

**Panel B: Policy to Practice:  
Systems Challenges**

**Systems Challenges in Teachers  
Professional Development:  
The Case of Nationwide, Substantive  
Curricular Reforms**

Ana Maria Rodino (Costa Rica)  
State of Costa Rican Education

# A Case of Policy Transition

Costa Rica is undergoing a process of substantial curricular reform involving major changes in the Study Programs of two instructional levels:

- *Preschool* (two school years for children from 4 to 5, and 5 to 6 years of age), and
- The content area *Spanish Language for I Cycle of Elementary School* (includes 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades, for children from 6 to 7, 7 to 8, and 8 to 9 years of age).

The challenges of the process are common to Latin American countries with a centralized education system under the administration of a National Ministry of Education.

# Basis of the Reform Process

The main thread underlying the reform process is a better understanding of two developmental processes previously ignored or misunderstood:

- ***Early childhood*** as a particular stage of development that should prevail in defining educational goals and methods over other considerations (such as the artificial administrative limits between “preschool” and “elementary school”), and

- ***Early literacy*** as a particular stage in the child’s language development that deserves special attention and promotion in and by itself.



# Former Situation

Four/five years ago neither *early childhood* nor *early literacy* were notions informing the country's educational policies. (Estate of Education III, 2011)

There was a set of Study Programs for the Preschool level and specific Ministry authorities implementing them, and another set of Programs for the Elementary years (divided by content areas), with distinct authorities in charge.

Little connection existed between the levels, perceived as greatly different from one another.

Literacy acquisition was a concern solely for the Elementary level since it was expected to occur (once and only) when children reached the age of 7, i.e. in 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

# Mayor Goal of Current Reforms

To change misconstrued discontinuities in early childhood school education, and the weak pedagogic outcomes they originated

(e.g. high % of children repeating 1<sup>st</sup> grade because they do not learn to read during the school year, and many others diagnosed with learning difficulties and placed into “curricular adaptation”, a simplified Study Program)

Further along the system there are more evidences of insufficient literacy achievements

(e.g. poor results in national and PISA evaluations)

The Ministry set as strategic priorities for the period 2011-2014:

(a) to strengthen literacy competencies by transforming the teaching of Spanish across all educational levels, and

(b) devising a national Reading and Writing Policy for the entire system.



# High hopes and high challenges

New Study Programs started to be designed in 2011 and were approved in 2013 (Spanish for I Cycle) and in 2014 (Preschool). They are being implemented in 2015.

Curricular changes are good news for literacy education in Costa Rica. But given their substantive nature, the Ministry now faces two challenges.

One challenge is to be expected:

## **Immediate implementation**

To inform, train and motivate in-service teachers to develop new classroom practices in accordance with the rationale, contents and guidelines of the new curriculum.

The second challenge is less anticipated and often ignored:

## **Lasting and consistent implementation nationwide**

To assure that currently in-training teachers will be well prepared to implement the new curriculum when they become active educators.

Since teachers' initial training is in charge of autonomous universities (public and private), their study programs do not have to follow governmental policies.

Moreover, the Ministry does not examine would-be teachers before hiring them.

Thus, the academic preparation of new teachers to conduct innovative practices is uncertain.

# Facing the Challenges

The 1<sup>st</sup> challenge is relative straightforward to deal with.

There are well known procedures in place: typically short courses and workshops targeted to in-service teachers nationwide.

However, planning difficulties always exist: financial and technical resources, logistics, timing and taking into account new or special considerations (e.g. a recent ruling by the Constitutional Court).



The 2<sup>nd</sup> challenge is not clearly addressed or even grasped.

The Ministry cannot directly compel universities to teach specific contents, such as novel theory and research (e.g. early childhood development, literacy development, and specifically early literacy development).

Should it then re-train teachers constantly? Different, indirect strategies are needed.

The Ministry can and should:

- Inform and jointly discuss with Schools of Education how teaching programs need to pay attention to national policies (academic “lobby”)
- Control the academic quality of teaching training programs in light of national policies (a government’s right), and
- Establish assessment strategies for hiring well prepared new teachers.

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Additionally, regarding both challenges, the Ministry must:

- Ponder the availability of appropriate teaching and learning resources, and
- Develop a variety of such resources for literacy development in general and early literacy in particular.

Resources need to include:

- ◆ theoretical, expert materials;
- ◆ didactic materials to be used in classes;
- ◆ other classroom resources (such as age and culture appropriate children's books);
- ◆ teachers' support groups (for example, for exchanging good practices or advice on how to deal with particular difficulties) and, ideally,
- ◆ developing mentoring experiences at school level.

Once nationwide, substantive curricular reforms  
**have been approved...**

there is still a long road ahead to transit.

Thank you!