Development of school curricula

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The education system in Egypt is facing numerous challenges on a variety of levels, which obstructs the materialization of the right to education with its different components as stated in Comment 13 on of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)[i]. Among those components are the quality of education and the way curricula are tailored to the students' needs whether in terms of knowledge or skills.

The 2011-2030 education strategic plan underlined the absence of a broad vision as far as developing curricula is concerned and relying in upgrading curricula on a fragmented approach that merges unrelated material from different international curricula. In addition, curricula and teaching and learning methodologies are detached from the actual school environment and the participation of teachers in discussions about curricula and in developing in-class supplemental material is minimal.

This paper will underline the main challenges facing the methodologies and different phases of setting school curricula in Egypt and will survey international experiences and propose development strategies.

The curriculum development process faces a numbers of challenges:

- Lack of focus on students/ learners in the constitutional texts that identify the goal of education
- The absence of a clear legal text that describes the process of setting school curricula
- Lack of clarity about the role of the Center for Curricula Development in the actual development of curricula and about the criteria according to which its members are chosen/ appointed
- The centralization of the curricula development process and lack of participation on the part of relevant parties including the parliament and other local councils
- Curricula are not updated in accordance with modern advances not only in terms of technology, but also as far as the philosophy of education and the most recent scientific discoveries are concerned
- Lack of coordination between parties in charge of setting curricula and teachers
- The rigidity and conventionality of assessment methodologies
- The rigidity of curricula and the way they do not allow students to develop their critical thinking abilities
- The discrepancy between public and private schools as far as the quality of curricula is concerned

School curricula as part of the educational process:

In the past few decades, reports and recommendations on education have mainly focused on quantitative components such as the number of students and the number of schools while overlooking qualitative ones. Providing education for all is one of the state's duties as stipulated by international charters. What is more important, however, is the type and quality of this education, how it is provided, and in what kind of environment. These issues, unlike the traditional approach, focus on the qualitative rather than the quantitative aspects of education.

The school curriculum is at the core of the educational process owing to its role in shaping the personality of students/learners and its role in embodying the educational goals of a given country. The curriculum is not only comprised of the material in text books, but also encompasses methods of teaching, presentation, and evaluation. Curricula are the main foundation on which the quality of the educational process is based. That is why this paper focuses on the criteria upon which curricula are set and the means of ensuring their quality. There have been demands to develop school curricula not only by students and parents, but the same demands are echoed by the media and academia owning to the role of those curricula in shaping the awareness and personality of the students.

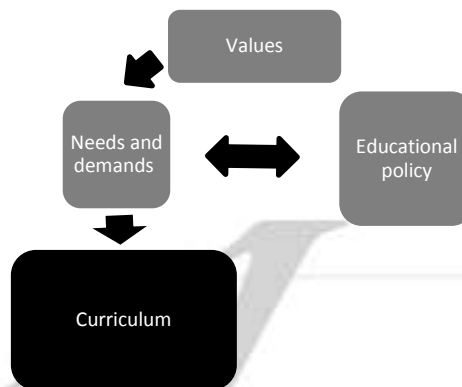## Curriculum setting criteria in international experiences:

Figure (1): From the UNESCO paper on curriculum development

According to the UNESCO study on curriculum assessment[ii], curricula are developed based on:

1- The values governing a given society

2- The needs and demands of this society that are affected by the educational process in the following manner:

Accordingly,

- The more participatory the curriculum making process is in a way that allows relevant parties to express their opinion, the more representative the curriculum becomes of the needs and demands of society.

- An adequate level of flexibility and creativity in curricula and access to different types of knowledge and skills develop students'/children's abilities in an independent manner[iii].

If the system that develops curricula is centralized and exclusive, how can it cater to the needs of children in different environments?

