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Developing a competence-based curriculum for the 21st century: the case of Kuwait

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Abstract

In the context of designing a new curriculum, the paper addresses the tension between integrating all subjects in an exploring-theme approach and a subject-based approach. Given the complexity of a curriculum reform, this opposite tension, faced by most current day change processes, cannot and should not be addressed by a firm option for one of the solutions, rather the balance between extremes should be adopted by well informed decisions at conceptual-curricular, institutional and strategic levels. We discuss a solution that keeps the subject-based approach but creates a set of internal organizers and mechanisms aimed at ensuring the integration as well as the vertical and horizontal coherence within a competence-based curriculum.

Keywords: curriculum, educational reform, integration, domain-specific knowledge, general and specific competences, key competences

1. Focus and rationale of the paper

Internationalisation and globalisation are both expressions commonly used to relate to today's world. And these are having an impact in the field of education, as curricula and educational developments are shared worldwide. Related to this, many systems of education have a greater interest in international monitoring of learning achievement through such programs as TIMSS, PIRLS, PISA and there is a strong push to recognise standards related to these. Thus, the statistics show that the number of participant countries grew constantly both in TIMSS (from 45 participant countries in 1995 to 59 in 2007 and then to 63 in 2011) and PIRLS (from 35 in 2001 to 48 in

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2011) (http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/). The participation in PISA shows the same trend: from 43 participant countries in 2000, to 56 in 2006 and to 64 in 2012 (http://www.oecd.org/pisa/). Although countries with strong histories of educational development (US/Europe/Far East) have taken the lead, the net is widening as other countries recognise the need to focus on globalisation issues through raising education standards and take note of achievements in international assessment tests. The concept of literacy is thus shifting from a national realisation, where it had taken on a content acquisition or a local culture focus, to one where literacy is related to competences going beyond the acquisition of basic subject-related knowledge and skills. Thus, the beginning of the third millennium brought about a vivid discussion concerning key competences as an overarching set of trans-disciplinary outcomes of learning to be achieved by every student by the end of compulsory education (e.g. European Commission, 2005).

Globalization of the economy, internationalization of the present competition-based society and the rhythm of technological changes put pressure on the workplace to change and ask for functional competences (Singer, 2006). Further, the push for more complex and life-related levels of literacy has been translated into the need for a competence-based curriculum for each school subject. But what does this mean? What is relevant for building a competence-based curriculum in the 21st century?

Within the globalisation and internalization tendencies as discussed above, this paper focuses on a special case-study. This brings into the spotlight the curriculum development in Kuwait. Kuwait offers an educational context that combines strong (religious) traditions, old fashioned ways of teaching, rich potentiality of resources, and a modern vision to reform education for a highly competitive and prosperous Kuwait society. To achieve this goal, a multinational team of international experts monitor and assist the local infrastructure in the process of reforming the national curriculum.

A new national curriculum and its successful implementation represent the initial compulsory stage of a large scale educational reform. Large scale educational reforms are also signs of globalisation (e.g. Fullan, 2000). As in other parts of the world, in the case of Kuwait, the focus has shifted to a need for preparing its citizens for greater involvement in globalisation developments underlying the beginning of the 21st Century. In Kuwait, a vision to become a future financial international centre has led to stronger realisations that past achievements on international assessment tests were not appropriate to meet these expectations. More precisely, the participation of Kuwait in TIMSS and PIRLS 2011 assessments showed very poor results in Mathematics and Sciences, and the lowest results in reading (http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/). Consequently, at stake in the educational reform envisaged by the state of Kuwait is growing competitiveness of human resources in a peaceful and global world. In such a context, taking decisions concerning the philosophy, structure, and finally the proper content of the subject curricula is a challenging endeavour facing many dilemmas and even contradictions. In this paper, we launch the debate concerning one of these dilemmas with a major impact in curriculum development, namely integration versus separation of knowledge learned in school.

2. Integration versus separation in curriculum

The opposite tendencies between integration and separation in curriculum designing may be seen as a big dilemma especially at the level of primary education, where the children come with the vision of the integrated world in which they live – they connect to the environment (social, personal, physical) in a naturally integrated way. Children do not parse the world into domains of knowledge in order to satisfy their needs, as does the school system. However, previous aims of education at large have been to equip young generations with the capability to develop the knowledge accumulated by the human mind throughout millennia of development. And this knowledge is today, inevitably, parsed into various domains of knowledge. The tension between the integrated way in which children learn in the natural (home) environment and the need of educating children within the mass school system needs to be responsibly addressed.

We cannot simply compress a history of millennia into the schooling period. We also should face the accelerated rhythm of knowledge accumulation today. How could school cope with these challenges?

An integrated vision for curriculum design can endeavor to put together a variety of learning contexts, letting the child to find structures. This is actually the natural way in which children learn in their first years of life. The experience of a few fortunate kindergarten and schools in different parts of the world show that such an approach can be effective if given sufficient time and very capable teachers able to coach students in selecting and organizing knowledge. But, in most school settings, we are facing time shortage and teachers whose training is based, methodologically, on a strictly directive approach, and, conceptually, on the simple reproduction of knowledge.