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**Part I: Implementing the BNCC: Lessons from “Common Core”
By David Plank – February 17, 2016**

Implementing the BNCC: Lessons from “Common Core”

As Brazilians debate the new curricular standards known as the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC), it is important to ask whether and how these new standards will lead to improvements in the education that young people receive in Brazilian schools. The answers to these questions depend first, of course, on the quality of the standards, but they depend even more critically on how the new standards are implemented in states, schools, and classrooms. The current national debate focuses on the quality of the draft BNCC proposed by the Ministry of Education, but even as this debate unfolds it is important to begin planning for what will happen after the BNCC is approved. In thinking about the challenge of implementing the BNCC, Brazil can learn some useful lessons from the ongoing implementation of the “Common Core State Standards” (CCSS) in the United States. In this policy brief we review and discuss some of these lessons and their implications for Brazil.

Lesson #1: Quality Matters

The CCSS are very strong standards: clear, coherent, and rigorous. They were developed by teams of subject-matter experts in a year-long process, in consultation with teachers and other practitioners. The development process was informed by research on child development and effective pedagogy, and the new standards were benchmarked against standards in countries that perform well on international assessments of student achievement. The CCSS are comparable to the best existing state standards (e.g., those in Massachusetts), and dramatically better than the standards that were previously being used in most American states.

The first draft of the BNCC was released in November 2015. The national consultation process that ends in March will give curriculum experts, classroom teachers, and parents the opportunity to criticize the current draft, and to offer recommendations for improvements in clarity and coherence.

The quality of standards matters for many reasons, but three are especially important. First, standards define what we expect students to learn in school. If standards are set too low, students may “succeed” in meeting them but they will learn less than they could or should. Second, standards articulate the central goals of the education system. They should therefore guide the decisions of policy-makers and educators about which teachers to hire, which textbooks to assign, and which tests to administer to ensure that all students have the opportunity to meet the standards. If standards are unclear or incoherent they will not support good decisions by teachers and administrators, and will not lead to improvement in the performance of schools and students.

Finally, the quality of the BNCC is the best protection against the political attacks that inevitably accompany efforts to define what students should know or be able to do.

Very few constituencies will call publicly for standards that are not clear, coherent and rigorous, or argue that we should expect students to learn *less*.

Lesson #2: Standards are Political

Reaching agreement on academic standards is always difficult, because well-intentioned people disagree about what children should learn, how they should learn, and who should decide what they are taught in school. In an effort to avoid political conflict the CCSS were developed under the indisputably bipartisan auspices of the National Governors' Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (an organization similar to CONSED), and the decision whether or not to adopt the standards was left to the voluntary decision of the states.

The developers of the CCSS also sought to minimize controversy by defining standards in only two disciplines: Language Arts and Mathematics.¹ Chastened by memories of the political firestorm that followed an attempt to define national history standards in the 1990s, the developers of the CCSS sought to avoid disciplines that might generate political controversy in favor of "basic subjects" where learning standards are in principle indifferent to specific curriculum content.

These strategies were initially successful, and 45 states (plus the District of Columbia) quickly adopted the CCSS. More recently, though, the CCSS have been attacked from both the right and left, for multiple reasons, and several states have reversed their adoption and proclaimed their intention to develop standards of their own. What is notable in these attacks, however, is that the critics of the Common Core have almost uniformly focused on what the CCSS represents (a federal takeover, a windfall for the testing industry, an attack on teachers' autonomy, "ObamaCore") and not on the quality of the standards themselves. The states that have formally abandoned the CCSS have quickly adopted "local" standards that are virtually identical to the CCSS in every important respect.

Brazilian federalism is very different from the North American version, and the adoption of "national" standards is, as a result, likely to be less politically contentious. At the same time, however, the decision by the developers of the BNCC to define standards simultaneously across the full curriculum, including Natural Science and Social Science as well as Portuguese and Mathematics, increases the likelihood of conflict over curriculum content. This could make the ultimate approval of the BNCC more politically difficult than it might otherwise be.

¹ (The "Next Generation Science Standards" (NGSS), were developed in a separate process, independently from the CCSS. The NGSS have now been adopted by 16 states.)

The process of gaining approval for the BNCC has already begun to arouse political opposition, and this may intensify as adoption and implementation draw nearer. If managed well the current national review of the draft BNCC may help to defuse some of the controversy around the new standards. In the end, however, the key to successful adoption of the BNCC is to keep the focus on the value of standards as a powerful lever for improvement in all aspects of the education system.

