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*The Quality Imperative*

How can participatory processes of
curriculum development impact on the
quality of teaching and learning in
developing countries?

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How can participatory processes of curriculum development impact on the quality of teaching and learning in developing countries?

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1 Participatory processes of curriculum development

1.1 Concepts of curriculum development

“Curriculum” is seen often as a critical issue during discussions on quality of education, being considered, variously, as “content”, as “product” and as “process”. It is easy to make the assumption that a common understanding of curriculum exists, but in practice this is far from the case, with a host of definitions, approaches and ideological standpoints being traded. Even though a dialogue on curriculum theory is well established, there is still a strong tendency in practice to understand curriculum as a list of content, often developed in considerable detail, that students should be taught. Whether this is likely to result in learning is often not articulated, and the link between curriculum and quality of teaching and learning may not be well understood. If viewed as a list that may be extended almost indefinitely, the curriculum quickly loses its immensely constructive potential, and may become a rod for the backs of teachers and learners, administered by those in particular positions of authority who may be viewed as unrepresentative of the teaching profession, and out of touch with the reality of the teaching and learning environment. As a result, it may easily become a scapegoat for perceived shortfalls in quality, rather than being seen as a positive force in education.

In trying to grapple with the complexities of curriculum, Rogers and Taylor (1998) suggested that curriculum development “describes all the ways in which a training or teaching organisation plans and guides learning. This learning can take place in groups or with individual learners. It can take place inside or outside a classroom. It can take places in an institutional setting like a school, college or training centre, or in a village or a field. Curriculum development is central to the teaching and learning process.” Such a description may help to unlock the power of the curriculum as a vital force within the struggle to strengthen and enhance the quality of teaching and training at all levels of the education system.

1.2 Participatory approaches to curriculum development

As with all development processes, power relations have an enormous impact on curriculum development, which may be dominated by one group or individual, particularly where curriculum development is centralised, for example in many
primary education systems. In recognition of the varying importance and influence of different stakeholders in the curriculum development process, more and more education and training institutions around the world are encouraging participatory curriculum development (PCD) processes, and at the same time building functional linkages with their local communities. PCD approaches create working partnerships between teachers, learners and other stakeholders, and aim to increase ownership of the full learning process, thus improving the potential for effective learning through participation (Taylor, 2003). PCD is underpinned by a number of basic principles:

- that participation is not only a means but an end in itself
- stakeholders in education who might normally be marginalised gain the right to take part in decision-making about teaching and learning
- that as a basic human right, education can help to reduce poverty and social injustice. Greater participation increases the likelihood of this goal being achieved, and so should be a prerequisite for education
- participation by relevant stakeholders may take place throughout the entire curriculum development process, including planning, delivery and evaluation.

2 How do participatory curriculum development processes improve the quality of education? Some examples from practice

PCD has potential for improving the quality of education at all levels, but clearly it is more likely to be applied where there is relative autonomy for education institutions and individuals to plan and implement innovative curriculum development approaches. Since in most countries, primary schooling, and often secondary schooling, is run by a central ministry which develops a national curriculum, there is usually little freedom for schools or local education authorities to adapt this curriculum to local conditions. Research has shown (Taylor and Mulhall, 1997) that in many primary school situations:

- curriculum is too full, rigid, inflexible and irrelevant to lives of learners
- curriculum is changed frequently with little/no follow-up
- the school time-table is full and inflexible
- classes are large and under-resourced
- few learning materials are available
- there is a heavy orientation towards exams
- the application of national curriculum standards actually restricts innovations, such as PCD, rather than providing an enabling environment for alternative approaches

