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Curriculum reform: Some insights from Asia

GEOFF MASTERS

Google for Education

CSE CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC EDUCATION
Leading educational thinking and practice

Contents

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Introduction

Across the globe, many countries are in the process of reviewing and reforming their school curriculum to better reflect the outcomes they now seek from schools. Most are looking to schools to assist in creating the kind of society they aspire to become – typically, a society that is equitable and caring, with a strong, sustainable knowledge-based economy, making a valued international contribution to global peace, stability and environmental sustainability.

These curriculum reforms are being undertaken in an increasingly interconnected world, in which most countries face common challenges and opportunities. A challenge for governments everywhere is to respond to unprecedented rates of economic, political, social and cultural change. A globalising knowledge economy and rapid advances in technologies have changed the nature of work and ushered in new models for doing business. At the same time, new kinds of occupations have emerged, requiring new kinds of knowledge and skills that often require continual updating.

In this context, some countries have developed descriptions of the kinds of citizens they believe their future will require. Commonly, they see a need for future citizens who are

- independent, self-motivated learners
- critical and creative thinkers
- adaptable, innovative problem solvers
- ethically-minded, with strong social skills
- knowledgeable about and respectful of cultural differences, and
- prepared for lifelong learning and career changes.

Most countries recognise that the outcomes they now seek from schools will not be delivered through incremental adjustments to traditional curricula, pedagogies and assessment processes; they require deeper educational transformation.

In this paper I consider how three jurisdictions in Asia (Hong Kong, Korea and Indonesia) have been reforming their school curriculum. I draw on a study of five jurisdictions that have performed at unusually high levels in PISA, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (Masters, 2023). That study included Hong Kong and Korea. Over the past five years, Indonesia has also been working to reform its school curriculum, with many of its reform objectives paralleling longer-term reforms in Hong Kong and Korea.

Promoting deeper disciplinary learning

The school curriculum in most if not all countries has a strong and continuing focus on developing students' knowledge and understanding of traditional disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and mathematics. Students usually study a common set of discipline-based subjects through primary and lower secondary school. However, in many countries, the focus of disciplinary learning is shifting, to give more priority to students' conceptual understanding and abilities to transfer and apply knowledge to non-routine problems and contexts.

In Hong Kong, prior to the territory's return to China in 1997, the curriculum consisted of content-heavy syllabi that prepared students for examinations at the completion of lower secondary and upper secondary school. For the past two decades, and in common with a number of other East-Asian countries, Hong Kong has worked to reduce the amount of rote learning required of students, to create time for broader learning experiences and other forms of learning.

Beginning in the early 2000s, the Hong Kong curriculum identified 'learning for understanding' as a key objective. It was recognised that this would require increased opportunities for students to construct and apply knowledge. Rather than being passive recipients, students would engage in active learning experiences that would build their understandings over time. Hong Kong's *Learning to Learn* curriculum in 2002 trimmed curriculum content and abolished the examination at the end of lower secondary school. It also replaced rigid subject divisions with eight broader 'Key Learning Areas'. This restructuring gave schools and teachers greater flexibility in how they deliver education, allowing them to focus on building students' conceptual understanding, rather than just memorisation of facts (Goodwin, et al, 2021).

Similarly, the Korean government in its 2015 revision of the national school curriculum recognised the need to address the problem of 'an excessive amount of learning caused by a curriculum centred on segmented and fragmented knowledge' and observed that 'the learning burden, overloading with academic pressure and excessive workload to memorise, with a focus on getting right answers, caused students to lose interest in meaningful learning' (Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation, 2015). The proposed solution was to replace traditional knowledge-based classes and rote learning with other forms of learning (Korean Ministry of Education, 2015, 2016).

In Korea's effort to break away from an earlier approach 'oriented toward knowledge acquisition', subject content was structured around core concepts to enable 'meaningful learning experiences', and a new emphasis was placed on competencies such as thinking and exploration – for example, by giving greater priority to the analysis and interpretation of source materials in history (Lee, et al, 2021).

