed in their students. They believed it contributed to the improvements in their students' achievement levels, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Nevertheless, they were also rather critical of a variety of issues over the curriculum and the implementation process. These issues range from heavy load of the curriculum to lack of teaching and learning materials, from large classes to inadequate teacher training. Yet, most of the criticisms were concerned with the implementation process. Systemic problems within the Ugandan education system, such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of teaching and learning aids, inadequate number of textbooks, and low teacher motivation, suggest that some of the expectations are unrealistic and indeed very difficult to realise in classrooms. For instance, teachers noted that they were unable to teach eight learning areas per day, as they felt the need to squeeze or avoid learning areas that were deemed less important. Likewise, even if the majority of teachers acknowledged the advantages of continuous assessment, they were hardly practicing it in their classrooms that had often more than 70 students. Use of child-centred pedagogy was constrained similarly due to overcrowding and lack of aids.

Issues related to teachers were also highly critical to implementation process, including low teacher motivation and morale, inadequate salaries, low teacher status, and unfavourable living conditions. Ugandan teachers indicated that the new pedagogical approach made further demands on teachers by asking them to engage children in learning to a greater extent, and by being more innovative and creative in their teaching. However, teachers suggested that many of them lacked the motivation and energy to engage fully in educational change processes (Altinyelken, 2010b).

Furthermore, the use of local languages as the LOI has contributed to the improvement of literacy skills, as well as high levels of participation in children's learning. It has also helped to improve students' understanding of content as they were better able to retain words and concepts and relate them to their immediate lives and experiences. In addition, teachers recognised the significance of local languages in promoting cultural expression, identity and maintaining culture heritage. Despite these gains, the local language policy has come under much scrutiny by teachers, school administrators, and parents in rural areas since many of them viewed the policy to impede on children's academic success in upper primary and secondary levels. Teachers believed that there is a low level of English language proficiency among pupils and that the primary English subject in the first three years of their schooling did not provide adequate English proficiency for students in upper primary levels (Altinyelken et al., 2014).

3.4. Bolivia

With coming into power of Evo Morales in 2006, Bolivia embarked on an ambitious change process in politics and society at large, including its education sector which was traditionally perceived as reproducing structures of colonial domination. Education quality was viewed as low, and teaching practices at schools have long been described as primarily teacher-centred, emphasizing memorisation techniques, being mostly relevant to urban context (Drange, 2007), suppressing linguistic and cultural diversity, and failing to prepare students for work, social life or democratic participation.

Through a consultative process, a new education reform law was established in 2010, succeeding the 1994 education reform law which was largely criticised by teacher unions and other actors for being neoliberal and imposing change from the outside at the exclusion of teachers (Contreras & Talavera, 2003). Morales and his government regarded education an important instrument of change, and viewed teachers as critical actors in this process.

The ASEP law consists of four general principles: (1) decolonisation, (2) intra- and interculturalism along with plurilingualism, (3) productive education and (4) communitarian education (Ministerio de Educación, 2010).

Decolonisation project in education is central to the new Education Revolution, aiming to fight against racism and discrimination. It strongly questions 'Western' knowledge, and strives to decentralise hegemonic Western thinking and help to acknowledge other ways of generating knowledge. Hence, by decolonising the education system, the curriculum aims at opening up for other sources of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge and technology, reviving indigenous know-how and cultural practices (Howard, 2009). The curriculum is underpinned by the broader philosophical foundation of 'living well' or *Vivir Bien*. It relates to such issues as acknowledgement of cultural and linguistic diversity, economic redistribution and political representation. 'Living well' is specifically opposed to the Western notion of 'living better' at the expense of others (Lopes Cardozo, 2011).

The second objective, intracultural, intercultural and pluri-lingual education, is an important spearhead in the new education law, aiming to incorporate these into all schools in the country independent of their ethnic and cultural composition. The intra-cultural component particularly targeted indigenous students, to strengthen their solidarity and membership to a native culture by incorporating indigenous knowledge and worldviews in the curriculum (Osuna, 2013). Intercultural education focuses on 'interaction between all cultures in Bolivia and with the rest of the world'. Furthermore, plurilingual education endorses the use of indigenous and foreign languages in education. The third objective of productive education

aims to link education to local productive and economic activities in Bolivian society. Productive education focuses very much on vocational development to enhance job opportunities and the ‘production of knowledge’. The final objective of the ASEP law, communitarian education, supports a community based education system (Ministerio de Educación, 2010).

