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Rethinking Learner Progression for the Future

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Education is one of the key domains where change is taking place as a result of factors, including the profound influence of Covid-19, which are transforming how people live and interact with each other throughout the world. New thinking (apparent, for example in the OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 Project, OECD 2020) is informing a re-conceptualisation of curriculum, assessment and learning in education systems globally and at all levels. Within the IEAN, member jurisdictions are developing new remote or blended learning environments and engaging with new models of assessment where teacher judgements have an enhanced status.

This paper presents arguments for placing the concept of learners' progression at the centre of thinking about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. These arguments derive from key educational research in the field, a selected range of which is explicitly referred to in the paper.

Education systems—and societies—need to think differently about assessment and about what it means for learners to progress through school. Thoughtful curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and relationships among them, are essential for effective learning. Curriculum specifies what societies decide matters for their future citizens. The development of learning in that context, through effective pedagogy and assessment, is what is typically considered to be progression in education. To date, however, thinking about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment has often paid insufficient attention to supporting learners to develop important personal and social capacities, such as those that will facilitate life-long learning, positive adaptation to unforeseen change and empathy and care for one another and for the planet. It has also typically created frameworks of standards to be achieved, which have encouraged use of assessment to summarise prior achievement at key transition points, rather than to identify for each individual learner the basis of her or his future learning in the educational journey. The examination or test-based assessment arrangements in place in most societies throughout the world concentrate principally on categorising students as higher or lower achieving in terms of the 'academic' abilities represented by these standards statements. They have a powerful washback effect on what happens in schools, resulting in very narrow curriculum experiences for students, often involving much 'examination practice'. These arrangements impoverish the educational experience of individual students. They thus severely constrain the potential of whole education systems to achieve the quality of education for their societies that policy intentions typically articulate.

There is a need to rethink learning progressions and assessment to support better:

- the development and demonstration of a much wider range of achievements by all young people;
- learners' awareness and that of their parents/guardians, their teachers and all those with an interest in educational achievement that the journey through school education is a progression that builds continuously on previous learning.

Acknowledging young people's participation in a complex world, education systems must move beyond traditional paradigms of assessment (tests and examinations) and look towards progression-based approaches.

This brief article responds to the following questions:

- What do we mean by progression in education?
- Why does progression matter?
- How do we describe progression in knowledge, skills, and other important capacities?
- How does progression relate to curriculum, pedagogy (teaching) and assessment?

What do we mean by progression and progression frameworks?

Progression is the development of a learner's knowledge and skills; capacities and dispositions (such as confidence and independence as learners, motivation, engagement, choice and awareness of others); and values/beliefs (which can act as powerful agents for education).

Learners progress by building on what they know and can do, by adding to and changing their knowledge, skills, capacities, dispositions and values, or by applying them in more complex situations. In schools, we can characterise learning progressions as:

- developing the knowledge and skills specified in a planned curriculum, such as those in mathematics, science, or the arts;
- more broadly, developing the capacity to think about and explain what has been learned or apply this learning in new ways to other parts of the curriculum or to life outside school; and
- even more broadly, developing personal attributes for learning, such as ecological and cultural awareness, commitment, self-regulation, collaboration and independence.

Whether we are thinking of it in a tightly defined curriculum area or in a much more broadly defined one, progression is any movement along a learning route. Progression frameworks are how we describe these routes, signposted by descriptions of learning at various waypoints. At the start of their progression learners are likely to have some, albeit unsophisticated, knowledge, skills and capacities upon which to build, over time, as they move to deeper, broader, and more sophisticated knowledge, skills and capacities in all three of the areas described above.

Progression frameworks can be written for any learning, from a single course to the broadly defined capacities, dispositions and values that are intended to be developed across many years of education. They use research and evidence from teachers to describe how learners typically develop and demonstrate increasing knowledge, skills and capacities in an area of learning. Their descriptions help to 'unpack' how learning might unfold for students over time, although different learners can progress through the framework at different speeds and by different

routes. This tension, between the *universal* and the *individual* aspects of a progression framework, requires further attention if we are to respond properly to the needs of all learners.

Why does progression matter?

Progression matters because it is the essence of learning, and effective learning is essential for us as individuals and for society. In line with the 2020 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report on Inclusion, it is morally, socially, and economically essential that all members of society are supported to learn key ideas and develop important skills and capacities and to fulfil their individual potential. A focus on progression is a focus on learning, now and into the future. It is a way of helping to ensure that a 'golden thread' of effective learning runs through every stage of education, including further and higher education, the workplace and lifelong learning. Importantly, it also focuses on the learner's personal experience of progression—their sense of themselves as learners—which is the most important agent in the learning process.

