

The thinking behind what I will be presenting to you this morning began with the question: Is there some sense in which the content of everyone's education should be the same—a kind of curricular equity? And if so, how might one go about determining what that equity would look like, given all the vast diversity in the world?

For suggestions, one might look to some of the founding documents that articulate the right to education,

such as, of course, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration states that education must be free and compulsory in the elementary stages, accessible based on merit in the more advanced stages, and directed to the full development of the human personality. This certainly makes clear the importance of some kind of equality of education; but the Declaration, perhaps necessarily given the kind of document it is, leaves out nearly all of the specifics.

The World Declaration on Education For All gives a slightly more concrete picture, stating that education must meet students' basic learning needs by providing "essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) re-

quired by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve their quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning.” Although this description gives a general direction for curricular planning, names a few key subject areas, and provides a statement of purpose for the curriculum,

the international discussion of educational development (as seen in the most important international development reports) has, by and large, discussed curriculum only in broad, abstract terms.

This is particularly notable in the most common indicators of progress in educational development, which include enrollment rate, public expenditures, literacy rate, primary school completion rates, student-teacher ratios, number of textbooks, and percent of teachers that completed certified teacher training.

While all of this information is important in building effective educational systems, none of these indicators examine what students are intended to learn during their school career.

Given the importance of the quality of curriculum for

the overall success of educational development efforts, description and analysis of curricula merits more international attention that is currently given. We have the broad direction set forth by the World Declaration on Education For All, but the international development community has yet to operationalize the description into concrete tools that planners can use to study and improve curricula.

We need an analytical device, a kind of curricular schema, that can be used to monitor progress in curricular development and facilitate international comparison of curricula. The schema would have to be specific enough allow “apples-to-apples” comparisons, and yet general enough to account for the diversity seen in different parts of the world.

This schema could then also be used as a heuristic tool to identify specific areas of weakness in given curricula and thus guide future development projects to fill the gaps.

How can we determine what should be included in such a schema?

I believe we can start with the idea that education fulfills a responsibility of the knowledgeable to share their

knowledge that has the potential to reduce suffering. Consider the example of a woman who moves to a new village suffering from water-borne illnesses. She knows that boiling water kills bacteria, but she notices that none of the other villagers boil their water. We would call the woman selfish or unkind if she purposefully withheld her knowledge about disease prevention. Put another way, the woman has a moral responsibility to share her knowledge about boiling water, since doing so would relieve the unnecessary suffering of her neighbors.

This suggests a criterion we can use to determine what should be included, namely, knowledge that could reduce suffering. Now, this is phrased negatively in terms of suffering. I would much rather speak positively about improving quality of life, or something along those lines. However, it's difficult to see how anyone has an arbitrary responsibility to increase the quality of life of others when that increase isn't linked with suffering. For example, someone who has enough wealth to own a vacation home might have a better quality of life if I helped him obtain a leisure yacht as well, but I doubt anyone would say that I have a *responsibility* to do so. Speaking of the responsibility in terms of suffering, as unpleasant as it may sound, provides a reasonable mechanism

for judging the limits of a responsibility to share one's knowledge.

With this criterion, then, we can follow the relatively straightforward procedure of examining the different areas of life to determine what knowledge and skills are necessary to reduce suffering in each area. Now, this could quickly become very detailed and cumbersome, since human lives are complex, and there is a great deal of information that can be used to reduce suffering.

We can introduce a principle, however, to limit the number of details included in the curriculum without diluting the curriculum's potential to reduce suffering. The principle goes along the same lines as the old adage "Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime." In other words, the curriculum could spell out every detail the every student will need to know to get through life ("giving a fish"); or alternatively, the curriculum could equip students to obtain for themselves the knowledge they'll need ("teaching to fish"). This would involve some minimal set of basic skills and knowledge necessary to analyze problems and to locate and make sense of sources of knowledge to help solve those problems. Even though such a curriculum wouldn't provide *all* the knowledge necessary

to reduce suffering, it would empower students to tackle the problems of their own human suffering themselves through continual self-improvement and improvement of their communities.

Based on this procedure, I have come up with a preliminary schema, which I've outlined on this handout. Unfortunately I don't have time to look at the draft in detail, but I would like to point out its three main sections:

foundational skills, disciplinary content, and community.

Foundational skills encompass the most basic communication and reasoning skills that are used in all areas of life and permit and facilitate further learning. If, due to resource constraints, a curriculum must be stripped to its bare bones using the principle of empowering self-improvement, the content areas in this category will be least affected, since they constitute the core skills that enable students to analyze and solve problems and continue learning on their own once the provided instruction has ended. They form the essence of "teaching the student to fish," so to speak.

The disciplinary content category includes knowledge and skills related to specific areas of life. In the situation

of scarcity of resources, the content areas in this category will include fewer actual details and act more as orientations to the field so that students will know where to find more information in that domain when the circumstances of their lives demand it.

Finally, content in the community category addresses how to live harmoniously with others, as well as certain practical questions about navigating life in the community, such as how to find housing or make use of available means of transportation.

Now, this schema is not a curriculum itself, but only the outline of what to think about when designing the curriculum. Since it's intended to be universal, it can't specify context-dependent details. The schema is like a set of cubby-holes for the curriculum: The content areas define a minimum set of slots that the curriculum planners must fill with context-appropriate content.

Moving from schema to curriculum therefore requires local contextualization. For each the content area, curriculum planners will need to identify the knowledge and skills that have the potential to reduce suffering in the students' particular context.

Preferably, this would take place through a participa-

tory process by people closest to the group of intended recipients, who are most familiar with the intricacies of the students' context.

The schema thus acts as a kind of heuristic tool to guide planners' thinking about curriculum in a systematic way so that the resulting curriculum covers all the bases required by the responsibility to educate. By matching existing curricula with the schema, planners can identify areas that need to be expanded; and in times of resource scarcity, the schema can help planners determine which areas of the curriculum can, regrettably of course, be reduced without imperiling students' overall ability to continue learning beyond what can currently be provided.

In these unhappy cases, it is important to keep in mind that what remains in the curriculum must support the goal of training students to use their learning, critical thinking, and research skills for solving problems, which will require an awareness of the fields of knowledge and tools available to them in creating potential solutions, as well as an orientation to the resources available to them to continue learning in the future.

The goal of a universal basic education schema is, of

course, to improve the quality of students' actual learning.

However, the schema is largely ignorant of the eventual delivery method for the curriculum. Planners will want to be aware of formal, non-formal, and informal learning opportunities and capitalize on each. [For example, in some regions that use informal personal loans instead of a bank system for providing entrepreneurial capital, students may absorb the customs of borrowing and lending automatically at home; whereas, in regions with more opaque banking systems, students will more likely need formal training in how money lending takes place.]

One should also note that the schema and the curricula that may be developed with it are not sufficient to produce learning by themselves. Curriculum, though extremely important, is only one of a number of factors necessary for effective education.

Instead, the schema would usually form only one part of larger projects to improve the quality of education in a developing region.

Furthermore, even though I've spoken about reducing suffering, education may not be able to achieve this goal

on its own in some areas where systemic problems hinder development efforts. In these cases, a comprehensive development strategy will be necessary to break down these barriers so that the improved education can realize its full effect.

Finally, the schema facilitates structured, qualitative monitoring of progress in curricular development that permit international comparisons despite variation in local learning needs. Such comparisons would evaluate how well the curricula in each nation have fulfilled the requirements of each area in the schema, given the local context, and thus render diverse educational systems comparable.