Lesson #3: Standards Are a Lever for Change, Not the Change Itself

The practical and political obstacles facing the BNCC are challenging, but writing and adopting standards are in fact the easy parts of the process. The far more difficult challenge is introducing and implementing new standards in schools and classrooms. For the BNCC to produce improvement in the performance of Brazilian schools and students, major changes in nearly every other aspect of the education system will have to be made. The most important of these changes include the alignment of assessments, the provision of appropriate training for new and in-service teachers, and the development of new instructional materials.

Assessment

Brazil has been a pioneer in the assessment of student performance at all levels of the education system, with the SAEB, ENEM, and ENADE among others, but up to now most Brazilian assessments have not been anchored in explicit standards that define what students should know or be able to do. With the adoption of the BNCC this will have to change, for two reasons.

On the one hand, it is often noted that what gets measured, matters. People focus their attention on responsibilities and tasks where their performance can be evaluated. Aligning assessments to the grade-by-grade standards defined by the BNCC sends a clear signal to educators that the new standards are important, and encourages them to improve and adapt their instructional work to ensure that their students master the knowledge and skills identified in the standards.

On the other hand, assessments that are *not* aligned to the BNCC are by definition not measuring whether students have mastered the knowledge and skills that the BNCC expects. They are measuring other things, including both knowledge acquired in school and also family background. Assessments that are not aligned to standards can provide some useful information about educational performance, but aligned assessments provide far more powerful guidance on how to support improvement in the performance of students and schools.

The federal government in the US invested heavily in two multi-state assessment consortia that promised to develop assessments aligned to the CCSS, and some private-sector testing firms have also developed new CCSS-aligned assessments. These new assessments were administered for the first time in 2014-15, four years after most states began their implementation of the CCSS. As Brazil moves forward

with the implementation of the BNCC it will be important to bring current assessments into alignment with the new standards, to ensure that judgments about the performance of schools and students are as accurate as possible, but also to provide guidance for teachers' instructional decisions.

Teacher Training

If the BNCC is to bring about improvement in the performance of Brazilian schools and students it must bring about change in what happens in Brazilian classrooms. The most immediate way to make this happen is to equip teachers with the content knowledge and pedagogical skills they need to align their teaching with the BNCC. This will require changes in the recruitment and training of new teachers. Even more important, though, it will also require that teachers who are already in the classroom be provided with the professional development and retraining that they will need to ensure that their students are equipped to master the new standards.

Providing in-service training for millions of Brazilian teachers is a huge challenge, but it is absolutely crucial to the success of the BNCC. At present many teachers do not themselves have the content knowledge in disciplines including mathematics and science to teach the new standards. Many more lack the pedagogical skills to deliver them effectively. Unless teachers receive the training they need to bring their educational practice into alignment with the new standards, the BNCC will not lead to improvements in the educational performance of Brazilian students.

New teachers will also need to be trained to provide instruction that is aligned to the BNCC. Ensuring that teacher candidates have the content knowledge and pedagogical skill that will be required to ensure that their students master the new standards will require major changes in the public and private institutions that prepare teachers.

Curriculum and Materials

In addition to pre-service and in-service training that is aligned to the BNCC, teachers also need curriculum frameworks and instructional materials that are aligned to the new standards. Most teachers rely heavily on textbooks to organize and inform their instructional practice. Providing them with textbooks and curriculum guides that are aligned to the BNCC is the most efficient way to ensure that the new standards are implemented in classrooms throughout Brazil.

New standards by themselves will change nothing in Brazil's education system. Policy-makers, local leaders, and educators at all levels will have to work together to support the successful implementation of the BNCC in schools and classrooms in all parts of the nation. At the end of the day, however, improving student learning depends upon changes in instructional practice, and teachers will only change their instructional practice if they are given the training, tools, and support they need to make the change. The success or failure of the BNCC in raising student achievement will be almost entirely determined by the hard work of implementation, and not by the quality of the standards themselves.

Lesson #4: Slow and Steady Wins the Race

The implementation of new standards requires big changes throughout the education system. It requires the development of new assessments and new instructional materials, and it requires teachers to do their jobs differently. These changes take time, and expecting them to happen without sufficient preparation is likely to lead to frustration and resistance. The different experiences of New York and California with the implementation of the CCSS illustrate the importance of careful planning to support the successful implementation of new standards.