In Indonesia, prior to its reforms over the past five years, the school curriculum specified large amounts of content that teachers were expected to teach and students were expected to learn. The volume of mandated content encouraged a delivery model of teaching, created pressure to cover the curriculum, and often resulted in relatively superficial learning. Although the 2013 national curriculum had identified social, emotional and moral competencies as important forms of learning, these were often squeezed out by content-laden curricula.

The reformed Indonesian curriculum places a high priority on students' abilities to apply, rather than merely recall, reading and mathematics knowledge and skills. This follows the observation in 2018 that only 30 to 40 per cent of Indonesian 15-year-olds met PISA's minimum standards in doing this.

The new curriculum also places a high priority on critical reasoning, creative thinking and self-regulation, as well as the development of attitudes and values consistent with a plural and democratic society. Factual and procedural knowledge remain crucial, but the curriculum balance is being shifted towards thinking, problem solving, deeper conceptual understanding and the ability to apply knowledge.

To promote these deeper forms of learning, the Indonesian Ministry has reduced the amount of mandated content and made the school curriculum more flexible. Teachers now have more autonomy to decide the pace and sequence of teaching. Learning objectives are set for every two to three years of school rather than for each school year, and teachers can combine subjects and adapt content and teaching to ensure local relevance (Adimoto, 2024).

As part of their efforts to broaden the goals of schooling to better prepare young people for future life and work, many countries have identified general skills (or competencies) to be developed by all students.

In summary, although Hong Kong, Korea and Indonesia have historically structured the school curriculum around traditional disciplines – and continue to do so – all three have moved to address concerns about the volume of factual and procedural content that teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn. Greater priority is now being given to students' conceptual understanding and skills in transferring and applying disciplinary knowledge. This has required the creation of more time and space in the curriculum for deeper learning, and a move away from long lists of teaching objectives specified for each subject in each grade. Strategies have included reducing the overall volume of factual and procedural content, introducing more broadly defined learning areas, promoting both in-school and out-of-school learning, and specifying learning goals for broader grade spans.

Giving greater priority to general competencies and personal attributes

As part of their efforts to broaden the goals of schooling to better prepare young people for future life and work, many countries have identified general skills (or competencies) to be developed by all students. These competencies are referred to by various names, including core or key competencies, general or transversal competences, and generic or 21st century skills. The intention is that these competencies will be developed through students' learning of school subjects, as well as through extra-curricular activities (Cheng, 2017).

In addition to conveying and highlighting the broader purposes of schooling, the specification of general competencies has been part of a move from content-heavy curricula, and a focus on transmissive and reproductive forms of learning, to curricula that provide more time and space for active forms of learning, such as discovery, creation and problem solving. In doing this, most countries have drawn on international conceptualisations of general competencies developed and promoted by UNESCO, the OECD and the European Union. General competencies tend to be of four broad types, which are

- basic skills
- thinking skills
- personal skills, and
- social skills.

In Hong Kong, the curriculum now identifies nine generic skills considered to be essential to lifelong learning in the 21st century. These are grouped into three categories (basic skills, thinking skills, and personal and social skills). All nine skills are expected to be 'fully infused in relevant knowledge contexts'.

Stages of development are specified for each of the nine generic skills, which are

- communication skills
- mathematical skills
- IT skills
- critical thinking skills
- creativity
- problem solving skills
- self-management skills
- self-learning skills, and
- collaboration skills.

Korea's 2015 revised curriculum identifies six key competencies that all students are expected to develop to realise the curriculum's vision for the future Korean citizen. The curriculum specifies that these are to be developed throughout the school curriculum and to be operationalised in subject-specific competencies, which are

- self-management ability
- ability to process and utilise knowledge and information
- creative thinking ability
- aesthetic-emotional capacity
- communication ability, and
- community capacity.

Each of these competencies is explained and elaborated in the current Korean curriculum. For example, self-management ability is defined as the 'ability to live in a self-directed manner with the basic skills and qualities necessary for one's life and career with strong self-identity and confidence'; creative thinking ability, as the 'ability to create new things by combining knowledge, skills, and experience in a wide range of professional and specialised disciplines based on a broad range of basic knowledge'; communication ability, as the 'ability to effectively express one's thoughts and feelings in various situations, and listen to and respect the opinions of other people'; and community capacity, as the ability 'to actively participate in community development with the values and attitudes required by members of local, national and global communities'.

