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A roadmap for action

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Abstract This text gives a structured overview of some of the courses for action that the participants in the UNESCO IBE project worked out together as a group over several months. We went beyond identifying the barriers and difficulties together with the good practices being developed in the several countries and tried to define a broad outline for the type of school we wanted to build. We thus needed to sketch out a roadmap for action that would guide us in our work and overcome the feeling of helplessness that many of us shared. It is quite normal when writing about education to begin by saying "we must" or "we ought to", without making it clear on whom those positive changes in education, or rather, in schools in different countries and contexts, depended in order for us to work towards accomplishing the goals of Education for All (EFA). Yet together we can, at different levels of power and responsibility, build a school for all that brings together quality and equity. This roadmap is a tool to guide our action, which in turn is itself enriched by our action, that of systematizing and analysing the progress made and the difficulties encountered.

Keywords Sub-Saharan Africa · Good practices · Curriculum reform

Introduction

Starting with a certain number of reflections produced during this project, we endeavoured to draw up an outline of a roadmap for action, in order to identify the levels of action involved in educational change, show the links between these levels and suggest some directions which would guide our work in building a school for all that brings together quality and equity. Thus, this text distinguishes itself from those that focus on plans and

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projects describing aims and objectives, reports on practices and theoretical reflections and systematizing.

While access to education should be guaranteed for all children we also should identify ways of ensuring that all children do indeed achieve real, pertinent learning. Providing access to education without creating the necessary conditions to fight academic failure does not equal EFA.

Our initial idea was to draw up a realistic action plan, which would be the same for all of the countries but different in the way it is implemented. This plan aimed at building a core around which to organize the answers to the many issues concerning building a school to become a key institution in poverty alleviation within the EFA framework.

During our group seminars we have therefore progressively enhanced the first proposal for courses of action with respect to the levels of action that must be taken into account and the aspects that need our urgent intervention.

Structuring and linking several levels of action, including transversal levels, together with the importance of a continuing policy dialogue and the building of support systems to ensure that this dialogue is improved by political, social and professional initiatives, have been highlighted as essential requirements for those initiatives that are key to the success of EFA.

Strengthening the links and dialogue between policy-makers and practitioners is another key goal of our work. Such convergence should also occur among all of the project's collaborators around common objectives that have been clarified, quantified and analysed to reveal their achievements and the difficulties encountered.

At the heart of the challenges posed by EFA lies the realization that there are no one-size-fits-all responses ready for use, either at the structural level or related to education strategy, which would afford all children, boys and girls, in their cultural and social diversity, real opportunities for equal access to and success at school. Moreover, we must not forget what happens before entry into basic education, the pre-school level and afterwards, through diversified schools that can respond to the "excluded" children and play a role in fostering professional and social integration; quite the contrary, it must be included in EFA.

Our discussion of the initial proposals for action proved to be very fertile, eventually leading to this roadmap for action, a tool for work and action, ready for constant correction and improvement through the results obtained from the actions taken and the actual dynamics experienced in the field.

Our starting points

In the course of our work we felt the need to clarify what we know and what we share between the nine countries involved in this project and the experts who have accompanied us since the start of the process. We have summarized some of the experience gained, which must be taken into account when deciding on what action to take:

- We recognize that the work needed to develop a curriculum for poverty alleviation is long and difficult, given the partners involved, the lack of continuity in policies and the very nature of education itself, and that it requires that the short-, medium- and long-term views be brought together to achieve consolidated results.
- Likewise, we conclude that power exists at all levels of professional and social action, and that these powers must work together and not oppose each other.
- We understand that we need *time* to build our frameworks for action and master the concepts and principles guiding our action.

