

## **Minding Your Curriculum**

By Bambi Betts

As I completed work at the 24<sup>th</sup> international school I have visited so far this year, it struck me once again just how common our issues and dilemmas are. Not surprisingly, so many of those issues and dilemmas revolve around our long time (and never to leave us) dilemma of the curriculum. And again not surprising, the particular advice sought is also surprisingly similar.

The PTC has been attempting to address these issues for a number of years. Here we offer a few thoughts to add to your solutions toolbox.

### **The Purpose of the Curriculum**

No small part of the curriculum dilemmas we face stem from a lack of clarity on the real purpose of the curriculum. Far too many international schools are in the unfortunate position of having what I term the 'accreditation curriculum'. The accreditation folks are on their way. We better write the curriculum! And the curriculum gets written...for a questionable purpose.

The true purpose of the curriculum should be two-fold:

- (1) as Grant Wiggins shared a number of year ago to help teachers 'cause' the intended learning
- (2) to ensure that there is equity of access to learning by all who attend the school.

All writing has an audience and a purpose. And the curriculum should be no exception. If its purposes are those stated here, then its audience is clearly teachers, not accreditation teams, parents, etc. While there may in fact be a version for these other audiences, the primary audience is teachers.

### **The Curriculum as a Contract**

There is another helpful construct to consider in the discussion of purpose. All of us in international schools are familiar with the notion of a contract. Each party in the contract agrees to provide or do certain things and abide by certain practices and principles. The curriculum in any school is just such a 'contract' between the school, and the parents and children.

In the case of the curriculum contract, parents 'promise' to give us some money and to entrust their child to our care for many hours each day, and to support the child as best they can in their learning.

What is our part of the contract? What do we 'promise'? Sadly, most schools cannot claim to guarantee learning. But we can guarantee ACCESS to learning.

So how do we guarantee access? This is where the curriculum comes in. It is in the curriculum that the school prescribes its part of the contract. If done properly, it prescribes, to whatever degree the school prefers:

- What learning will each child have access to?
- What forms of assessment will each child have access to? and
- What learning activities will each child have access to?

To reiterate, the level or prescription is of course entirely a decision of the school. But there must be a decision, if the goal is to be a school rather than a collection of classrooms. A clear dilemma in many schools right now is actually deciding on that level of prescription.

Is this a school where WHAT learning students have access to will be determined by each teacher? Or is there some agreed upon intended learning?

Is this a school where certain learning strategies will happen in EVERY classroom, regardless of the particular teachers in any given year? Or are all learning/teaching strategy decisions the sole domain of each individual teacher?

And again, are assessment practices determined only by individual teachers and/or are there some which are required?

It is curious that so many schools make big noises, for instance, about being inquiry based or 'hands on' or child centered. Yet in the curriculum guidelines we see very little that prescribes any particular teaching strategies; more typically a suggestion (not a requirement) that teachers use a variety of strategies.

While it is certainly a viable choice to leave decisions about teaching strategy to individual teachers, that choice is not compatible with a mission statement that gives the impression that children who come to the school will have equitable opportunities to learn. And the same holds true for intended learning and assessment practices.

### **Is anybody looking?**

Regardless of the level or prescription that a school eventually settles on, the next quagmire is often 'how will we know if the curriculum is actually being implemented' and that it is working for kids?

This determination seems like such a daunting task for principals and curriculum directors, given that we are a 'profession', one that perhaps should not need much minding. Yet this is the real work of all of us - teachers, principals, and heads – to be gatekeepers of our intentions. In a future article, we will explore these monitoring practices.

For now, we cannot confuse this gatekeeping with lack of trust. Rather we should embrace it in the light of all we have learned about leadership in high performing organizations.