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Policy Conversation Paper

Learning Progression: Implications for Curriculum & Assessment

This paper was produced by the members of the **IEAN Sub-Group on Assessment & Progression**:

Glen Deakin, Chris Deluca, Gareth Evans, Louise Hayward, Dylan Jones, Per Kristian Larsen-Evjen, David Leng, Kara Makara Fuller, Siv Therese Måseidvåg Gamlem, David Morrison-Love, Sverrir Óskarsson, Trude Saltvedt, Elaine Sharpling, Sonny Singh, Kari Smith, Ernest Spencer, Greg Stone, Francisco Valdera-Gil, Joanna Valentine, Nancy Walt, Lesley Wiseman-Orr and Claire Wyatt-Smith.

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This short brief is targeted to policy makers in governments and school districts who may be thinking about learning progressions and the implications for curriculum, teaching, and assessment.

Why Think About Progression?

Improving learning for all is an aspiration for countries internationally. Jurisdictional standards have commonly been used as an attempt to improve performance. However, there is increasing evidence that typical assessment/examination arrangements impoverish the curriculum and learning for individual students and thus for the educational systems within which the students learn. For jurisdictions concerned with improving all students' learning and increasing their motivation to learn, an alternative approach is necessary. **Learning Progressions** offer an effective alternative to improve learning in jurisdictions with curricula intended to prepare young people for lifelong learning in the mid to late 21st century.

Education systems and societies need to think differently about what it means to progress as a learner. If we truly value that learning is progressive and lifelong, we need to think differently about curriculum, teaching, and assessment. All approaches to teaching and assessing should consider the variability of learning (i.e., learners have different starting points and progress in different ways and rates) and include "strengths-based" descriptions - what learners can do now and what, most importantly, they should do next to enhance their learning journey.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the growing appetite for change across all areas of society makes this an opportune moment for reflection on existing approaches to learner progression. Developing these practices for the benefit of *all* learners will build on the innovative response of education ministries across the world and support the development of more inclusive education systems that recognise the complexity of learning in all its forms.

What are the Implications of Learning Progressions?

Thinking about learning as a progression versus static ability or achievement expectations by age or school grade/year means paying attention to implications in five key areas:

1. Implications for curricular design

Jurisdictional curricular frameworks are learning progressions at the macro level. The written curriculum helps teachers plan learning and teaching activities.

- Well-designed curriculum frameworks are built on an underlying construct of learning for the domain or discipline at hand.
- Learning progressions in curriculum should be based on big ideas (what matters) and include content/knowledge and skills/competencies.

- A well-designed curriculum framework incorporates clearly stated descriptions of learning progression designed to help both teacher and learner to consider progress in learning.
- Developing curriculum frameworks based on progressions will support all learning environments, including online learning scenarios.

2. Implications for ongoing instruction and day-to-day assessment

Learner progression must be supported by effective pedagogy and assessment.

- Teachers should be involved in developing curricular progression frameworks into more detailed progressions that address the range of individual learner needs typical of those found in most classrooms. This is key to supporting assessment that develops learning.
- Teachers who forge a close relationship among curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (including learner self-assessment), will greatly enhance the learner's journey.
- Assessment for learning should be central to all jurisdictional learning systems.
- Learners need to be empowered to be active assessors of their own progress. Involving students in the review of learning progressions, including selecting exemplars of their work, provides important evidence of progression, while at the same time increasing learner agency.

3. Implications for assessing learning over time

There is a need for alternative ways to evaluate or make judgments about learning over time.

- Assessing learning progression over time requires ongoing evaluation. Teachers continuously make judgements about student progress which inform collaborative decisions about next steps and future learning.
- Focusing on what students can do and the progress they have made along a continuum is key.
- Traditional assessment methods such as numerical calculations of student performance are inappropriate when assessing a progression of learning.

4. Implications for assessment for summative purposes

Assessments designed to provide summative information tied to particular ages or stages creates an expectation that the pace of progression for most learners will be similar; they generally are not designed to measure the extent to which learners have progressed in their learning.

- We need to address the challenge of designing valid and reliable approaches to assessments that focus less on the learner's age and more on complex achievements which current tests and examinations typically do not reflect. Such assessments could include descriptions of personal capacities, based on observation of and interaction with learners. Progression frameworks that describe personal capacities, knowledge, and skills, while acknowledging the variability expected among learners, can

provide a solid basis for assessment. A sharp focus on the purpose of assessment and the learners involved, linked to clear progression frameworks, would provide a valid, reliable, and informative summative assessment at the end of a school career. Such assessment at different time points would also offer a measure of the degree and rate of progression of learners.

- There should also be a focus on making the information from jurisdictional assessments more useful to students and teachers, supporting their formative use as much as possible, utilizing descriptive language that focuses on what students are able to do and informs what they do next.

5. Implications for capacity building and developing assessment literacy

Everyone involved in the education of children and young people needs to be assessment literate and able to use information from all forms of assessment.

- Supporting teachers in assessment literacy requires sustained strategies over time.
- Wider communities (e.g., parents/guardians, employers, post-secondary institutes) need to be engaged in discussions about learning progressions and their implications for assessment.

Summary

Learning progressions and progression frameworks are needed to 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 specific ages or grade levels.

There is a need to develop progression frameworks with descriptions that are based firmly on research evidence (demonstrated with exemplars), that represent the complex ways in which learners actually build upon their prior learning, recognising that those descriptions of learning are only approximations as far as individual learners are concerned.

Learning progressions have important policy implications for instruction, assessment, professional development in assessment literacy, and engagement with the wider community.

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