- We observe that each country or region has a diversity of situations and specific needs, but that beyond this diversity there are also regular features and similar issues and problems.
- We realize that, in most countries involved in the project, a political, social and institutional will exists, as expressed in official documents.
- However, we also realize that, when taking action, we focus more on the barriers than on the solutions. Moreover, when implementing changes, we encounter barriers at the level of individuals who are afraid of change, at the level of official structures with their rigidity and absence of links, and at the level of individual, group and authority relations with the other players due to a lack of clarity about what is at stake, and an absence of consensual means for action based on clear, appropriate arguments about the contexts concerned.
- We conclude that we often become locked in cycles of impossible situations because we all tend to repeat and reproduce the answers learned and experienced earlier, particularly those learned in school and university, rather than moving out to look for new answers to old issues.
- We are convinced that the split between the issues concerning school organization and management and those concerning the curriculum is the source of many failures and mistakes. Management and pedagogy are two sides of the same coin of school life.
- More specifically, we understand that, in order to introduce positive innovations, all the partners involved must want to, know how to and be able to develop them. Education is everybody's business and nobody can change reality on their own. Therefore, wanting to, knowing how to and being able to, all require starting with a clear, shared vision of education so that everyone knows where they want to get to. This vision makes it possible to integrate partial measures and projects, and assess and monitor the chosen aims. The political dialogue is a strategic tool with which to build this shared vision and implement consistent, continued and appropriate policies. Tools for the information, communication and participation of the partners involved form part of this policy dialogue.
- Finally, after detailed examination of the projects in Angola, Brazil, Burkina Faso, the Republic of the Congo, Mauritius, Mozambique, Portugal and Rwanda, inter alia, we conclude that it is possible to work out new answers to old problems, which naturally give rise to new questions. Responses to these questions require the involvement of all, from the central to the local level. They mobilize competencies, know-how and resources, as well as the will to do things and the means and power for action.

Most probably we shall not find the answers to current problems in the taboos, rigidity and uniformity of the traditional school. On the contrary, the work carried out on this project and the dynamics thus created show that EFA is possible, but that we must run the risks inherent in the necessary changes to the education system.

The six strategic levels of action for change

For each level of action, transverse courses for action can be identified, which strengthen the development of EFA and represent a central factor in poverty alleviation. We have thus identified the following six levels of action: policy level (international and national); education administration (central, regional and local) level; school level; teacher and school manager training level; family and local community level; teachers as citizens and professionals level.

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The policy level

The international level

We believe that the international level should be considered when working out education policies with respect to the funding agencies and the national authorities, sometimes within the framework of multilateral institutions. Thus, three conditions should be taken into account to avoid creating additional obstacles at this level, but instead encouraging conditions that support the development of EFA.

The first condition concerns the role of the funding agencies. Whether they are external or internal partners, these agencies should not be able to impose their views, often unilaterally, due to their financial power. They should work with the plans to develop EFA that the countries are structuring in the short, medium and long term.

The second condition concerns the need for a serious discussion between the national authorities and the funding and various other agencies present in each country, in order to build a converging vision and common priorities, while taking account of the real, diverse situations within each country. The example of pre-school education is a case in point. If good quality pre-school education is considered to be a precondition for reducing inequality in basic education and ensuring greater success in learning, then why not invest in those countries with problems at this level (see the case of Burundi, for instance)? There can be no absolute priorities when it comes to education. If progress is to be made there must be investment in the early school years, without losing sight of the following stages of education and professional training.

The third condition concerns support from external and internal agencies for the medium- and long-term plans, rather than one-off, unfocused projects. It is essential that the international support guarantees a complete cycle of education and goes beyond support for piecemeal actions. One of the major problems is the length of time and capacity needed to integrate innovations into the systems in each country, over and above one-off funding, which is often subject to the priorities of the funding agencies rather than those of the people actually involved in the field.

International aid should be framed in terms of exchange to support integrated development throughout the world, reduce inequality between countries and regions, particularly between the north and the south, and promote peace and learning to live together in harmony.

The national level

The first condition for change towards quality schooling is the political and social will that considers, de facto, that education is a priority and both an individual and collective asset. This means going beyond speeches and good intentions to ensure long-term policies and sufficient funds.

The second condition is the building of a vision of education that is shared by all the players in the education sector. This vision must plan and prepare for long-term changes and the strategies needed to get there.

Likewise, social involvement must be continuous and structured, not sporadic. The policies should ensure continuity through treaties, agreements, and for support and assessment structures. They should take account of the particularly slow rate at which changes in education occur, and thus the need for a certain degree of continuity to ensure coherence in the changes. A tendency has been noted to appeal to social involvement only at moments of crisis or conflict that are difficult to overcome, but such involvement should

go far beyond a specific answer at critical moments. This continued involvement is decisive in developing EFA.

The third condition concerns the linking up of administration and pedagogy at all levels of the social fabric, that is, institutions, groups and individuals, with respect to both the vision of education and concrete action in the schools. We can all give examples of good pedagogical practices that have suffered because of the administration, as well as of opportunities to act freely, of which neither the schools nor the teachers can make use, due to a lack of organization or training.