In Indonesia, the focus of the recent education reforms (known as *Merdeka Belajar*) has been to assist students to become lifelong learners. The curriculum prioritises two foundational skills (literacy and numeracy) and three general capabilities, which are

- critical reasoning
- creative thinking, and
- self-regulation.

In addition to general competencies of these kinds, most countries recognise social and emotional development as important aspects of student learning and growth. The development of social-emotional skills is seen as part of the holistic development of every child and young person, and a responsibility that schools share with families and the community.

Hong Kong places a particularly high priority on values education and has a well-developed Moral and Civic Education Curriculum Framework, first introduced in 2001. Currently, the framework identifies nine values and attitudes, which are

- perseverance
- respect for others
- responsibility
- national identity
- commitment
- integrity
- care for others
- law-abidingness, and
- empathy.

Hong Kong schools are encouraged to integrate these nine values and attitudes into their moral and civic education planning, and to address them through Key Learning Areas and extra-curricular activities as appropriate. A 2020 task force that reviewed the curriculum recommended the preparation of more 'life events'

exemplars and resource materials, to support teachers in 'developing the universal core values underpinning Chinese morals and culture' (Task Force on Review of School Curriculum, 2020).

Indonesia, through its recent curriculum reform, also identifies attitudes and values that students will require if they are to participate in that country's plural and democratic society. These include

- tolerance and appreciation of diversity (*kebinekaan*)
- willingness and ability to communicate and collaborate to solve social and community problems (*gotong royong*)
- a strong moral compass stemming from a belief in God (*iman, takwa dan akhlak mulia*).

In summary, Hong Kong, Korea and Indonesia have all made efforts through their curriculum reforms to broaden the objectives of schooling to include a range of general skills/competencies. They have also made efforts to specify in the curriculum attitudes and values that students are expected to develop. In common with countries everywhere, they have encountered challenges in introducing these broader outcomes into the curriculum and, in particular, in clarifying how they relate to disciplinary learning. All have recognised that the introduction and development of competencies requires time, opportunities for practical application, increased 'experiential' learning inside and outside schools, and more use of 'real-life' problems and projects as contexts for learning and development.

A high priority for school systems across the world over recent decades has been the introduction of common and inclusive curriculum and schooling arrangements. For some, this has meant moving away from different and parallel types of schools

Encouraging more inclusive and integrated learning

A high priority for school systems across the world over recent decades has been the introduction of common and inclusive curriculum and schooling arrangements. For some, this has meant moving away from different and parallel types of schools (for example, basic and grammar schools; schools based on different languages of instruction; and general and technical lower secondary schools) toward single, comprehensive schools for all students. It has also meant discontinuing the streaming of students into parallel academic tracks (for example, liberal arts and natural sciences tracks in the upper secondary school) and ending the practice of selecting only some students for progression to the next phase of school. The aim has been to provide every student with common foundations followed by personal choice within the same broad curriculum arrangements.

Hong Kong is an example of a system that has introduced a range of reforms over a quarter of a century to deliver more inclusive schooling. This has included the elimination of early specialisation and streaming. The education reforms of the early 2000s removed terms such as 'pre-vocational', 'technical' and 'practical' from school names, with the intention that all schools should be comprehensive. Also, a whole-person, broad and balanced curriculum was promoted for all stages of schooling.

Previously, students graduating from primary school in Hong Kong were classified into five bands and allocated to secondary schools based on scores on an academic aptitude test. The education reform of the early 2000s recommended abolishing the aptitude test and reducing banding to minimise the labelling of students.

Hong Kong also had a tradition of selecting only some students to proceed to the next phase of school. For example, students were selected for entry to upper secondary school based on their results in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, at the end of lower secondary school. Only about one third of each cohort achieved the scores required for entry. This examination was removed in 2010, giving all students access to six years of upper secondary education. As a result, the number of students graduating at age 17 approximately doubled the number graduating at age 18 under the earlier, selective system. This reform changed upper secondary schooling in Hong Kong from an academic, selective system to a more broad-based, equitable and diversified system.

