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# What Does Everyone Need to Learn?

Toward a Universal Schema  
for Basic Education Curricula

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The characteristics of the family in which children are raised have an enormous effect on the kinds of formative experiences they enjoy, which, in turn, direct the trajectory of the remainder of their lives in dramatic ways. Children born into wealthy families have access to rich formative experiences, which lead to a greater variety of opportunities during adult life than children born into poorer families. But this hardly seems fair: Why should opportunity for success in adult life depend so much on the luck of birth, irrespective of natural ability or personal motivation? In recent decades, the international community has pushed for universal schooling as a means of equalizing, in part, the formative experiences of children in richer and poorer families. Unfortunately, many states find themselves in the unhappy position of having too few resources to provide every child with the lavish education they might desire. As a result, it has become increasingly important for states and other educational providers to seek out ways of maximizing educational benefit given limited resources, while still achieving the opportunity-equalizing function we assign to schooling.

This suggests the question: Is there some guideline curriculum planners can use to reduce the cost incurred by a given curriculum without jeopardizing the power of their schools to reduce the opportunity gap between rich and poor? Is there some minimal set of content to which everyone ought to have educational access? The international community has yet to establish a detailed answer to this question. International discussions about education have certainly underscored the great importance of educational and curricular quality, but descriptions of what counts as quality content have remained rather vague. Moreover, the common indicators used in international monitoring reports are unrelated to the quality of curricular content. Since access to schooling is nearly irrelevant if the quality of what students learn in school is insufficient, the international community needs to begin monitoring curricular content, in addition to the current indicators. This can be facilitated by an analytical device—a schema for basic education curricula—used to facilitate the evaluation and comparison of curricula in diverse contexts.

The foundation for such a schema may be established by means of moral responsibility. Consider a woman who knows boiling water kills bacteria. We would call the woman selfish if she refused to share this knowledge with those in her village suffering from water-borne diseases. Those who hold knowledge that has the potential to reduce suffering bear a responsibility to share that knowledge. When the responsibility to educate is framed in terms of Thomas Pogge's institutional conception of human rights, all people can fulfill the responsibility to educate by supporting educative institutions, broadly understood.

The responsibility to educate suggests a criterion for the curricular schema:

Knowledge that has the potential to reduce suffering forms the absolute minimum content of the curriculum of any sufficient educational system. Since human lives are quite complex, a list of all knowledge that has the potential to reduce suffering could become quite detailed. However, we can limit the detail of the curriculum without diluting its power to reduce suffering by following a principle of ensuring the curriculum empowers self-improvement. Thus, a skeleton list of content areas can be developed for the schema by examining all areas of life and applying the criterion of knowledge that has the potential to reduce suffering in light of the principle of empowering self-improvement. The schema can then be used in curricular development through a participatory process of local contextualization in which curriculum planners specify the knowledge and skills necessary to reduce suffering for each content area given the target students local context.

The resultant schema (the criterion, principle, and skeleton) may also be used to evaluate and compare existing curricula in external monitoring reports. An evaluation based on the schema analyzes the curriculum in terms of each of the content areas of the schema to determine how well the curriculum meets students local learning needs. The evaluation then identifies the curriculums strengths, weaknesses, and excesses (i.e. where the curriculum goes beyond the absolute minimum required by the schema). These excesses are not undesirable, but indicate areas that could be reduced in the case of resource shortages. Such an evaluation would ideally take the form of a dialog between external observers and local curriculum planners to leverage their different perspectives and come to consensus on students needs.

The recent push toward universalizing access to schooling is a laudable effort in the fight against poverty and human suffering by improving equity in educational access. However, schools will remain ineffective at furthering this goal if the knowledge and skills they provide to students bear little relevance to students' lives or do not cover all of the students' basic learning needs. Moreover, all people who support a given social order have a responsibility to ensure that society provides knowledge that has the potential to reduce suffering to those who need it. The schema for basic education curricula presented here supports both of these goals by providing a framework for thinking about curricula in terms of students' learning needs and an outline of categories of knowledge and skills to which all students ought to have access. The schema can be used as both a planning and an evaluative tool, and can thus support local and national educational reform efforts, as well as international monitoring of progress toward Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals. By paying greater attention to the content of the education we provide, we can move forward confidently with plans for expanding access to schooling, knowing that access to schooling means access to the vital knowledge students need to attack the challenges of their lives.