The implementation of the new curriculum is supported by the PROFOCOM programme, a re-training or professionalisation program for in-service teachers. Within the PROFOCOM programme, teachers are stimulated to change their accustomed way of teaching by taking on a more research- and practice-oriented approach to education and including – among others - indigenous knowledge and worldviews in the curriculum (Schipper, 2014). The underlying rationale of the new education law concerns the full inclusion of Bolivia’s historically marginalised indigenous people in the education system and the enhancement of Bolivia’s poor educational results (especially among the indigenous) from the past. By including the aforementioned objectives in present day education, the government aims to stimulate a critical approach to existing knowledge and open up the curriculum for indigenous knowledge, cultures, languages and productive and communal activities, which are constructed within different regional and local contexts (Schipper, 2014).

The new curriculum is considered plurinational because it consists of a national (60%), regional (30%) and local (10-20%) curriculum. The national part of the curriculum applies to each and every Bolivian, whilst the regional and local curricula are more catered to the specific regional and local contexts. Indigenous Peoples’ Educational Councils elaborate the new regionalized education curricula to reflect socio-cultural and linguistic features of each indigenous group’s culture. These regionalized curricula, elaborated independently, need to be compatible with the pluri-national base curriculum. The local curriculum, in turn, responds to the needs and expectations of the local groups.

The current educational activities have a more practice-oriented approach, including the everyday life situations. The dialectical relation between theory and practice is reflected in the working methods of critical pedagogues, in which students actively participate to construct knowledge. Teachers aim to incorporate Bolivia’s own indigenous knowledge within the new curriculum, by starting from their current and historical reality (Schipper, 2014). Yet, Osuna (2013) warns us that if intra-culturalism aims reaffirming the origin, history and cultural identity of the ethnic group, it might inadvertently result in (re)essentializing the ideas of culture and identity of the indigenous groups. Consequently, even though the Education Revolution is built on the basis of decolonization to fight racism and discrimination, classroom practices might generate static and essentialized indigenous identities.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Implications of the Curriculum Reforms

There are strong arguments suggesting that major curriculum changes that have been occurring in many countries around the world are driven to a greater or lesser extent by globalisation discourses which points to an urgency and need to prepare children and young people for participation in a competitive global economy (Yates & Young, 2010). Anderson-Levitt (2008) also confirms that emerging global curriculum is a response to the demands of globalised economies and knowledge societies. The cases of China, Turkey and Uganda exemplify how the discourses on the rationale for curriculum change reflect the primacy of

economic considerations. This does not come as a surprise, since such considerations have come to characterise many of the education reforms initiated in different parts of the world in the past two decades.

Although global policy trends informed reform processes in many countries, research on policy implementation in diverse contexts reveal that divergence at the country level persists as the reforms are re-contextualised and adapted to local contexts. Moreover, such curricular reforms often went through a metamorphosis as a result of different understandings, interpretations and practices of actors involved at implementation phase, such as teachers and students. Such re-contextualisation and deviations from global discourses and scripts are even stronger in developing country contexts (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). Consequently, there has often been a gap between global reform talks, policy discourses and actual educational practices at classroom contexts.

When we look at the implications of the recent curricular reforms on learning outcomes, we see a mixed picture. In Uganda, several teachers and education stakeholders believed that Thematic Curriculum has many strong aspects, such as improved relevance, more emphasis on literacy and numeracy, increased student participation during lessons, rendering learning as a more enjoyable activity for children. However, these teachers at the same time believed that such aspects can hardly be fully realised due to systematic problems in the education system, including large classroom sizes, lack of materials, low teacher morale, and inadequate teacher preparation. On the other hand, a larger group of Ugandan teachers have already noted positive improvements in learning outcomes, for instance improvements in numeracy and literacy levels, and life skills, and greater student engagement in their learning processes (Altinyelken, 2010b).