The fourth condition involves the creation of intersectoral dynamics in poverty alleviation. For example, the economy, health and training are all sectors of activity that must be linked to EFA to ensure its success.

The level of the central, regional and local education administration

The first condition for change is linking up the central services at the regional and local levels in terms of their functioning and objectives, which are complementary but all too often stacked on top of each other, with respect to the schools. It is necessary to go beyond the separation, so often seen in the various countries, between the central services that look after the different aspects of school life – especially innovation, management, control and pre- and in-service training and guidance for teachers. It is very important to put into place operational links and to provide positive management of those power conflicts that are common to all organizations. It is a challenge to avoid losing too many resources and energy and, sometimes, to stop useless conflicts from starting.

The second condition is identifying and making known good practices by working closely with the schools. This means organizing meetings, information sessions and open days to allow shared learning between schools and between teachers, together with a sharing of the teaching materials produced when implementing the good practices. This innovation strategy is undoubtedly one of the most efficient.

The third condition concerns the development of flexible curricula. By curricula we mean not only the objectives converted into programmes and school textbooks, that is, the formal, prescribed curriculum, but also the real curriculum as it is implemented in the schools, including all of the situations and experiences lived as part of learning, together with the management of the pupils' learning process. It is obvious that common directions are necessary, but the ways they are used must vary. There is no question of fragmenting the curriculum but rather maintaining unity, not uniformity, within diversity. We cannot forget that each responsible party and each partner has their pedagogical vision and that each teacher has a way of managing the time, work, resources and pupils' learning processes.

The fourth condition is acting with and for the schools. The schools represent the centre of educational life. The administration is bound to function better and easier, as the goal is getting the pupils to learn. Often, practices that are peculiar to one official service or another and the multiple bureaucratic requirements imposed on the schools, create additional barriers rather than a means of support and guides for reference.

The school level

The first condition for change is to work out school projects, often with the help of the local community. This is one of the most interesting, creative and noble tasks in the teacher's work. We cannot ignore any differences in the economic and cultural contexts that govern children's and young people's lives and are related to school and learning. Moreover, once

these differences are translated into school projects they become positive factors for equity and the quality of the work done at school.

The second condition is to encourage teamwork. Nobody can be a teacher in isolation. Students' success is one of the greatest joys of the teaching profession. To achieve this, it is important to go beyond the rigid class structure and get teachers involved in students' learning.

The third condition is to work out, look for, require and practice in-service training, linked to professional activity, as through study groups, projects and workshops, with the help of the teacher trainer colleges and other forms of professional and scientific support, together with the sharing of learning with other colleagues.

The fourth condition is to work with the local communities and mobilize all available resources. Difficulties can often become opportunities, if the opening up, empathy and decentring that are necessary to find mutual support between the school and its local community occur. For example, in Burkina Faso we have seen parents and grandparents taking charge of children in the nursery schools; and in Mozambique large numbers of people from the local community are involved in teaching the local curriculum.

The level of teacher and school manager training

The first condition for change is to train teachers. In addition to knowledge of their subject, teachers need to know a wide range of pedagogical strategies to build up learning for every pupil. They also need to know how to handle conflict and the relations of power and authority with respect to the pupils, school staff and other partners.

The second condition is to develop a methodology for adult learning that looks for a correspondence between pre-service training and the practices to be developed in the schools, by integrating as far as possible new technologies with respect to knowledge and skills, not just simply computer literacy. We are well aware that we tend to reproduce and teach in the same way we have been taught, rather than trying to follow the lessons and advice on teaching given in pre- and in-service training. The value of example and practice to renew pedagogical approaches is now beyond question.

The third condition is to train oneself in and practice transferring the knowledge gained and mobilizing the skills learned in real-life situations. This means that training should be organized in collaboration with the schools, in all their diversity. The teachers would have before them real pupils and not the ideal pupil, who is a product of abstractions taken from normative pedagogical methodology.

The fourth condition is to draw up pre- and in-service training for teachers that take into account the real needs of the teachers. In addition to subject-based skills, teachers should acquire pedagogical strategies that would give them the necessary knowledge to establish links with the parents and the local communities, work in teams, learn by means of properly directed and successful experiences, and handle conflict.