This environment makes curriculum innovation difficult, but it is possible to achieve, especially where the curriculum is “fixed but not full” (Taylor, 2003). For example, a research study (Taylor and Mulhall, 1997) showed that the education policy statements of many countries emphasise the importance of relating the
content of the curriculum and the processes of teaching and learning to the local environment. At the same time, there tends to be a large gap between what is stated in policy compared with what is carried out in practice in the classroom. Case studies from Tanzania, Sri Lanka, India and Ethiopia showed, however, that teachers regularly try to contextualise learning by relating the content of the curriculum to the experience of their pupils, for example drawing on agricultural examples to illustrate abstract concepts (e.g. mathematics) in schools in rural areas. A research study currently being carried in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Mali (Nanok, Vandenbosch and Taylor, 2004) provides an example of “a mathematics class about areas and perimeters of rectangles, and the teacher was using examples of agricultural plots, without realising that she was indeed doing something called ‘contextualisation’” (Vandenbosch, pers. comm.).

These strategies require a real engagement by pupils and teachers together in the curriculum transaction process, and may even involve other stakeholders, for example parents and local community members. Admittedly, such practice depends a great deal on the capacity and interest of individual teachers, since national education systems seem rarely able to support the development of such abilities on a large scale. Strategically, then, it seems important to learn more widely from the experience and innovations of individuals, suggesting that much can be learned at a national level from local good practice, as well as learning from innovations that are shown to be less successful or unsustainable.

In vocational, university and adult and non-formal education and training the potential to introduce innovations in curriculum development become even greater, as curriculum development becomes progressively more decentralised, although it should be recognised that in many countries there is strong national control over curriculum at all levels of the education system. For example, university education in Vietnam has for a long time been managed by the national Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), but a decentralising trend has led the MoET to show considerable interest in a PCD approach in university curriculum development, based on a “standard” agreed at national level, but with opportunities for local adaptation (MoET, 2003). It could be imagined that such a move might also take place at lower levels of the education system eventually. Interestingly there are examples of cases, such as Cuba, where the education system that formerly set great store on the needs of local communities and individuals now is based on a national perception of needs which guides the curriculum development process. A tension may indeed emerge, then, between control over curriculum development and teaching and learning processes at national, regional, local and even individual levels. But perhaps recognising and being open about this tension whilst encouraging participatory dialogue and debate is one way to move forward and avoid a centralist stalemate.

A range of participatory curriculum innovations have been identified, such as:
- the Childscope Project (Miller, 1995) in Ghana which had an initial objective to “develop a sustainable model for providing quality basic
education, appropriate for boys and girls in rural communities. With a focus on improving the education of the child through the joint efforts of the school, community and children, the curriculum was reshaped according to needs of the community, and life skills and teaching methods are intended to be linked across the curriculum.

- “curriculum conferences” (Bude, 2000), which have been used to provide a platform for training workshops involving different stakeholders in the production of curriculum materials for schools.
- A workshop in Zimbabwe that focused on “Teaching with Trees in Southern Africa”, whereby teachers, headteachers, curriculum developers, education officials and natural resources scientists explored the potential for contextualising teaching and learning in primary schools through the integration of natural resources management and agroforestry (de Haveskercke, Shumba and Sifile, 2004).
- An action research project in Swaziland, involving teachers, facilitated the production of learning materials for units in the junior secondary science syllabus (Lubben, Campbell and Dlamini, 1995)
- The Social Forestry, Education and Participation (SFEP) project in Thailand which aimed to contextualise learning through involvement of primary school children in community-based activities, specifically in social forestry; teaching, learning and school-community relations were addressed by involving school pupils in studies of local village problems related to forest management (McDonagh and Wheeler, 1998)
- The Agricultural and Rural Vocational Education Project (AVEP) in Kyrgyzstan aims to support the development of professional training of men and women farmers; the curriculum is developed, delivered and evaluated following a highly participatory approach (Helvetas, 2004)
- In Vietnam; the Social Forestry Support Programme, and the Localised Poverty Reduction in Vietnam Programme (both based, respectively on networks which included 5 universities) combined participatory curriculum development with community-based learning approaches. This enabled experiences gained by students, teachers, government officials and members of local communities to contribute to both community-based development activities and to curriculum development, thus benefiting all parties through improved learning programmes coupled with enhanced outreach and links with poor communities. (Social Forestry Support Programme, 2003; Scott, S. and Truong Thi Kim Chuyen)
- The Learning and Teaching Participation initiative (www.ids.ac.uk/participation/learn) has enabled sharing of a range of very innovative and participatory curriculum development approaches in institutions of higher learning around the world (Taylor and Fransman, 2004)
Example of participatory curriculum development approaches at primary school level – English language curriculum development in The Gambia