Curriculum change in China and Turkey points to different outcomes compared to Uganda. In both countries, although the previous curriculum was viewed as overloaded with too many facts and subject matters, the revised curricula was also viewed critically for being ‘too light’, and omitting significant information (Altinyelken, 2010c). Hence, in both countries teachers tended to supplement the curriculum with additional information acquired from other sources, increasing the work-load of teachers (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Furthermore, China and Turkey exemplifies the importance of public examinations governing transition between different levels of education, and how such examinations can have backwash effects on curriculum implementation, in terms of narrowing curriculum content to subjects tested in the exams. In both countries, teachers and school principals appear to be primarily concerned with the success of their students at public examinations, and the implications of exam scores on individual teachers and school profile.

Failure to adequately involve teachers in curriculum development process, the lack of adequate teacher preparation prior to implementation and structural limitations within the education system have appeared to lead to what Balarin and Benavides (2010) discuss within the context of Peru to ‘a situation whereby classroom practices, while outwardly appearing to conform with expected changes, are, when scrutinised further, clearly disconnected from such central aims as enabling students to learn significant knowledge’ (Balarin and Benavides, 2010, p. 323).

Furthermore, the Turkish case points to some unintended consequences of curriculum reform. In Turkey, concerns over reduced curriculum content, a high emphasis on research assignments, the ‘emptiness’ of the textbooks, and the ramifications of student-centred pedagogy led several teachers to conclude that students learn less with the revised

curriculum. Consequently, several teachers argued that the development of competencies is emphasised at the expense of knowledge acquisition, marginalising access to knowledge within mainstream education system. These concerns echo similar concerns in other contexts (see Balarin and Benavides, 2010 for the case of Peru) with regard to the ‘voice of knowledge’ within education. Young (2009) draws attention to the dangers of ‘emptying the content’ which he identifies as a trend in the educational policies of many countries. In this respect, he criticises outcomes-based curricula for promoting a ‘hollowing out’ of knowledge (Young, 2008). He further suggests that:

[...] an empty and rhetorical notion of knowledge and the increasing tendency to blur distinctions between the production of knowledge and its acquisition and between knowledge and skills – the latter unlike the former being something measurable and targetable – becomes a way of denying a distinct ‘voice’ for knowledge in education. Furthermore, excluding such a ‘voice’ from educational policy most disadvantages those learners (and whole societies, in the case of developing countries), who are already disadvantaged by circumstances beyond the school (Young, 2009, p. 195).

Alexander (2008) also contends that in some of the curricular changes in the past decade, knowledge is almost seen as diametrically opposed to skills or competencies. Such a dichotomous understanding seemed to be strong among some of the Turkish teachers. Undoubtedly, education has important roles in helping to develop skills and development, however, such roles should not be assumed at the expense of education’s other important roles, that of improving students’ understandings and knowledge base.

One of the symptoms of constructivist education is the great reluctance of teachers to intervene, to direct, or to criticise when they are dealing with children. Nevertheless, furthering the aim of a just and equal society requires teachers who are prepared to challenge some of the observed patterns of children. The current trends in education policies emphasize the extension of access to and widening of participation in education. However, at the same time, they neglect or in some cases actually deny that at the most fundamental level, education involves the transmission of ‘powerful knowledge’ from one generation to another. This implies that teachers should not only be facilitators or guides in classrooms, but should also be a – to use an unfashionable term – ‘transmitter of knowledge’ (Young, 2008; 2010).

Young’s comments points to another important concern within education, reducing disparities in learning achievement. In this respect, there are arguments that curricular changes that emphasize competency-based curriculum tend to have a negative impact on disadvantaged students particularly since they are often unable to secure their access to ‘powerful knowledge’ in other ways, for instance through families or access to elite forms of private education (Wheelahaan, 2007).

