UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response

Education Sector Issue Notes

Issue Note N° 4.2

Developed by UNESCO Beirut Office, International Bureau of Education and Section of Education Policy with support from UNESCO Offices in Bangkok and Abuja

COVID -19 Crisis and Curriculum:
Sustaining Quality Outcomes in the Context of Remote Learning

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the lives of large numbers of learners, teachers and parents around the world, with millions now teaching and learning from home. While this is first and foremost a health crisis, it will likely have significant long-term effects on education, including on curriculum and learning. The situation, however, could become an opportunity to rethink curriculum, teaching-learning-assessment processes and the development of learners' competencies with a view to strengthening their learning skills and sustaining their motivation.

While it is still too early to anticipate when education institutions can resume their regular activities, the after-crisis period must be already envisaged in order for the learning (and curriculum) continuum to be preserved.

Lessons learned from country/national level efforts, especially in the context of Education in Emergencies (EiE), and the meaningful usage of resources (including digital resources) should be leveraged so that learners, teachers and parents are neither overwhelmed nor confused.

This crisis will likely provide an opportunity for schools to strengthen their ties with families, and for teachers to communicate and cooperate better with parents in the interest of learners. In the same vein, the crisis means teachers and parents may become more involved in decisions regarding curriculum appropriateness. This can support the development of a learner-centred, participative and inclusive learning paradigm that takes into account the interests of learners, as well as their environments and aspirations.

Defining the topic and related key issues

Within the context of the COVID 19 pandemic, there is a tendency to rush towards the use of ICTs to ensure continuity of learning. However, more consideration is needed around the qualitative approach if the objective is for students to be engaged, motivated and supported to learn during this period. Continuity of learning outside school requires special provisions that must allow for:

- **Learners** to benefit from well thought-out, quality and accessible teaching and learning resources as well as social and emotional support, such as through teachers' and parents' confidence and understanding;
- **Teachers** to support learners in acquiring, developing and applying their knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours, all underpinned by values, such as those related to Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD);
- **Families** to help contribute to the education of their children through support, encouragement and equipment; and finally
- **The education system** to adapt to new requirements by revising learning provisions and requirements, and taking necessary regulatory actions, as appropriate.

Curriculum, as well as curriculum-related matters, such as teaching and learning materials, classroom practices and assessment, need to be approached differently and in a systemic way. Business as usual needs to be replaced with creative solutions and flexible innovations, aimed at encouraging meaningful, relevant, effective, and quality learning in times of crisis.

Curriculum is usually comprised of curriculum frameworks, plans of study, syllabuses (i.e. including sets of competences to be acquired through learning areas and learning content/scope and sequences), and the associated teaching and learning resources, such as textbooks. In the context of remote learning, textbooks and lessons are often uploaded and teachers provide distance lessons and suggest homework. All these operations need thorough planning in accordance with learning priorities and quality standards and benchmarks, with a view to avoiding student and parent overload.

- **Learning areas**: Some learning areas may already be available online (such as for Languages, Maths and Sciences). More efforts and creativity may need to be invested in other learning areas, such as Social Studies, the Arts and Physical Education (PE), which should not be neglected. Countries need to pay attention to distinguish between learning areas that require rigorous scope and sequencing, and those in which learning content may be organized more flexibly.

- **Textbooks**: As they are the most visible components of the curriculum and therefore closest to teachers and learners, going digital is sometimes limited to uploading textbooks, lessons and homework online. In many countries, textbooks are produced by the private sector. The copyright and authorization to make them digital might be challenging, with cost implications. Effective partnerships between the public and private sector, for example publishing houses and ICT enterprises, need to be settled as soon as possible.

- **Teachers**: They can be asked to share lessons online or via TV and radio broadcasting. While these are important measures in maintaining the functioning of the education system, teachers need to be prepared to explore the full range of opportunities that remote learning offers, for example through online platforms, social media, TV or radio, so that teachers preserve their communication with learners in an interactive manner. The education system should prioritize the needs of teachers who, faced with this emergency situation, must organize themselves to ensure pedagogical continuity. This continuity should be based on the

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teachers' capacity to act professionally and independently; their ability to act, to adapt and to interact in complex situations; their ability to account for their knowledge, know-how, and actions; as well as their autonomy and personal responsibility. It is important to organize teachers around rapid means of communication dedicated to the management of this crisis. This may include providing them with a virtual training and exchange platform; and training them to use social media, for instance Twitter and WhatsApp, for pedagogical purposes such as through quick lesson plans and pedagogical hints.

- **Assessment:** Appropriate methods should be used to evaluate and validate learning outcomes. Among the resources and courses to be offered remotely, it is important to integrate evaluation at several levels through: a) immediate, relevant and constructive feedback to learners; b) formative evaluation based on observations, interactions, group discussions, strategic questioning, creative projects and other stimulating evaluation tasks for students; c) graded evaluations; and d) summative evaluations such as end-of-year exams. Under the current circumstances, summative evaluations and high-stake examinations will probably have to be reconsidered as well as standardized assessment (i.e. either postponed; or replaced by other types of evaluation, such as formative classroom- and school-based evaluations; and/or modified with regard to their scope and delivery modalities, such as through opting for online examinations – countries will have to consider different scenarios and take customized decisions).