Progression also matters because it supports assessment for learning—identifying next steps. Next steps can be agreed in collaboration with the learner both in on-going learning/teaching activity and in using occasional summary descriptions of progress and achievement as the basis for planning further progress. Progression frameworks can therefore guide and help to bring together teaching, learning and assessment in powerful ways.

How might we describe learning in progression frameworks?

Most 21st century societies recognise the need to promote learning in all the types of progression described above. Progression frameworks are needed that describe and focus on the learning that is essential for further learning, development, and growth, rather than on the specification of standards to be achieved by particular ages.

Progression and how it is described in frameworks will vary across subjects. It is more than just increasing depth and breadth of knowledge. Knowledge, skills, capacities and dispositions are often intertwined and progression is likely to be complex too, not a simple, linear process. Progression may mean learning something new, being able to apply knowledge or skills in new situations, linking ideas together or building upon existing knowledge, skills and capacities in other ways. Progression frameworks also need to recognise that learners have different starting points and progress in different ways and at different speeds. Reflecting this complexity in a simple way is not easy, but it is essential.

There is a need to develop progression frameworks with descriptions and examples based firmly on evidence from research and practice that represent the complex ways in which learners actually build on their prior learning in diverse ways. It is important to recognise that these descriptions of learning and examples are only approximations as far as individual learners are concerned. Currently, more

research evidence is needed for the advantages and disadvantages of degrees of 'granularity' in the learning descriptions provided in progression frameworks—the amount of detail that will support but not limit learning.

The future: how should progression relate to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment?

A new and clearer understanding of progression can help us to improve learning significantly.

Reframing curriculum as progression

Curriculum is typically a specification of course content which helps teachers to plan learning and teaching activities designed to support learners. Adopting a progression approach involves threading curriculum with a continuity of learning expectations that work towards developing consistent learning goals with students. This might involve, for example, ensuring that descriptions of progression for all curricular areas develop skills for self-regulation and critical thinking. Learner progression is supported by effective pedagogy and assessment for learning in the process of enacting curriculum. Assessment for learning is a central idea in considering progression and essential for turning curriculum into progression.

Assessment for progression

There is robust research evidence (for example, from a wide possible range, Black and Wiliam, 2018; Harlen, 2006; Hayward and Spencer, 2018) that relevant interaction among learners, and between learners and the teacher, is key to effective assessment for learning. A well-designed progression framework incorporates the descriptions of learning that will help both teacher and learner to focus that interaction effectively (Heritage, 2008, 2011; Black et al 2008). Learners' voice as well as learners' work can provide important evidence of progression within assessment for learning interactions. Learners need to be empowered to be active assessors of their own progression. They need to feel that their perspectives matter. Such sharing of ideas can connect learners' life experiences and areas of interest to the school curriculum, increasing motivation, agency and so progression. Teachers need support to develop 'assessment literacy'—professionalism that is able to forge a close relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (including learner self-assessment) and to work with students in new relationships. Such professionalism, informed by thoughtful and evidence-based progression frameworks, would strengthen the validity of formative assessment and greatly enhance the learner's journey.

Progression and assessment for summative purposes

Traditionally assessment is used for summative purposes when there is need to summarise a learners' knowledge, skills and capacities at a particular point in time. In using a well-designed progression framework to ensure a continuous learning journey across points of transition, a new teacher can base discussion with

individual learners on such descriptions of learning so far, so that further learning/teaching can build on previous learning.

Assessment for a summative purpose is also central in the award of qualifications and it typically provides a snapshot of attainment in individual areas of the curriculum. In school education, such assessment for qualifications categorises learners by grade or checks on the achievement of outcomes specified in curriculum frameworks. It often consists of tests and examinations; in some cases it incorporates, for example, portfolios of school work, assignments, performances, observations of practical work. Assessment for summative purposes is often tied in practice to particular ages or stages, which creates an expectation that the pace of progression for most learners will be similar. In fact, individual learners are likely to follow different routes of progression and to do so at different speeds in accordance with a range of factors that may render typical existing assessments less valid and informative than is desirable.

Education systems need to address the challenge of designing and operating reliable summative assessments which are fair to both students and the system which uses them across the whole range of educational provision. They need valid and reliable assessments which show more complex achievements than typical tests and examinations do and that focus less on the age of the learner and more on ensuring continuous learning throughout the educational journey. These might include descriptions of personal capacities, based on observation of and interaction with learners, such as those currently used in selection and valued by many employers. Progression frameworks that describe personal capacities, as well as knowledge and skills, and acknowledge appropriately the variability to be expected among learners have the potential to be very effective bases for such assessment. A sharp focus on the purpose of assessment and the learners, linked to clear progression frameworks, could provide valid, reliable and very informative descriptions of achievements at key transition points and at the end of a school career. Such assessment at different time points could also indicate the degree and rate of progression of learners, which should be of value to anyone concerned with effective education.

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