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France is relatively similar to Egypt since it is a centralized state. Until 2003, there was not an entity in charge if developing curricula. France also has more than 300 charters related to curriculum development[iv]. In 2013, as part of an education development policy, the following changes were introduced:

- A Supreme Council for Education was established for the aim of preserving the transparency and autonomy of curriculum development.
- The minister chooses the chairman of this council, who in turn chooses 18 members, based on the fair representation of both sexes, provided that six of them are members of parliament and the rest are educational experts.
- The council determines the main criteria according to which curricula are to be based after consulting experts from all relevant fields and the resulting documents are to be submitted to the council before ratification by the minister[v].

Finland is considered by European countries and the United States to have performed a miracle in education. In the 1970s, Finland embarked on a process of developing the educational system for the purpose of offering equal education opportunities for all citizens. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, a gradual process to shift to a decentralized system started and local authorities were given more powers as far as education is concerned in their respective municipalities. The process of curriculum development in Finland is currently based on the following:

- The National Education Council issues a curriculum charter that is the result of a set of discussions and workshops encompassing all municipalities. This charter has an administrative, intellectual, and pedagogical function. The charter identifies the main purpose of education in Finland, the courses to be taught for each stage and their goals, and the skills/knowledge learners are expected to acquire. The charter also offers an account of how many hours are required for each course.
- Municipal authorities translate this charter in a way that caters to the needs of each local area. This includes the number of hours and the administration of the educational process. Each municipality the issues a local curriculum development charter that represents its version of the national one[vi].
- Finnish schools and teachers enjoy a high level of autonomy regarding the material to be taught in accordance with both the national charter and its relevant local version[vii].
- The Finnish educational system lays special emphasis on teachers who at least have to hold Masters Degrees, receive intensive training, and are given high salaries. They also enjoy a great deal of autonomy inside the classroom.

The curriculum development process in Egypt: Recommendations

It is not possible to develop school curricula without upgrading the process through which this development takes place. This process needs to be more participatory so that it would include representatives of the different echelons of society. Relevant parties to take place in the process should include the executive departments of the Ministry of Education and the Center for Education Development, municipal authorities and individuals including teachers, students, and parents. The process should take place in stages and should be transparent. It is also important to look into the criteria for appointing the staff of the Center for Education Development and ministry employees in charge of setting school curricula to make sure that they are chosen based on efficiency and experience rather than seniority and that they are chosen based on a clear set of rules. Fair access to quality education for all would only be possible when the curricula in public schools are radically changed so that they no longer depend on memorization while paying no attention to developing students' critical thinking abilities and the same should apply to exams and other forms of assessment. Curricula need to be flexible enough to cater to the needs of different regions in Egypt since what students in Siwa Oasis need is not the same as students in Alexandria, for example. This should happen while ensuring that the quality stays the same nation-wide and that the educational system in all parts of the country depends on developing students' mentalities and personalities. This necessitates providing teachers with intensive training and developing the educational environment inside the schools. It also means that developing school curricula not only implies a shift towards decentralization and the appointment of efficient staff, but also coordination with all other relevant entities like the schools of education, the Teachers' Academy, and the bodies in charge of setting exams. This should be accompanied by budget amendments in which teachers' salaries are raised and more money is allocated generally to education and to printing new books.

Because if the process of curriculum development is conducted without a clear methodology that relies of participation, representation, and efficiency it could end up repeating the same mistakes of the past, the following three recommendations need to be taken into consideration:

1- Legislative amendments, whether at the level of the constitution or laws, that would identify the philosophy of education in Egypt and lay more emphasis on the students'

acquirement of knowledge and skills rather than the sweeping national goals that overlook individual characteristics

2- Drafting a new curriculum development charter that is learner-based, participatory, and flexible

3- Enhancing teachers' skills and raising their social status

Implementation mechanisms:

Implementation mechanisms first need to be discussed among relevant players—both legislative and executive—civil society, and individuals. In order for those mechanisms to be effective, decision-makers need to be serious about developing education and shifting the focus of the educational process towards students' skills and knowledge.

