

Édu**brief**

Essential information for understanding current education issues



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WHERE DOES SCHOOL CURRICULUM COME FROM?

There are frequent controversies regarding curricula. Sometimes the focus of controversy is how history is taught, other times it is the predicate, and still others, how reading is taught. Everyone may have an opinion on the matter, but do we have a clear idea of how educational content is determined and what is meant by terms such as syllabus, curriculum and teaching methods?

FROM THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION TO SCHOOL CURRICULA

The main objectives that schools must pursue are not self-evident. To transmit cultural and scientific heritage? To enable each student to go as far as possible in his or her studies? To shape free and responsible citizens? To provide the basis for good social and professional integration?

In Jules Ferry's schools at the turn of the 20th century, a small minority of pupils pursued their schooling beyond primary school. Today, we speak of lifelong learning. The missions entrusted to schools are clearly no longer the same.

Despite a few principles enshrined in law, the expectations of citizens and various social groups may in fact be different or even contradictory. The contract between schools and society is often more implicit than formally discussed. Whatever the objectives set out by the nation may be, they must also be translated into a series of guidelines and references so that lessons and instructional units can be developed.

“ In addition to the transmission of knowledge, the Nation entrusts schools with the primary mission of sharing the values of the Republic of France with students. Public education teaches all students respect for the equal dignity of human beings, for freedom of conscience and for secularism. Through its organisation and its methods, and through the training of its teachers, it fosters cooperation among students ”
(Article 2, Law for restructuring schools, 2013)

Why must children go to school?

Three main answers to this fundamental question can be put forward, namely:

- to transfer the knowledge produced by researchers
- to cultivate children's cognitive capacities
- to have children acquire useful knowledge for life.

In the first case, the school subjects and knowledge that will be taught must be determined. In the second case, the focus will be on developing thinking skills and intellectual abilities. In the third case, the emphasis is on contextualising knowledge and developing skills suitable for all sorts of situations.
(adapted from Capsó, 2010).



THE 5

MAIN AREAS OF THE "COMMON CORE OF KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND CULTURE" (2013):

- ➔ Languages for thinking and communicating
- ➔ Methods and tools for learning
- ➔ Educating individuals and citizens
- ➔ Natural systems and technological systems
- ➔ Representing the world and human activity



PEDAGOGY

Teaching methods and freedom

In addition to the curricula that make up the “commons” of education, the principle of teaching freedom is often invoked in France. This freedom is a rather vague notion that is usually illustrated by the fact that a teacher is free to choose from different approved school textbooks and can use varied teaching resources. The freedom of choosing teaching “methods” is also mentioned. In fact, the diversity observed in classroom practices shows many individual variations, which suggests that the term “teaching methods” refers more to a collection of specific principles or convictions than to a definition of specific practices.

WHAT IS IN CURRICULUM?

In France, a detailed definition of what must be taught through national programmes has long been valued. Indeed, programmes are broken down into school subjects, educational levels and sometimes even blocks of time. Paradoxically, few research studies have focused on curricular content. Those that have, highlight the risk of sacralising or naturalising academic knowledge with the expectation that it permeate the whole school system from the top down, without taking into account cultural and practical aspects of content. Indeed, school subjects are not a mere transposition in the classroom of universal knowledge defined elsewhere. Some learning areas derive directly from university disciplines, such as biology and geology in the school subject called “life and earth sciences”, even if learning about genomes in lower secondary school is clearly rather different from genetics experiments in laboratories! Between the knowledge produced by research and taught knowledge, a series of transformations takes place.

Other school subjects are school-specific creations, such as history-geography. Some university disciplines, such as law, sociology and psychology, are taught little or not at all. Other school learning does not have clearly defined university equivalents, such as technological education and many other courses with “education” in their names (e.g. environmental education and education for sustainable development, health education, citizenship education), which refer, rather, to societal issues or social practices.

In France, since 2013, all of this knowledge is currently organised within the “common core of knowledge, skills and culture” (*Socle commun de connaissances, de compétences et de culture*), which constitutes the curricular framework for nursery school and the four cycles of compulsory schooling. This “common core” is made up of five main areas that have learning goals to which contribute, in varying proportions, the different school subjects and teachings. While the curricula provide teachers with leeway for implementation, they often suggest or imply specific instructional units, stages and educational formats.

WHO CREATES CURRICULA?