In summary, Hong Kong, Korea and Indonesia have taken steps to ensure that all students have access to a common, inclusive school curriculum.

Hong Kong has also taken steps to minimise the separation of schools into Chinese and English language-of-instruction schools. From 1997, all secondary school graduates in Hong Kong were expected to be proficient in writing Chinese and English, and to be able to speak confidently in Cantonese, English and Putonghua (standard spoken modern Chinese). Public lower secondary schools were expected to teach in Chinese. However, there were concerns about students' exposure to English in these schools, and about the labelling of schools as either Chinese or English. From 2010, the policy was changed to remove this bifurcation and to give all schools flexibility and autonomy to decide on the medium of instruction, including the possibility of teaching particular subjects in either Chinese or English.

In parallel with curriculum reforms designed to create more inclusive, comprehensive forms of learning have been initiatives to dissolve earlier curriculum dichotomies – especially those based on knowledge-skills and theory-practice distinctions – and to achieve more integrated forms of learning for all students. A goal has been to reduce the siloed nature of school learning by encouraging more joined-up teaching and learning across disciplines and beyond the school.

In Hong Kong, schools are encouraged, but not required, to adopt a cross-curricular approach when planning whole-school curricula to 'enable students to explore knowledge and gain experience in a more comprehensive and coherent manner'. Schools are given examples of how this might be done, including through 'key tasks' that can be used to make connections across Key Learning Areas (KLAs). Most KLA curricula in Hong Kong also provide advice on possible cross-KLA linkages. The territory's curriculum includes a compulsory multidisciplinary General Studies course for primary school students, structured around themes such as 'The Connected World' (which incorporates biology, technology and the social sciences).

In Korea, to prepare students for the future, the current curriculum places a high priority on cultivating creative and 'convergent' competencies. The development of students' abilities to integrate learning across disciplines (referred to in Korea as 'convergence education') has been promoted by developing new opportunities throughout the curriculum for cross-curricular teaching and learning. This new emphasis on creativity and cross-curricular learning is seen as part of a shift in focus from the memorisation of factual and procedural knowledge to more meaningful learning and competence.

In summary, Hong Kong, Korea and Indonesia have taken steps to ensure that all students have access to a common, inclusive school curriculum. (In Indonesia, this has been seen as important to ensuring equity for culturally and linguistically diverse student groups.)

As in many other countries, these school systems have restructured the curriculum to ensure a comprehensive education for all students; phased out the streaming of students into different tracks; and worked to abolish selection mechanisms that limit access to the next phase of school.

At the same time, these three school systems have given increasing priority to students' abilities to bring together and apply knowledge from different disciplines to address important issues and topics. A range of strategies for promoting cross-curricular learning have been developed, including exam-free semesters, major projects and multidisciplinary courses.

Promoting breadth in upper secondary schooling

As a growing proportion of students have continued their education into upper secondary school, most countries have addressed the question of how this phase of schooling is best designed to prepare all students for further learning, life and work. A particular challenge has been to provide students with a broad preparation that includes deep theoretical knowledge and understanding; opportunities for knowledge application; high-level skill development; and attitudes, values and dispositions for future employment and ongoing learning.

In many Asian countries, there has been a long-standing societal focus on academic learning, performance on external public examinations and successful admission to university. In these systems, there has been more emphasis in curricula on the acquisition and demonstration of theoretical knowledge, and less emphasis on practical and applied learning. In fact, vocational learning has often been seen as a second-rate alternative and, sometimes, a dead end.

Hong Kong is an example of a society that highly values academic excellence and tends to see vocational education and training as a fallback option for low-achieving students. In the eyes of most parents and students, the single path to success is through the study of academic subjects and high performance on public examinations. The government has worked to change this perception, including through state-of-the-art vocational facilities and opportunities for overseas experiences. Vocational education is also being broadened to give more priority to general vocationally relevant skills and attributes, and less priority to narrow job-specific skills. In an effort to broaden student learning beyond academic learning, Hong Kong has introduced two-year elective Applied Learning courses that develop both theory and practice in various vocational and professional fields. The 2020 school curriculum task force recommended increasing the number of these courses, which currently are studied by about nine per cent of students. However, for the vast majority of Hong Kong students, the focus of upper secondary learning continues to be on the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and understanding that can be demonstrated in examinations.

