

Opinion and Commentary

How a School Can Maintain its Identity in the Face of National Standards

By Carolina Pavanelli

Writing a school curriculum is not an easy task. Educators from around the world who have ever had to face this challenge know that there is a lot at stake here. After all, building a curriculum is far from just listing the content that will be taught. It is about defining the skills we want our students to develop and identifying the best teaching strategies and most effective ways to assess whether or not our students have achieved both our goals and theirs. All the while, we have to keep in mind that our students have very different social and cultural backgrounds and take this into account when building the curriculum.

It is a difficult enough task when a school has total freedom

to choose the content and skills it wishes to emphasize, but the challenge is far greater still when all schools in a given country are forced to implement an official curriculum. In such conditions, how can a school preserve its unique identity?

This is the challenge facing schools in Brazil. In December 2017, the government issued an official document called the BNCC (Base Nacional Comum Curricular). This document outlines the contents and skills that should comprise 60 percent of the curriculum proposed by all schools operating in the country, whether private or public. In Brazil, at the end of high school, students wishing to gain admittance to university must take a standardized test that many find difficult. For this

reason, even international schools in Brazil understand the need to respect the BNCC document and align their curriculum with national standards. As such, each and every school in the country is currently working to adapt its curriculum without fundamentally changing its character.

The process involves two fundamental steps for any school. The first one is to decide what to include in the 40 percent of the curriculum not defined by the BNCC. There is the possibility, for example, of inserting electives, promoting a sports program (uncommon in Brazilian schools), or integrating other content and skills the school deems important.

The second step is to identify in the document which content and skills match most closely the

school's pedagogical identity. Beyond traditional subject areas, the BNCC emphasizes citizenship, social-emotional skills, environmental awareness, the value of reading, scientific experimentation, and the adoption of a learn-by-doing approach. It is expected that all schools incorporate these aspects into their curriculum by 2020, but it is impossible to prioritize everything. Therefore, if a school has inscribed environmentalism as a central value within its core identity, for example, this new obligation to comply with standards can be turned to the school's favor. It can shine a brighter light on this aspect of its curriculum, reaffirming the school's identity, and respecting its government-issued mandate all at the same time.

Building a curriculum is not easy. However, schools operating in countries where official mandates are in place should study these documents carefully and, only then, design a curriculum that will allow them to differentiate themselves. The greatest agents of this transformation are the educators, because it is they, above all, who are responsible for the strength and vibrancy of a school's identity. ●

Carolina Pavanelli is a teacher at Eleva School and educational director at Eleva Educação. She has been teaching for eight years in Brazilian and bilingual schools and is now responsible for elaborating the System Eleva curriculum for more than 100,000 students.

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Orientation and Cross-Cultural Training: Good for Host-Country Nationals, Too!

By Ettie Zilber

One of the most important jobs of international school administrators—and one of our greatest challenges—is to research, recruit, and retain quality staff. This is no simple feat, considering the unique and challenging circumstances in which we operate.

Once hired, a “golden rule” for achieving better outcomes in our multinational and multicultural communities is the orientation—or induction—of each new individual or cohort. Administrators are well aware of the importance of orientation, in order to make the transition as positive, seamless, and as smooth as possible. Many international schools have already developed such programs for their expatriate newcomers. Programs, policies, and practices take various forms and require varying budgets (Zilber 2008).

Typically, planning for a smooth transition begins even before a contract has been signed. The principle objectives of such programs should be to assist in the relocation, adaptation, and acculturation of the employee into the new cultures of both the organization and the country. The sooner new hires can make sense of their new reality and adapt, the sooner they can focus all their energies on the job of educating our students.

Sadly, however, there is a demographic within our communities that is sometimes overlooked in planning orientation programs: the host-country staff (HCS). These employees can include both instructional and non-instructional staff, and their numbers vary

greatly based on a school's profile, mission, and curriculum. The HCS all play vital roles in the school and interact with the foreign constituents on a daily basis.

