TWG 12: National policies in curriculum reforms: what makes a quality curriculum in a technological era?

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Introduction

We live in a rapidly changing technological world, with a range of demographic and environmental challenges. Emerging technologies challenge traditional learning, teaching and assessment processes and many countries are reforming (parts of) their curricula in an effort to reflect these challenges. Pre EDUsummIT, discussions of TWG12 focused on what makes a quality curriculum in a technological era. These discussions considered what the purposes of education systems should be in a rapidly changing world, and thus what educational visions, policies and practices might be most appropriate (Butler et al. 2018). In addition, the group members considered; (i) What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values will today's students need to thrive and shape their world? (ii) How can instructional systems develop these knowledge, skills, attitudes and values effectively? (e.g. Howells, 2018). This work highlighted existing tensions within many national education systems including: using technology to enhance existing curriculum subjects and the need to educate next generations of workers to adapt to a rapidly changing technological world and; the contrast between the rhetoric of policy documents and actual classroom practice in many countries. Despite reform at curriculum level, it has not always translated into concerted action at the classroom level.

The complexity of translating policy into practice emerged as a key factor in the discussions of TWG12 at EDUsummIT and in particular, the misalignment across and between the various levels of individual national education systems. Group members stressed that if any curriculum is to be successfully implemented, there is a need to consider all of the levels of the system in a coordinated and coherent way (see Figure 1). The main thrust of the group accordingly centred on ***collaboratively co-constructing curriculum.***
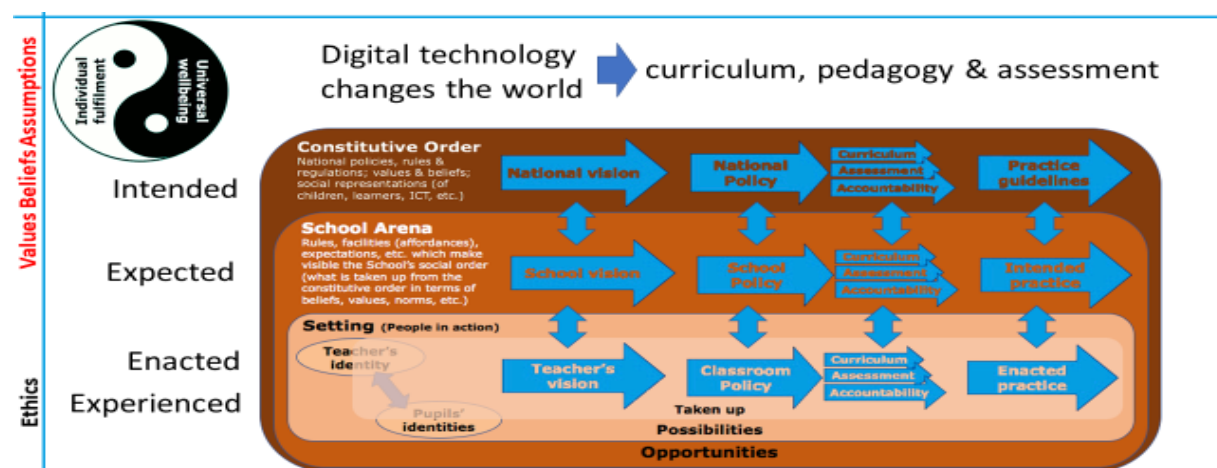

Figure 1. Levels of alignment to be considered in a coordinated and coherent way for curriculum reform

Alignment: Issues & Challenges

Alignment across and between levels is key to collaboratively co-constructing curriculum. TWG12 discussions focused on three core issues which were viewed as paramount when developing national policies to ensure quality curriculum in a technological era: partnership with curriculum stakeholders, teacher professionalism and assessment.

● **Partnership with stakeholders**

Traditionally, curriculum reform can be a top-down process and may only reflects the concerns and interests of an exclusive group of stakeholders (e.g. policy makers) without considering other stakeholders in education including students, parents, teachers, policy makers, commercial companies, NGOs etc. While the process of curriculum development may sometimes appear to include broad consultation, this can be limited or tokenistic with a lack of feedback to inform stakeholders how the consultation process informed the curriculum design. This lack of transparency may result in disengaged stakeholder groups, cynicism and lack of trust in policy and processes.

● **Teacher Professionalism**

Teachers are often not engaged in the consultation process when decisions are made in relation to curriculum. Consequently, they may feel disempowered leading to a perception of de-professionalism.

● **Assessment**

Attempts to define "a quality curriculum" without simultaneously addressing pedagogy and assessment can be viewed as counter-productive. Changing the culture of assessment practices can often be a point of resistance by parents, teachers and policy makers. This raises the question of the purpose of assessment, who it is for and how it is used. Standard approaches to summative assessment are unable to capture the aspects of new curricula focussed on skills and attributes . For example and not unreasonably, teachers tend to focus on those things for which they are held accountable i.e. predominantly high stakes test results. In practice, this means that they continue to focus on content to the exclusion of skills and attributes. Unless solutions are found to the assessment problem, the gap between the rhetoric of national curricula and the reality of practice in schools will remain.

Possible actions to overcome misalignment to enable new alignments

- Removing education policy from short term political cycles (e.g. Finland / Sri Lanka) would enable a more realistic timeframe to engage in consultation informed by research and feedback.
- Raising the status of teachers and teaching as a profession is pivotal as "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (Barber, M., & Mourshed, M., 2007). Consequently, valuing and nurturing of the teaching profession is paramount to attracting high calibre people who engage in continuous professional learning; this must be coupled with a strong support system to ensure quality teaching appropriate for a technological era
- Developing a robust framework for meaningful ongoing consultation so that all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, policy makers, companies, NGOs, and other stakeholders) have a voice in the reform process; this should help to reduce the power imbalance thus creating trust, a sense of ownership and greater engagement
- Understanding curriculum reform as an iterative process (e.g. recent curriculum reform process in the Netherlands entailed six loops of consultation); informed by research in which the curriculum is envisioned and designed in co-creation with all stakeholders. Consultation should to be a part of each cycle of the reform practice i.e. feedback and explanation of decisions made should be provided to stakeholders as part of each cycle (transparency).
- Rethinking the purpose of assessment and exploring the possibilities of new forms of assessment (e.g. Intrinsic feedback from computational materials; AI / Data mining / Learning analytics; Portfolios; Micro credentialing / badges etc,)

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