

**WHAT DOES EVERYONE NEED TO LEARN:  
TOWARD A UNIVERSAL SCHEMA FOR BASIC EDUCATION CURRICULA  
Thesis Outline**

*Michael Culbertson, April 2008*

I. Introduction

A. The Push for Universal Basic Education

1. The luck of birth unfairly limits future opportunities
2. Schooling can reduce the opportunity gap between the rich and poor
3. Schooling has historically been accessible only to the elite
4. Recent international movements have called for the universalization of access to schooling

B. The Importance of Curriculum for Effective Education

C. The Lack of an Adequate International Description of Curricular Quality

1. Existing international instruments only vaguely describe curricular quality
  - a) Universal Declaration of Human Rights
  - b) World Declaration on Education For All
  - c) World Bank Education Sector Strategy Paper
2. Indicators used in international monitoring neglect curriculum
3. Adequacy lawsuits in the United States

II. Foundation

A. Human Rights and Moral Responsibility

1. Education as a human right
2. An institutional conception of human rights

B. From Reactive Attitudes to Moral Responsibility

1. Reactive attitudes to our perceptions of others' postures toward us
2. Exceptions to the reactive attitudes
3. Reactive attitudes to our perceptions of others' postures toward third parties

C. Education as a Moral Responsibility

D. Limits of the Responsibility

1. Not all knowledge has equal potential to reduce suffering
2. Some possess more knowledge than others
3. People experience different degrees of suffering
4. The responsibility is proportional to the means of the teacher
5. The responsibility does not automatically extend to every piece of knowledge
6. The responsibility is limited by the prospective students' willingness and capacity to learn
7. Permissibility of compulsory education for children

E. Fulfilling the Responsibility

1. Logical equivalence of the responsibility to educate and the human right to education
2. Fulfilling the responsibility by supporting educational institutions
3. Responsibility of rich nations to poor nations

F. Toward a Curricular Criterion

III. Framework

A. Preliminaries

1. Procedure for establishing the framework
2. Principle of empowering self-improvement
3. Individual focus versus communal focus

B. Foundational Skills

1. Communication
2. Numeracy
3. Reasoning
4. Research

- C. Disciplinary Content
  - 1. Health
  - 2. Government
  - 3. Economics
  - 4. Employment
- D. Community
  - 1. Group identity
  - 2. Interpersonal skills
  - 3. Communal life
- E. From Schema to Curriculum
  - 1. Local contextualization
  - 2. Local participation
- F. Comparison with Other Proposed Universal Curricula
  - 1. Mortimer Adler
  - 2. E.D. Hirsch
  - 3. Nel Noddings
- G. Compatibility with Other Educational Objectives
  - 1. Educating for Economic Growth
  - 2. Educating for Democracy
  - 3. Educating for Peace
  - 4. Educating for Academia
- IV. Analysis and Monitoring
  - A. Process
    - 1. Identifying strengths
    - 2. Identifying weaknesses
    - 3. Identifying excesses
  - B. Examples
    - 1. Cambodia
    - 2. Virginia
  - C. External Observers
- V. Conclusion
- VI. Appendices
  - A. Summary of the Schema
  - B. Examples from Cambodia
  - C. Examples from Virginia

**WHAT DOES EVERYONE NEED TO LEARN:  
TOWARD A UNIVERSAL SCHEMA FOR BASIC EDUCATION CURRICULA  
Executive Summary**

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The characteristics of the family in which children are raised have an enormous effect on the kinds of formative experiences they enjoys, 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 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 is 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 comprises 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 em-

powering 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 curriculum's strengths, weaknesses, and excesses, 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.

## DRAFT UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION SCHEMA

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mculbert@bu.edu

- **Criterion:** Knowledge/skills that have the potential to reduce suffering
- **Principle:** Empower self-improvement

### FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

#### • **Communication**

- Language: dominant languages necessary for commerce, government, and civil society
- Reading: ability to read common documents (such as newspapers, informational pamphlets, technical manuals, business agreements, and government documents)
- Verbal Expression: ability to express one's thoughts, desires, and needs to others verbally, including any special forms of communication (eg formal business letter)
- Tools: means of communication (eg community fora, postal systems, email, web, as available)

#### • **Numeracy**

- Counting
- Quantitative reasoning
- Marking the passage of time
- Arithmetic

- Basic geometry
- Elementary algebra

#### • **Reasoning**

- Evaluating data
- Identifying stakeholders
- Making inferences
- Analyzing causal relationships
- Identifying potential solutions
- Predicting potential outcomes
- Decision-making
- Making arguments

#### • **Research**

- Formulating a clear research question
- Locating sources of information, including “book research,” investigative or experimental methods, and people who are likely to have or can lead one to the desired information
- Evaluating sources of information

### DISCIPLINARY CONTENT

#### • **Health**

- Nutrition
- Exercise and rest
- First aid
- Disease awareness
- Sexual health
- Maternal/infant health
- Personal safety
- Medical facilities

#### • **Government**

- How decisions are made
- How to participate in government

#### • **Economics**

- Financial literacy: currency, banking, rationing wealth/planning for the future, local system of borrowing and lending, debt awareness, consumer credit (as applicable)

#### • **Entrepreneurship:**

- Recognizing a need for goods or services
- Preparing a business strategy
- Understanding business cash flow and basic accounting
- Familiarity with basic marketing
- Knowing how or where to obtain capital
- Being aware of the legal requirements on business

#### • **Employment**

- Obtaining Employment: locating available jobs, local customs of soliciting employment, presenting oneself in a winsome way, kinds of compensation other than salary in common use
- Technical Skills

### COMMUNITY

#### • **Group Identity**

- May include history, literature, fine arts

#### • **Interpersonal skills**

- Understanding perspective
- Politeness, mutual respect

- Admitting when one has erred, asking and extending forgiveness

#### • **Practical orientation to the community**

- Housing, transportation
- Rights/responsibilities of living in the community