The level of families and local communities

The first condition for change is to be well acquainted with the living conditions of the pupils in their families and local communities. It is obvious that schools cannot do everything, but it is also possible to take action on two fronts. First of all, it is possible to consider the real living conditions of both the children and their families, and thus not impose academic requirements that could increase inequality. Then other sectors of the

administration must be mobilized and intersectoral links created to respond to all needs—economic, social and health related, for instance—in the lives of the children, their parents and their local community that could interfere with the pupils' learning processes.

The second condition is to take into account the will, living conditions and rhythms of activity in the local communities, trying to find more flexible, less rigid answers to the diverse living conditions and specific needs of the pupils and their families. Each country can offer numerous relevant examples from their geographical, social and cultural realities. For instance, we can mention the issue of school calendars and how they could be adapted to fit the needs of certain communities, or that of a school timetable, which should take account of the work needs and the children's contribution to their family's subsistence.

The third condition relates to giving value to the knowledge and aspirations of the local communities and families, making the school a relevant institution in their lives. It is absolutely essential that the value of school-based knowledge is recognized by the community and that they have a feeling for what lies beyond school certificates and diplomas.[1] The community thus becomes aware of the value and interest of school in its daily life in terms of both access and learning.

The fourth condition concerns giving value to the knowledge of the local communities by integrating it into the children's school life. In many communities there are people willing to collaborate with the teachers in formal and informal activities. In Burkina Faso we have seen grandparents take charge of the work in the nursery school, under the guidance and directions of a roving teacher. Another example is in Xinavane, Mozambique, where a hairdresser and a mechanic participate in the pupils' learning process.

The level of teachers as citizens and professionals

This final level concerns teachers, who have a decisive role to play in the life of the schools and in the children's schooling and education.

The first condition for change is that teachers should be made aware of their power and that their practices, strategies and methodologies can make all the difference between failure and successful learning for the pupils.

The second condition for change is the awareness that the quality of the teacher's work is the main indicator of the social value of the profession. Although teachers in many countries in the southern hemisphere experience very difficult working conditions and draw very low salaries, there would be no sustainable development without their work. This is a crucial policy issue to which all of the partners in education, both external and internal, should pay attention.

One must be critical in the face of power (Perrenoud 2001), responsible towards one's work and show empathy to the children and the local communities. The teacher is not a civil servant like any other; the teacher is an educator. The children's learning and individual development is both the teacher's and the student's professional achievement.

The third condition, previously mentioned, is giving value to teamwork and sharing what is accomplished in groups, cooperatives and other formal or informal structures.

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[1] See the good practice on how to link up the national and local curricula in the school at Xinavane, Mozambique.

Conclusions

As we have seen, this roadmap is both modest and ambitious. Nevertheless, the conditions sketched out for each level of action can guide our action towards building up EFA.

We know that very often the great reforms inspired by the same centralizing, bureaucratic and uniform tendencies of the past do not change reality. Rather, it is micro-decisions and tiny changes in attitudes, relationships between partners and practices in favour of quality, and equity, together with collective and individual responsibility that bring about great changes.

The way we were welcomed during our visits to the schools in the countries taking part in the project, the commitment shown by all the partners in explaining the work being done, the joy shown by the members of the local communities and their genuineness in showing not only their achievements but also their difficulties, and the time given for ritual and celebration, show their pride in this positive work around the children and young people, very often at the cost of great sacrifice.

Thus, we can, at our different levels of responsibility and work, overcome the challenges of EFA and make each school a source of riches for its community, a democratic asset for each and all, on the condition that actions are developed that are concerted and worked out within the framework of a plan rather than scattered over a multitude of projects.

It is essential that these actions correspond to objectives that have been defined between all partners and take account of real contexts, with their strengths and weaknesses. For most children school is also a centre of life and care, an essential place where they can find the support, love and respect of adults.

To achieve EFA we must all take up our responsibilities, along with our knowledge and will to mobilize and share. We must be demanding not only of others, such as the politicians and the administration, but also ourselves.

Moving away from routine practices and believing that it is possible that we can improve education is the first step on this innovative road. The work carried out during this project has shown numerous openings, opportunities and possible solutions for a school capable of achieving EFA. The good practices, which are described in another article in this issue of *Prospects*, are there as proof, as a challenge, a beacon and a certainty.

School is a social institution produced in a given time frame and culture. It is also an important tool for freedom for the most deprived, a place for caring, learning and citizenship. The work carried out in this project has confirmed that, by starting with its good points, we can transform the school to meet the new needs for justice and democracy in today's societies.

Reference

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Author Biographies

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