Again, the Turkish case provides important insights to such arguments. In Turkey, some studies (Altinyelken, 2010c; Simsek, 2006) suggest that despite the seductive appeal of the democratic and progressive language of the curriculum change, a shift to competencies and emphasis on student-centred pedagogy tend to aggravate social and economic inequalities because of unequal access to learning aids, educational resources and ICT. SCP favours children whose parents are more involved and concerned with the education of their children, who are more educated, and have more cultural capital. Moreover the revised curriculum seemed to aggravate existing inequalities since it increased the demand for private tutoring and reduced the chances of students succeeding in the public exams without supplementary private coaching. Therefore, there was a strong conviction among teachers that the

educational gap among income groups, and between urban and rural areas would be further accentuated, leading to an increasingly stratified society (Altinyelken, 2013b). In China, similar concerns with examinations explain why the education system has largely remained unchanged and continues to be committed to an examination defined notion of education quality, rendering the education system elitist (Dello-Iacovo, 2009).

Within the context of Uganda, major discussions with regard to inequality relates to the language-in-education policy. Several teachers suggested that the use of local language as the language of instruction at lower primary has rendered students living in rural areas in a disadvantageous position for the Primary Leaving Examination in comparison to students who studied mainly in English in urban areas. For communities, parents and teachers alike, the transition to post-primary education and upward social mobility appeared to be the highest priority, for which English was seen as indispensable (Altinyelken et al., 2014).

The curriculum reform in Bolivia is rather distinct compared to the other three cases discussed in this paper. It is rather ambitious and one of its driving motives is to redress historical inequalities within education system and in the broader society. However, since the implementation process has recently started, its outcomes on learning achievement and reducing disparities among students from different ethnic and linguistic groups is yet to be seen.

4.2. Lessons (un)Learnt

Beyond a one-size-fits all approach to curriculum development: A one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum development needs to be abandoned and replaced with a differentiated approach. Universal solutions do not fit within diverse education realities. It is not accurate to advance universalistic curriculum reforms because education cultures, resource availability, teachers' identities and capacities are very different around the world. Thus, blueprinted curriculum reforms will have very uneven effects and will be received very differently according to these and other institutional and contextual factors.

Context matters: Very often reform failures are not due to technicalities, limited funding, or implementation problems. Rather, such failures reflect 'the fundamental contradictions that arise when (policy) solutions are borrowed from educational systems where the problems are entirely different' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010, p. 331). When context is not adequately considered in education policy transfer, it may lead to negative or unintended outcomes. Indeed, policies prescribed by the same paradigm might produce different practices when they are applied in different contexts. Sometimes, such differences might be so large that it would be difficult to imagine that they were the result of the same global policy. Ignoring such contextual capacities might lead to unintended and unexpected consequences and reforms aimed at improving education quality might inadvertently undermine quality or intensify socio-economic inequalities (Carnoy and Rhoten, 2002; Altinyelken, 2011). Therefore, adequate attention to context should be given while adopting curriculum policies from global agendas or while borrowing them from other countries and contexts.

Involvement of teachers in curriculum development and implementation: Teachers and other local actors should be involved in the entire policy process, from formulation to evaluation. Although teachers are widely recognized as the real driving forces in educational reforms, change agencies, be it ministry departments or development organizations, hardly act accordingly. In many cases, teachers were not or only sideways involved in the initiation,

preparation, design and development of a new curriculum proposal (van Veen et al., 2005) and they were often positioned as passive implementers of externally driven changes (Wood, 2004). Teachers' involvement will guarantee that educational reforms are based on needs analysis and correspond to the priorities and necessities identified by schools and other local stakeholders. In fact, reform success largely depends on the extent to which local actors agree with the urgency of the reforms, their objectives and the means to reach them. In other words, reform success depends on the extent to which local actors enact education change (Fullan, 2007).

Avoiding quick-fix approaches: Often, attention and energies of policy makers are focused on the 'what' of desired change and they tend to neglect the 'how' (Rogan, 2007). Indeed, misjudging the ease of implementation is one of the frequent mistakes in educational policymaking (Haddad, 1995). When implementation stage has not been well planned and structured, it may result in unexpected outcomes and even in strong resistance to policies (Dyer, 1999). Hence, a 'quick fix' approach to reform implementation needs to be avoided. The implementation phase should be carefully planned and organized. The reforms should be communicated clearly and efficiently to the actors involved in implementation at regional and local levels. This would avoid insecurities, confusions and irregularities among local implementation partners. In addition, teacher resistance to education reforms should not be considered always as a 'problem' or a 'conservative act' in itself. Resistance to reforms, and the consequent negotiations and debate it might generate, provide opportunities for policy makers and aid agencies to reflect on the reform proposals and to improve future interventions.