In Korea, attitudes to academic and vocational learning have changed over time. As Korea industrialised in the last century, vocational education and training provided the skilled labour required by its emerging industries. In the 1970s and 1980s, about half of all upper secondary students were enrolled in general secondary schools, and half in vocational secondary schools. However, with changes in the economy and Korean society, a growing proportion of students sought places in higher education made possible by academic study at school. This resulted in a decline in the popularity of vocational study, which tended to be a destination for less academically able students.

The government's introduction of 'Meister' schools, to prepare highly skilled workers for priority industries, arrested the decline in the popularity of vocational study but, for the majority of Korean students, upper secondary education remains strongly focused on preparation for examinations in academic subjects.

In summary, a challenge faced by Hong Kong, Korea and Indonesia is to ensure that all students in the upper secondary school receive a broad education that integrates knowledge, understandings, skills and attributes for further learning, life and work. Globally, some systems are working to specify core learning outcomes for all students in this phase of school. However, working against this is the high value often attached to 'academic' learning by parents, students and teachers, to the exclusion of knowledge application and skill development. In Asian countries, vocational learning can have a relatively low status, especially when it is focused on narrow job-specific skills and does not provide pathways to postsecondary institutions.

An ongoing challenge has been to achieve a balance between common curriculum expectations on one hand, and local autonomy to respond to students' contexts and needs on the other.

Increasing opportunities for local adaptation

A long-term trend in many countries has been toward greater local decision making in relation to the school curriculum. This has usually coincided with a more general move to local school management, with local authorities having greater control over a range of matters, including staffing and school budgets. Decentralised curriculum decision-making has given local authorities, schools and teachers more flexibility to tailor teaching and learning to students' local needs and circumstances. An ongoing challenge has been to achieve a balance between common curriculum expectations on one hand, and local autonomy to respond to students' contexts and needs on the other.

As in many countries, curriculum development in these three Asian jurisdictions was historically highly centralised, with curricula developed by civil servants working in curriculum branches of ministries of education or other national agencies. These curricula tended to be detailed and prescriptive, often including time allocations. Textbooks, too, were developed or authorised centrally, along with curriculum guides and other teaching and learning resources.

Over time, many school systems have changed their curriculum development processes to give schools, and sometimes local education authorities, greater input into what teachers teach and students are expected to learn. This has often been part of a general move to more 'democratic' decision-making and the belief that central authorities should devolve all decisions best made at the local level. It has also reflected an intention to recognise the professional role of teachers in adapting what is taught to students' interests, needs and local circumstances to make learning more relevant and meaningful. A consequence has been that centrally developed curricula tend to have become general 'frameworks' rather than detailed curriculum specifications or syllabi.

In Hong Kong, the introduction of school-based management in the early 1990s gave schools increased responsibility for curriculum development within the expectations of the territory-wide framework. Today, guidelines for 'whole-school curriculum planning' recommend collaborative curriculum development involving staff across the school and specify requirements for the inclusion of Key Learning Areas, allocating teaching

time, setting learning objectives, addressing general competencies, values and attitudes, and ensuring access to essential learning experiences. Each primary school has a designated curriculum leader responsible for this process. Schools are expected to develop a plan for a broad and balanced curriculum appropriate to students' needs and the school context.

Globally, school systems have introduced more flexible curriculum arrangements that allow upper secondary students to design their own learning programs to pursue personal strengths, interests, and post-school goals.

In Korea, the national curriculum historically was developed and operated centrally. The decentralisation of curriculum decisions was a key reform of the sixth curriculum revision in the early 1990s. Subsequent curriculum revisions have given greater autonomy to regional education offices and schools to adapt the national curriculum to local circumstances, provided they meet the achievement standards specified by the curriculum. The development of the Korean curriculum thus occurs at three levels: the national framework; regional interpretations and adaptations to address local needs and conditions; and a school-level 'teacher curriculum' that defines goals, content, learning activities and assessment methods.