In The Gambia, a Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) volunteer supported a PCD approach that was applied to the development of English language teaching in primary schools (Sander, J., pers. comm.). The following steps were critical to the process:

- small awareness raising workshop of the PCD process involving key stakeholders, resulting in an action plan for the curriculum development process.
- stakeholder analysis, followed up by individual meetings with more key individuals, focusing on their roles and their views on the current curriculum
- wider survey of stakeholders (teachers, parents, employers) from schools around the country
- developing a thematic, child-centred approach to the new curriculum, integrating appropriate teaching and learning methods and materials with content. A general outline was developed within the curriculum unit through a departmental workshop; panels of serving teachers then worked to develop the new detailed curriculum
- teachers participated in writers’ workshops where they produced pupils’ books and teachers’ guides.

Due to the engagement of different stakeholders throughout this process, there was a high degree of interest, especially from teachers, in the development of the curriculum; a workplan was agreed and followed by those involved. There were some challenges, however, including:

- change of key personnel, of senior, national officials and also the arrival of a new consultant partway through the process
- difficulties in getting people to come together for key events and workshops, due to conflicting schedules and logistical issues
- recognition of a need to build educational and pedagogical abilities and capacities amongst key stakeholders, but a reluctance from individuals to admit this need
- recognition, belatedly, of the need to engage more with school students and parents throughout the process
- processing difficulties resulting from too large a survey on needs; a smaller survey would have been equally effective and more efficient.
3 Impacts of participatory curriculum development on improved teaching and learning

3.1 Benefits and limitations from participatory approaches to curriculum development

It is often assumed, particularly in project proposals and documents, that participatory approaches will bring untold benefits to any development intervention. Evidence from initiatives such as those listed above do suggest that PCD approaches are of great value, because:

- the likelihood of domination of processes and outcomes by a small, unrepresentative group is avoided
- different views on learning outcomes and processes may be contributed and form the basis for an ongoing, reflective dialogue
- through engagement in the PCD dialogue in different ways, individuals are able to build their own knowledge, and share their knowledge and experience with others
- participation is active and involves different people practising or learning by doing, which in itself promotes further learning
- as well as learning through knowledge and practice, different stakeholders hold different values, attitudes and beliefs; these may be better understood and taken into consideration through an ongoing, open dialogue
- contextualised teaching and learning becomes more feasible, since a PCD approach will inevitably be context dependant, and will involve those who know their own situation best.
- at the same time, those with different forms and sources of expertise may still make a contribution where knowledge and skill gaps exist, and strategies may be developed to address such gaps.

The cost of PCD is a particular issue that needs to be considered carefully. PCD has been criticised for being more expensive initially than more traditional curriculum development approaches, but in the longer term, PCD should prove to be a significant investment. Initial costs have more to do with setting up the process and establishing key systems and structures. There are costs involved in bringing people together, some direct (financial and logistical needs) but also indirect (emotional energy for example) in working in a participatory way. There are also costs required for capacity development, in the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are supportive of a PCD approach (see below). Maintenance costs of the PCD process should decrease over time, however, as a steadily increasing resource pool of skilled people and useful materials becomes available (Helvetas, 2002).