Policy alignment: Educational policies need to be aligned. If a new education policy (e.g. curriculum emphasis on the development of competencies) contradicts another newly introduced policy or an existing policy (e.g. nationwide exams governing the transition to post-primary education in Turkey), the implementation of the new policy will encounter serious setbacks. Therefore, the alignment of the new policies with existing policies should be carefully examined, and possible conflict between them should be addressed.

Providing sufficient resources for reform implementation: Curriculum reforms, beyond punctual and isolated interventions, need to make sure that the necessary conditions (e.g. learning materials, teacher preparation, monitoring and supervision) and the enabling environment are guaranteed by the state and available for teachers and schools.

4.3. Key Priorities for post-2015

- A rights-based approach to education needs to be strengthened in the post-2015, and such approach should not only emphasize the *right to* education, but as well *rights in* and *through* education (see Subrahmanian, 2005). Curriculum content, pedagogy, assessment and the language-in-education policy are central to making sure that students from diverse backgrounds have access to rights in and through education.
- Any discussion on curriculum reform and that of education quality in general should encompass equity implications. Good quality education is more critical for the poor and the marginalised since the richer segments of the society have social and cultural capital that puts them in an advantageous position in educational processes. Nevertheless, the

current dialogue on post-2015 does not pay sufficient attention to the issues of how teaching and learning can be facilitated for the disadvantaged groups (Sayed, 2010).

- The focus within curriculum should be balanced between knowledge, competencies and skills, and none should be emphasized at the expense of the other. In this respect, curricular systems need to make sure that students' access to 'powerful knowledge' is guaranteed. Textbook quality and availability is highly important in this regard.
- As stated in the civil society joint statement (2013) co-signed by, among others, Global Campaign for Education and Education International, '... it is crucial that education be transformative, geared towards social and environmental justice, the democratization of power structures, promotion of equality and non-discrimination and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. A narrow approach to learning, understood as measurable learning outcomes in numeracy and literacy, can result in sidelining these core dimensions of quality and diminishing other subjects and essential skills, values and relations, such as creativity, curiosity, critical thinking, civic-mindedness, solidarity, cooperation, self-discipline, self-confidence, co-responsibility, dialogue, compassion, empathy, courage, self-awareness, resilience, leadership, humility, peace, harmony with nature, thus detracting from achieving the overall purpose of education. In line with this perspective, education evaluations should be holistic and formative, grounded on national parameters and respecting cultural and linguistic diversity, while focusing on systems as a whole and being developed with the active engagement of teachers, students and parents'.
- As indicated in the earlier statement, the current emphasis on learning assessment inadvertently reduces education quality to cognitive achievement in a few areas of knowledge (Sayed, 2010). Learning assessment should be viewed as a context-specific act and should move away from being merely a summative policy tool. Furthermore, as confirmed by Verger et al. (2012, p. 883) 'Cross-national comparable measurable global targets for education quality should not become a new form of tyranny and surveillance over low-income countries'.
- The debate on reforming pedagogical practices should refrain from positioning the notions of teacher-centred and student-centred learning in opposite locations (Scheerens & Slegers, 2010; Edwards & Usher, 2008). Furthermore, such debates need to move away from a focus on the 'problematization' of implementation process and in particular of teachers. Instead, efforts should be made to develop and apply more structured alternatives and to develop context-specific pedagogical approaches (Schweisfurth 2013; Altinyelken, 2012; Gauthier & Dembele, 2004). As Tabulawa (2003) suggests since teaching and learning are contextualised activities, there can be no justification for a universal and homogenising pedagogy.
- Early exit models in the use of local languages in educational processes are not successful and fail repeatedly to produce the desired outcomes. The post-2015 agenda should reaffirm education in children's mother tongue as a human right, and late exit models and/or bilingual education approaches should be considered.

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