In summary, a general trend has been from centrally developed, prescriptive curricula and syllabi to broader curriculum 'frameworks', within which schools, and sometimes local education authorities, are expected to develop curricula responsive to students' circumstances and needs. At the school level, the curriculum development process may include teachers, students, parents and the broader community, with the central authority providing guidelines for whole-school curriculum development.

Providing greater flexibility to meet individual needs

A general intention of recent curriculum reforms has been to make schooling more 'learner-centred'. The underlying objective has been to make schooling less about teachers delivering the same curriculum content to everybody (sometimes referred to as teacher-centric) and more about understanding and addressing the interests, motivations, aspirations and learning needs of individual learners, and creating flexible curriculum arrangements that allow students more choice in what, when and where they learn. From the point of view of curriculum design, key considerations are the provision of more student agency or choice and the creation of flexibility for students to learn anywhere at any time, including the possibility of progressing at their own pace.

Most school systems identify two reasons for providing more student choice in the school curriculum. The first relates to intrinsic motivation. In general, students are more likely to be emotionally engaged in learning if what they learn has personal meaning and relevance. Curiosity and wonder are powerful motivators, and students are more likely to be engaged and to learn successfully if they have opportunities to pursue issues and topics that interest them. The second reason is to accommodate differences in students' emerging post-school aspirations. During their secondary school years, students develop clearer understandings of personal strengths and interests and of the kinds of post-school activities they may wish to pursue. Globally, school systems have introduced more flexible curriculum arrangements that allow upper secondary students to design their own learning programs to pursue personal strengths, interests and post-school goals.

In Hong Kong, students choose from a number of upper secondary electives according to their interests and abilities. In the past, students tended to be streamed into arts, science, commercial and technical tracks, but are now encouraged to choose electives from different Key Learning Areas. When these new arrangements were introduced in 2012, the total number of students studying science subjects was greater than the number under earlier streamed arrangements.

In Korea, the national curriculum includes an emphasis on the development of a 'self-directed person' and prioritises student independence, self-regulation and self-management. In 2016, a 'free semester' program was introduced for middle school students to provide 'a variety of activity programs to enhance students' talents and aptitudes with student-centred learning and process-oriented evaluation' (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019). Under this program, students are given opportunities to 'discover their dreams and talents' by designing their own programs of study and engaging in hands-on activities that include career exploration. From 2018, schools were able to offer this program for two semesters.

The intention of more self-directed learning has implications for how the curriculum is organised and teachers are prepared and supported.

As well as giving students more choice in what they learn, many school systems have introduced more flexibility in when and where learning occurs. Every jurisdiction was confronted with this challenge when schools were closed and learning was moved online in 2020–2021 because of the pandemic, but some jurisdictions had already been embracing a broader view of learning that incorporated out-of-hours and out-of-school learning. Also, while most curricula were designed for delivery into formal school settings – including classrooms, grade levels and school timetables – online and other forms of flexible delivery introduced less structured, more individualised and less time-bound forms of learning.

Hong Kong has begun referring to 'learning time' rather than 'lesson time', to promote understanding that learning can occur anywhere, anytime, not only during formal lessons. The 2020 task force in Hong Kong noted that most schools continue to rely on the school timetable and central curriculum guidelines to allocate time to learning but recommended the wider adoption of the concept of learning time given the 'changing modes of learning beyond the classroom and school hours (for example, e-learning), the growing diversity in student learning needs, and variations in school contexts'.

In summary, an intention of recent curriculum reforms has been to make schooling more personalised or 'student-centred'. One aspect of this intention has been to provide students with greater agency or choice in their learning. The intention of more self-directed learning has implications for how the curriculum is organised and teachers are prepared and supported. During school closures due to COVID, teachers found new ways to blend information technology into their teaching and to make better use of digital learning environments. In general, more flexible learning arrangements have enabled teachers to better address individual learning needs and students to have more say in their own learning paths, and sometimes to advance at their own pace.

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About the paper

The author explores how three jurisdictions in Asia (Hong Kong, Korea and Indonesia) have been reforming their school curriculum. In doing so, he draws on his 2023 study of five jurisdictions that have performed at unusually high levels in PISA, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (Masters, G N, *Building a World-Class Learning System*, published by National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), Washington DC).

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