Some might wrongly assume that HCS do not need the same training as expat staff, since they have not boarded a plane or left their country, family, or culture to seek employment at an international school. However, I would argue that HCS do indeed need training and orientation in order to make sense of their interactions with foreigners within the community. They also need to learn about the organizational culture, which can be very different from the sorts they may have encountered previously. I believe that working in a multicultural organization—even when it's located in your homeland—is a lot like working in a foreign land.

Cross-cultural awareness workshops have been a mainstay at all my schools, intended not just for the foreign-hire educators but for HCS as well. Moreover, I believe that such professional development should be mandatory for every member of the international school community. The trainings we organized included workshops in which participants focused on examining their own cultural background; shared reflections while in homogeneous or heterogeneous groups; explored the anthropological definitions and elements of “culture”; discussed the values and behaviors common among different groups, including the host culture, expatriate culture, and cross-cultural kids; considered case studies to ana-

lyze “culture bumps”; underwent simulations with experiential debriefings, revelations, and “aha” moments; discussed excerpts from movies and literature; and of course, enjoyed a healthy portion of good humor and good food.

One of the participants wrote a heart-warming testimonial summarizing what she took away from the workshop:

Thank you for opening our eyes, sharing your wisdom, forcing us to think and theorize, encouraging us to share and bond, validating our personal narratives, giving us new words to articulate feelings, giving us tools to become better teachers, giving us insights to become better humans.

What a weekend!

— Shannon O'Dwyer

It is of utmost importance for all members of the international school community to participate in such experiences—HCS included. Once all are bonded thanks to the same illuminating experiences, everyone will acquire the concepts, skills, and vocabulary to analyze “culture bumps” when they occur, or, even more importantly, perhaps avoid them altogether. I encourage us all to learn about “the Other” and how “the Other” perceives and responds to “the other Other.”

Such training will truly change the modus operandi, decision-making outcomes, and relationships among all community constituents—including administrators, students, parents, educators, staff, and board members.

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Discipline & Consequences

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• **Losing control.** There are plenty of times when educators experience frustration, anger, fear, even want revenge. But the last thing students need is adults blowing their tops, especially kids who have experienced trauma outside school. "Our students need us to be strong enough to react with reason, not emotion," says An-

derson. "They need to see what it looks like when mature adults respond to frustration in calm, respectful ways. And they need to be treated with dignity and respect, especially when they're in a crisis." Role-playing discipline scenarios is helpful; so is compiling a personal list of self-calming strategies.

• **Not seeing the big picture.** "Without relationships, everything else falls apart," says Anderson. Relationships should be at the center of discipline, with all other strategies seen as tangents. Rather than asking, "What's

the consequence that will fix this problem?" better to ask, "Is there a consequence that might be part of how we help this student?" This approach is especially important for the most vulnerable students; students with the most chaos and trauma in their lives—those who make us angriest—are the least likely to benefit from harsh punishments. Anderson suggests making a visual map with relationships at the center and other strategies and consequences radiating outward. ●



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Student Choice in PBL

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grade the creative products but instead evaluated our students' ability to show how their GII provided evidence of their learning. As such, we provided anecdotal feedback on their creative projects but only graded the accompanying rationale they provided.

Students who participated in the GII framework loved the autonomy it offered. The experience of managing a schedule, planning independently, and seeking and responding to feedback was invaluable.

This framework exists as a manageable way to support personalized learning and shows us that choice is essential and what we assess matters. Through the use of creative learning frameworks such as the GII, all students have the capacity to develop the skills to become self-managing, adaptable, innovative contributors in our society. ●

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Cross-Cultural Training

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Thus, I would ask: What type of orientation and cross-cultural training do you offer foreign staff and host country nationals at your school? I would love to hear from you. ●

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CCK = Cross Culture Kid is one who has "lived in—or meaningfully interacted with—two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time during developmental years."

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Cultural Diversity

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in which some cultures may be given privileged status within the school, and helps to muster the requisite courage to take decisive action toward cultural pluralism and inclusion in the school's larger academic, professional, and social life worlds.

In effect, a meticulous, caring, stubbornly democratic, broad consensus must be built regarding the need to dismantle walls of cultural exclusion and separation and replace them with inclusive, affirming bridges of understanding and learning in culturally diverse international schools. ●

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