The scale of the curriculum development effort will determine costs also; a major national review of curriculum for the entire primary school system will of course be far more costly than a more limited initiative, for example at local level in a more decentralised system. Costs are influenced also by the
employment of stakeholders. Where wages are very low and working conditions poor, teachers, for example, often need to generate income through other activities, and so some compensation for time spent may need to be considered. But it is impossible to set clear rules for this, and the context will determine the way in which cost issues are addressed.

In the examples provided above, projects have tended to cover at least some of the costs associated with curriculum development. There is no space here to discuss issues of cost-sharing and comparative advantages of government vs. private vs. project funding of education, but it seems reasonable to provide additional sources of funding from external sources in some particular circumstances in order to avoid short-term personal hardship, whilst bearing in mind the need to avoid establishing dependency on external fundings which may not always be available.

One recent example of this has occurred in a vocational education and training setting in Central Asia where a small project has provided the funding to “kick-start” a participatory curriculum development approach. Careful attention was given to ensuring that within 2-3 years, the actual cost of providing the training was very close to the government’s own estimate of costs, thus following a strategy that should, in principle, have been sustainable. Unfortunately, it became apparent quickly that the government was not, in reality, providing funding even to the level at which they had claimed was standard. This has led to difficult questions being asked. Should the donor cease support to the project, since the government is underfunding its own education system? Should the project continue, funded by the donor and effectively in parallel to the government’s own system (a strategy which generally is not viewed as valid). Or, should other options be explored, such as self-funding by students and their families, or collaborations with private enterprises? These are difficult questions, but perhaps it is inevitable and valuable that they arise. Through a dialogue around issues such as these, conducted in a participatory way, real progress may actually be made.

**Achieving and recognising benefits**

The benefits of PCD may be rather more wide ranging than those commonly identified for curriculum development, although certainly many of the advantages gained have much in common with the anticipated benefits of traditional approaches. As new benefits are perceived, indicators are also needed in order to demonstrate what has occurred in practice. Table x below includes a range of benefits expected from a PCD approach, along with suggested indicators of their achievement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PCD benefits</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
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<tr>
<td>PCD is a continuous learning process</td>
<td>A participatory M+E system is established, revised as required&lt;br&gt;PCD experiences documented &amp; disseminated&lt;br&gt;Existing &amp; / or new partnership/networks for PCD are developed &amp; strengthened at local/national/regional levels&lt;br&gt;PCD process/products take account of policy environment&lt;br&gt;Key learning points from field-based experiences are identified, &amp; curricula revised accordingly</td>
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<td>Equality of decision making</td>
<td>Gender balance of stakeholders&lt;br&gt;Appropriate composition of teacher group involved in PCD&lt;br&gt;Curriculum framework agreed by decision makers&lt;br&gt;Key stakeholders have ability to influence PCD process &amp; outcomes</td>
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<td>Participatory teaching &amp; learning strategies are developed &amp; applied as an integrated part of PCD</td>
<td>Participatory teaching &amp; learning strategies are integrated into curricula, in all class sizes &amp; locations&lt;br&gt;Teachers communicate effectively with learners &amp; involve them actively in the lesson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching &amp; learning materials are developed &amp; applied as an integrated part of PCD</td>
<td>Teaching &amp; learning materials are developed produced &amp; applied by teachers in collaboration with other stakeholders&lt;br&gt;Teaching &amp; learning materials are applied &amp; evaluated in different learning environments, &amp; revised on a regular basis to suit learning objectives&lt;br&gt;Teaching &amp; learning materials are approved by relevant decision-makers</td>
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<td>Agreed learning &amp; performance outcomes are achieved during study &amp; on the job after leaving school</td>
<td>Average pass rate of learners reaches an agreed, satisfactory level&lt;br&gt;Student numbers (based on achievement of entrance criteria) are maintained or increase&lt;br&gt;Progression or employment rates of school leavers are maintained or increase&lt;br&gt;Supervisors &amp; clients of school leavers, or teachers in follow-on institutions are satisfied with their abilities &amp; performance</td>
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<td>An enabling institutional environment supports PCD</td>
<td>PCD approach is accepted/approved by institutional management&lt;br&gt;Adequate structures &amp; procedures are established which create enabling environment for PCD as continuous learning process&lt;br&gt;Adequate resources (time, people, facilities) for PCD committed by institution on continuous basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs &amp; interests of key stakeholders are explored &amp; identified, &amp; integrated into final curriculum</td>
<td>Learning needs assessments are carried out &amp; updated on regular basis to identify and respond to emerging needs&lt;br&gt;Number &amp; range of earlier identified stakeholders involved in PCD is maintained or adapts according to needs&lt;br&gt;List of needs validated by different stakeholders&lt;br&gt;Needs identified are integrated into curricula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common vision for education/ training &amp; PCD is established</td>
<td>Strategies/action plans prepared &amp; agreed jointly by key stakeholders&lt;br&gt;A common vision shared across all layers in the teaching institution (including management, teachers, students, parents, other stakeholders)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active mechanism for peer feedback on PCD process &amp; products</td>
<td>Feedback provided regularly by range of key stakeholders&lt;br&gt;Response to feedback is provided promptly &amp; effectively by education institution(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different solutions and options are made available as different needs &amp; demands emerge</td>
<td>Agreed aims &amp; objectives for PCD process&lt;br&gt;Solutions &amp; options are identified and implemented in collaboration with key stakeholders</td>
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Limitations and challenges to PCD