New York:

New York was an early and enthusiastic adopter of the CCSS, and of new assessments aligned to the new standards. In their rush to embrace the CCSS, however, New York policy-makers failed to plan for the political and technical challenges that would have to be faced in the implementation process. The result was a fiasco that angered parents, teachers, and other critical constituencies, and led ultimately to New York's abandonment of the CCSS.

Immediately after New York adopted the CCSS the state's education leaders moved to implement a new system of assessments aligned to the new standards, giving teachers virtually no opportunity to learn about the new standards or to adapt their instruction to the state's new expectations. The Governor nevertheless left the state's current accountability framework in place, which meant that teachers were to be evaluated on material they had not taught and their students evaluated on material that they had not learned.

The results were disastrous for CCSS. Scores on the new assessments were lower than scores on the previous assessments, and teachers and parents were understandably furious, believing that they and their students were being unfairly punished for the state's mistakes. New York's teacher unions called on the Governor to reverse the state's adoption of the CCSS, and encouraged parents to "opt out" of the new assessments by refusing to allow their children to participate.

The political conflict engendered by these implementation errors continues. Twenty percent of New York parents chose to "opt out" of state assessments in 2015, and the combined opposition of teachers and parents led to the resignation of the state's Education Commissioner. The Governor was obliged to appoint two separate commissions to investigate the new standards and assessments. The commissioners returned with a call for the state to abandon the CCSS, and a demand for a "total reboot" aimed at developing New York standards that would be acceptable to teachers and parents.

It is important to recognize that the collapse of CCSS in New York had and has virtually nothing to do with the standards themselves, and everything to do with the way they were implemented. The state's failure to support or even plan for an effective implementation process produced needless confusion, conflict, and expense, while doing nothing to improve educational opportunities for New York's children. In the end New York will almost certainly develop and adopt "New York" standards that are virtually the same as the CCSS, but the political challenge of implementing "New York" standards successfully has been made far more difficult by the failure of the CCSS.

California:

California also adopted the CCSS enthusiastically, but in contrast to New York the state has been both thoughtful and deliberate in implementing the new standards and the new assessments that are aligned to them. As a result there is almost no organized opposition to the CCSS in California. Among state leaders there is a solid political consensus in favor of CCSS, and teachers and their unions remain strongly supportive as well.

To build and sustain political support for the CCSS, California has worked hard to give teachers the time and support they need to learn about the new standards and to implement them successfully in their classrooms. In the past three years the California Legislature has provided nearly \$4 billion to local school districts to support CCSS implementation. The primary focus of these expenditure has been on in-service training for teachers, but funds have also been used to purchase instructional materials aligned to the CCSS and to invest in the new technologies required to support CCSS implementation.

At least as important has been the three-year hiatus that California has taken from its previous accountability framework. The state has not administered consequential assessments of student learning since 2012-13, which has given teachers and their pupils time to adapt to the state's new expectations without fearing that they will be punished if their performance falls short. California is now moving toward the adoption of a new accountability framework that will measure multiple dimensions of school performance, further reducing the stakes attached to CCSS-aligned assessments.

By devoting attention, time, and resources to standards implementation, California has avoided the political conflicts that have undermined the CCSS in New York and other states. Teachers remain broadly supportive of the new standards, and their support has encouraged parents to be supportive as well. Barely one percent of parents chose to "opt out" of the new state assessments in 2015. The implementation process is far from complete, but it remains fully on track and it is already producing benefits for California's students.

Lesson #5: Adopting the BNCC is the First Step in a Long Journey

The adoption of common standards marks a big step forward, in Brazil as in the US. Before the adoption of the CCSS standards and expectations for student differed wildly across the American states, and the degree of variation is even greater in Brazil. The adoption of the BNCC will provide schools and teachers with a clear, coherent and rigorous statement of what students should know and be able to do at different grade levels. Adopting explicit and uniform standards is a potentially powerful strategy for improving educational opportunities for all Brazilian students, and especially for those who now face the greatest disadvantages.

The gains from adopting the BNCC will only be realized if the new standards are implemented carefully and effectively, however. Unless assessments and instructional materials are closely aligned to the BNCC the new standards will amount to little more than words on paper. Even more important, the government must give teachers the time and resources they need in order to acquire the content knowledge and pedagogical skills that putting the new standards into practice in their classrooms requires. In the absence of such support, Brazilian students are unlikely to experience any real change in the content or quality of the instruction that they receive.

The BNCC is an important advance in the long struggle to improve Brazilian education, but in themselves they do not constitute a strategy for change. They provide the starting point for a strategy, but without careful implementation of the BNCC the lasting improvement in the quality of Brazilian schools that they promise will not be met.