- **Diversifying teaching-learning options**: It is important to remember that a systemic approach to the curriculum will further enhance the diversification of educational provision beyond traditional teaching and learning approaches. Digital learning, through e-learning platforms and tools, is certainly the most advocated choice. Digital content should though be accompanied by other types of media, such as TV, radio and social media to reach out to all students including those lacking e-tools and connectivity.

Lessons from past practices and current crisis

From past and current experiences, it is a fact that countries make impressive efforts in switching from face-to-face to remote learning approaches using digital means.

However, as also shown in the context of the current crisis, going digital does not only mean to upload lessons and/or having teachers lecture in front of a camera. Without appropriate teacher preparation and strong leadership and coordination at national and local school levels, going digital may trigger teachers, learners and parents feeling overloaded and confused. Learners may be flooded with homework that they and their families cannot handle. In addition, many students and their families do not have access to online means – and national and local networks becomes quickly oversaturated and slow in responding. Other challenges include poor infrastructure and tools, competing households' economic capacities, as well as high illiteracy rates and languages of instruction.

In addition to imparting knowledge and developing and maintaining learners' skills, learning in the context of a crisis implies also focusing on values and responding to learners' needs to be comforted, to receive adequate social and emotional support and be motivated to have a positive outlook on the future. The crisis calls for more intersectoral collaboration between education, health, economy, and other sectors, from a holistic and inclusive perspective.

In the context of crisis, learning can and should be enriched and diversified through oral history and family or community-based intergenerational learning that involves families, teachers and principals through multidirectional sharing and learning from one another. This will imply going beyond formal

teaching and learning and considering also non-formal and informal education.

As much as possible, learners should be encouraged to play and be engaged in joyful learning activities that are able to uplift their spirits in times of crisis and enhance learning motivation.

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions

At policy level

It is important that curriculum development agencies and departments of Ministries of Education establish tasks forces, also including teachers and parents, to redefine curriculum and learning outcomes in the context of different subject areas. Teachers and parents should be able to work in a flexible and creative manner based on clear guidance by focusing on what is most important in learning. In times of crisis, one cannot expect the entire, usually demanding and overloaded, curriculum to be delivered to learners via online means.

Coherence and equity in learning opportunities, knowledge building, skills development and their application for all students including girls, those living in rural areas, displaced persons, those with special needs and those from low income families, need to be addressed.

It is important to give priority to learners who are to graduate, those with learning difficulties, and to learners at risk of dropping out of school for economic reasons.

Systemic approaches to the curriculum need to be maintained by ensuring coherence among educational policies, school management, student learning, assessment, teacher practices, training and resources. It is important not only to put in place a platform of resources to upload and download, but it is equally important to seek coherence between all the components of the curriculum and curriculum-related issues.

Times of crisis may be also used to invite teachers to delve into other elements of the written curriculum in addition to textbooks, such as curriculum frameworks and syllabuses, from where they can access broad orientations around what makes up the quality of learning and curriculum delivery. Such exercises can be used in spreading a solid curriculum culture based on a shared vision of quality learning.

Ministries of Education, and Curriculum units, in cooperation with teacher coordinators and assessment specialists, need to start thinking and planning for the after-crisis period, when schools will resume, and learners will need catch-up classes and refresher activities. However, given the lessons learnt from different crises, curriculum development and implementation should not be approached as business as usual. The current crisis constitutes a major opportunity for reconsidering what is good learning and for quick curriculum assessment exercises to identify whether there are unnecessary or inappropriate elements in the curriculum that should be redefined, eliminated, replaced or improved.

At operational level

School principals need to coordinate their teachers by encouraging them to talk to one another and harmonize their teaching approaches, as well as homework and assessment requirements.

Schools should be clustered and organized in a way that teachers can network and receive support from head teachers, coaches or school inspectors, in critical subject matters or methodology, particularly on ICT-pedagogy integration.

National and local school authorities need to quickly assess the capacities of teachers to support online learning in an interactive way. Schools and teachers should be given more autonomy in managing the curriculum according to local conditions.

In order to enhance teachers' and parents' capacity to support remote learning, national and local school leaders should develop reliable partnerships with NGOs and private companies engaged in online and remote learning. They can organize quick training sessions on the basics of remote learning based on interactive means, such as PowerPoint presentations, videos, quizzes and project work, among others.

Learners, who are very often more experienced than their teachers or parents in handling digital tools, should be involved in defining remote learning modalities, as well as how to display the learning content. Instead of learning about irrelevant facts and data, learners are probably more interested and motivated in debating a current topic; discussing a work of art, such as a novel, a movie, a painting or a piece of music; and producing their own creative work through video making, GIFs and other social media means.

The current crisis constitutes an opportunity to enhance learners' higher-order thinking skills, such as questioning, creativity and problem solving. At the same time, it can help develop important social and emotional skills, for instance empathy, working together, helping one another, being resilient and pro-active, showing initiative and acting responsibly in the context of risk-taking and decision-making.

Learning outcomes and their assessment need to be radically redefined. Rather than grading, in the context of a crisis, it is more important to help learners identify their strengths and weaknesses, and work towards overcoming their learning problems. Teachers and schools should be given more space in performing formative assessment, and by turning assessment into learning opportunities. Given their usual familiarity with digital means, learners should be involved in constructing these new assessment modalities, that should incorporate self-assessment and assessment by peers.

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