First: Legislative reforms

The challenges facing education and curriculum development in Egypt are to a great extent associated with the state's philosophy on education and the laws that govern the educational process as a whole. Several legislative amendments are required in order to make the curriculum development process more participatory, flexible, and representative of the diversity of the Egyptian society:

1- Revising the articles in the constitution on education so that they focus on the learners' knowledge, skills, and critical thinking

2- Revising the 1981 Education Law and making it more learner-based

3- Adding a section in the Education Law on the rules of administering the curriculum development process with special focus on including a wide range of writers and not only Ministry of Education staff as is the case at the moment

4- Adding an article that identifies the duties of the Center for Education Development and the criteria through which its staff is appointed so that it would be based on transparency and efficiency rather than direct appointment by the minister

5- Adding an article that defines a clear role for legislative bodies in the curriculum development process

6- Revising the constitution and the Education Law in a way that allows a shift towards the decentralization of the educational process and the fair representation of all governorates

Second: Drafting a new curriculum development charter

The curriculum development charter would be the reference all writers of textbooks should consult. This charter would include the philosophy of education for each stage, its main goals, and the skills and knowledge the learner is expected to acquire in it. It should also determine teaching methods and the number of hours. The phrasing of the charter should be extremely lucid while leaving room for textbook writers to be creative and for flexibility of adaptation for different local environments. Such a charter was already issued in Egypt, yet it was not participatory and it did not trigger a radical change in curricula or teaching methodologies. For this reason, the following is proposed:

1- Changing the criteria through which staff at the Center for Curriculum Development is employed in a way that ensures representation from different departments of the Ministry of Education, legislative bodies, governorates, civil society, and educational experts

2- Establishing a committee affiliated to the Center for Education Development whose role is to draft a charter for primary school curricula as a start, provided that the charter is the outcome of a number of workshops attended by relevant entities and individuals from across the country

3- One of the main roles of this committee would be revising assessment methodologies so that the educational process is not only evaluated through exams, but also through the students' ability to acquire knowledge and think critically.

4- The charter is to be submitted to the Ministry of Education for ratification following a societal dialogue and parliamentary approval

5- Publishing the charter and launching a textbook writing competition for writers and publishing houses

6- Establishing an independent committee to evaluate competing books and how far they abide by the charter then authorizing more than one book for each course so that teachers' can choose what is more suitable for their context

Third: Enhancing teachers' skills and improving their status

The process of developing curricula would not bear fruit unless teachers receive the proper training that enables them to teach the new material. This can be done through the following:

1- Developing the curricula of schools of Education and the Teachers' Academy in parallel with the development of school curricula and in accordance with the new charter

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2- Motivating teachers through providing them with more training on teaching methodologies, participations, and in-class autonomy

3- Raising teachers' salaries, which needs amendments in the national budget and allowance to education

4- Improving teachers' social status through training that ensures their ability to deal with children and teenagers in the appropriate manner and only appointing them after they pass the relevant tests

Curriculum development is a long and arduous process, but is inevitable in the light of the challenges currently facing the Egyptian education system. Political will and societal participation are as important as legislative and budget amendments in order to develop a participatory process that is based in efficiency and fair representation.

[i] "Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 13, The right to education.", *in* http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/escgencom13.htm

[ii] Christian Depover, "Conception et pilotage des reformes du curriculum", UNESCO, mars 2006.

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[iii] Christian Depover, ibid.

[iv] Roger-François Gauthier, Maryline Coquidé et Dominique Raulin, « France : l'avancée du Socle commun et les

questions posées », Revue internationale d'éducation de Sèvres [En ligne], 56 | avril 2011.

[v] Installation du conseil superieur des programmes, dossier de presentation, Ministere Education Nationale, octobre 2013.

[vi] Finnish Education in a nutshell, Ministry of Education in Finland, *in*
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dO9NqHr96eWH3vtmgkZy_qjh8aw&sig2=RJNlH4N3BsZSvkMsylfasQ&bvm=bv.93756505,d.bGQ

[vii] Erja Vitikka, Leena Krokfors & Elisa Hurmerinta, "The Finnish national core curriculum: structure and Development." *Miracle of Education*. Eds. Niemi, Toom & Kallioniemi. University of Helsinki, 2012.