There are limitations and challenges to a PCD approach. Some of these, as noted in the case study from The Gambia, are common. A high turn-over of personnel, especially in government institutions may mean that there is a need constantly to engage with and provide training for new staff (although a participatory approach will mean that institutional knowledge is more likely to be widespread, and so may actually counter this problem). The Childscope project in Ghana revealed that in order to bring about improvements in teaching and learning, there was a need for a steady, stable, adequate teaching force, and a well managed programme of professional support, supervision and development. Involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders will result in different expectations that have to be understood and addressed. Enthusiasm and commitment to change may vary from stakeholder to stakeholder, sometimes creating obstacles. When participation is addressed seriously, existing power relations will inevitably be questioned, which may result in tensions and conflicts between groups and individuals.

One significant challenge to achieving a PCD approach is the level and nature of facilitation needed to address this relatively process-oriented approach. Some facilitation skills and abilities may not be familiar to many of those used to more traditional curriculum development approaches. In particular, values, attitudes and beliefs of different stakeholders as well as those of the key facilitator are a vital issue for dialogue. There is a real need for sensitivity and awareness of the needs and expectations of others, especially when resistance or conflict emerges, or when difficult decisions are to be made. Capacity development is therefore vital. Different stakeholders will also have different learning needs in this regard, but it is likely that dedicated training, coaching and support will be required. This can increase costs, although it may also bring long-term benefits and a range of transferable skills, useful in different contexts. PCD facilitators are likely to require:

- knowledge and practice of participatory approaches based on articulated sets of personal values and beliefs
- personal strategies for critical reflection on action, and experiential learning approaches with partners and collaborators
- understanding and application of educational technology (situation analysis, learning needs assessment, curriculum design, learning materials design and production, selection and use of participatory teaching and learning methods, curriculum and learning assessment and evaluation)
- knowledge and application of facilitation skills (process design and management, communication, reporting and documentation, etc.)
- knowledge and skills associated with specific subject/technology areas

Even though challenges do undoubtedly exist, with careful facilitation and acknowledgement of the fact that a participatory process may take more time and innovative mechanisms that are different to more conventional hierarchical
approaches, the long-term outcomes are likely to be beneficial, lasting and sustainable.

References


Helvetas (2002). 10 key stages towards effective participatory curriculum development - learning from practice and experience in the Social Forestry Support Programme, Vietnam, and other Helvetas-supported projects. Experience and Learning in International Cooperation no. 2. Zurich: Helvetas