For a long time, curricula were set by subject-based Regional Education Inspectors (IA-IPR) and specialist associations (in mathematics, French, foreign languages, history, etc.). Each subject area went through a relatively autonomous development with regard to the others. In the 1980s, discussions on the evolution of curricula led to the involvement of other stakeholders, such as the Ministry’s standing committees and academics from the Collège de France. In 1990, the National Council for Curriculum (CNP) was created, marking a move to a more unified vision. The council was made up of qualified professionals working in French National Education, Higher Education and Research. A 2005 law replaced it with the High Council for Education (HCE), which was, in turn, ultimately replaced by the Higher Council for Curriculum (CSP) by a law in 2013. CSP members include not only qualified professionals working in French National Education, Higher Education and Research, but also representatives of parliament (members of parliament and senators), as well as the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE).

Over time, a steady trend can thus be observed whereby the analysis of curriculum is no longer reserved only for professionals within the national education system, but has been opened up to academic specialists and political and social representatives.

WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN OTHER COUNTRIES?

Internationally, a great diversity can be observed in how educational content is set. Educational objectives can cover areas of know-how such as behaviour and skills. Curricula may be organised at a national, regional or local level (in Germany, Spain and Switzerland, the regional or local level is predominant).

The very development of curricular content may be, as in Finland and Québec, the result of broad collaboration among stakeholders at a local level (teachers, educational professionals, parents, elected officials, etc.).

Similarly, some curricula may set out a specific number of teaching hours per subject area, whereas others set a weekly minimum or time ranges.

In some countries, the objectives may be very general, but the authorities will impose a single textbook or organise regular external evaluations that serve as guides for teachers. For several years now, the term “curriculum” has been increasingly used to designate this area of educational policy and action.

WHAT IS A CURRICULUM?

Internationally, the term “curriculum” is used more than “syllabus”, “programme” or “course of study”. The terms in the second group often refer to what is supposed to be taught in detail every year, whereas “curriculum” is a broader idea that simultaneously encompasses educational objectives and principles, teaching areas and their various components (knowledge, know-how, disciplines, skills, etc.), academic pathways, and student evaluations. Depending on the country and the stakeholders, the policy or curricular area may also include textbooks and teaching resources, teaching situations and practices, and even teacher training. The advantage of opting for the term “curriculum” lies in its more general and systemic approach to the things that come together to produce educational content. It allows us to take into consideration not only what “must” be taught, but also what is really learnt by students depending on the course, the exam preparations, the learning materials, and so forth.

The example of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence



The subject areas:

- Expressive arts
- Health and wellbeing
- Languages
- Mathematics
- Religion and moral education
- Sciences
- Social sciences
- Technologies

The declared purpose is to help children and young people (from 6 to 18 years of age) to become:

- Successful learners
- Confident individuals
- Responsible citizens
- Effective contributors

To this end, the curriculum includes four contexts for learning:

- Curriculum areas and subjects
- Interdisciplinary learning
- Ethos and life of the school
- Opportunities for personal achievement



From prescribed curriculum to real curriculum

Researchers use several curriculum-related terms to describe more accurately what is taught:

- ➔ **Prescribed curriculum:** what is written in the official documents.
- ➔ **Formal curriculum:** the various components of curriculum contained in instructions, textbooks, resources and tools.
- ➔ **Informal curriculum:** what is taught through habit, without always being institutionalised (for example, the format of a presentation or demonstration).
- ➔ **Hidden curriculum:** what is unconsciously taught through experience, socialisation and diffuse transmission (e.g. the distinction made between an essay about one's holidays and an oral story told to one's peer). It may be a source of significant inequality between students depending on their social and cultural background.
- ➔ **Real curriculum:** what the student retains and uses, whether in evaluations or practical situations.

HERE ARE SOME REFERENCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES:

- Higher Council for Curriculum (CSP): <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid75495/le-conseil-superieur-des-programmes.html>
- Activity report by the Higher Council for Curriculum (2015): <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/164000266.pdf>
- Teaching content and practices, Eduscol resources (General Directorate for Schools): <http://eduscol.education.fr/pid33035/contenus-et-pratiques-d-enseignement.html>
- Curriculum for Excellence, Scotland: <https://education.gov.scot>
- Curriculum for the French-speaking part of Switzerland: <http://www.plandetudes.ch/per>
- Skills framework, Belgium: <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=0&navi=190>
- Curricula and qualifications, Finland: http://www.oph.fi/english/curricula_and_qualifications
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Ireland: <https://www.ncca.ie/en>

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