Commentary – Brazilian NLS V3 Introduction   Dave Peck
December 2016

Overview

Account has been taken of comments on previous versions and the introduction is now much improved. There is a good explanation of the rationale for Brazil's national standards and an appropriately judged explanation of the legal framework that underpins the learning and development rights and the NLS.

There is also a clear elucidation of the need for the focus on general competencies and the range of competencies learners need to develop.

Another marked improvement is the explanation of the role of the States, the Federal District, the Municipalities and schools in implementing a curriculum built upon the national standards.

The following commentary provides specific comments relating to each of the existing sections of the document, with suggestions for further refinement.

1.Introduction

1.1   **The construction of the Brazilian National Learning Standards**

This section gives an excellent brief account of the NLS development process. A more appropriate title might be: *'The process of developing the Brazilian National Learning Standards'.* There is a clear underlying message about the validation of NLS that stems from such an extensive consultation process.

Validation could be emphasised even more strongly, perhaps with a statement about the intention to engage with a large number of stakeholders before going on to give the figures regarding the number of contributions and the range of stakeholder groups. Another point that could be made more forcefully is the fact that the process was designed with two rounds of consultation (rather than one) so that more account could be taken of stakeholder opinion in refining the standards.

Presenting this impressive data at the start of the document, relating to the numbers involved in consultation, counters any possible criticism regarding insufficient engagement with the public and / or education professionals.

1.2   The Brazilian National Learning Standards

This section presents the rationale behind the NLS. It might be helpful to include the word 'rationale' in the heading. The first paragraph expresses two key points regarding the rationale and the nature of the NLS.

- They incorporate both knowledge and competencies
- They are underpinned by principles of equity and inclusiveness

The term 'competencies' is not easily understood. It would add value if there was an extra sentence to explain the importance for learners' life chances of developing not only what they know but also what they can do.

The first paragraph under the heading 'Why adopt NLS?' provides a clear and compelling explanation of the need for nationwide standards addressed by diverse curricula in the different States, the Federal District and the Municipalities. The term '*excellence'* is often used internationally to express the aim of providing every learner with the opportunity of reaching the very highest standards. There is a clear message in the text about *equity* and about raising standards but there is scope for a stronger expression of ambition with respect to how high standards should be. Hence the use of '*excellence'* might help.

There is currently no mention of the development process having involved comparing and aligning the NLS with international standards. This rationale section could usefully include something about the importance of equipping all learners with the ability to compete in the global economy.

The second paragraph (*The NLS are a national reference…)* and the sixth (*State and Municipal education departments and schools…*) both relate to the role of States, the Federal District, Municipalities and schools so these two paragraphs could be merged. This is a key point about effective implementation of the standards so that they have a positive impact on the progress of learners across the country. This important aspect of the rationale may be considered worthy of a separate sub-heading.

The final two paragraphs of this rationale relating to learners with special education needs, those in Youth and Adult Education, indigenous people, immigrants and speakers of African languages and runaway slave communities are also extremely important. They have very significant implications for effective implementation across the country. Consideration should be given to whether there should be a separate sub-heading for such a key message.

1.3   **The NLS legal framework**

It is important that the introduction should include the legal framework that establishes the need for national standards and that sets out the principles that have guided their development. Section 1.3 does this effectively, and is appropriately brief, although it could be more 'reader-friendly'.

Suggested improvements:
- Include an introductory paragraph that describes the content of this section, for example:
  'The requirement for Brazil's national learning standards and the principles that should be taken into account in developing the standards are established in law. Some elements of the legal framework underpinning the NLS are detailed in the following paragraphs. These are drawn from the 1988 Federal Constitution, the LDB, the DCN and the PNE.'
- Improve reader-friendliness by further developing the structure of this section, with separate paragraphs devoted to each article or legal document and its implications for the NLS. Paragraphs could be further structured with direct quotes from articles / documents in italics and implications in bold or plain text.

The 'rights' section is much improved from the original list in earlier drafts. Now that they have been rationalised and categorised under the three headings relating to ethical, political and aesthetic principles, they form a coherent set of learner entitlements[1]. In the introductory paragraph (under the heading '*The NLS learning and development rights*'), it would be good to add that the rights have implications both for what is taught (knowledge, skills and attitudes) and for how the curriculum is taught (pedagogy).

The penultimate paragraph of section 1.3 ('*Learning and development are continuous processes…*') explains the importance of the rights in ensuring equity and quality for all students. This paragraph could be moved to the introduction to rights where it would help to stress the importance of the rights before the detail is presented.

1.4   **The pedagogic foundations of the NLS**

The title '*The pedagogical foundations of the NLS*' suggests that pedagogy underpins and drives the NLS whereas, in reality, the new

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[1] The word 'entitlement' is normally used in this context in English, denoting that learners are entitled to an education that incorporates certain elements. 'Rights' has a broader meaning encompassing human rights, civil rights and constitutional rights. The Portuguese word 'direitos' may cover both of these English meanings, in which case this comment should be ignored.

NLS have implications for pedagogy[2]. A better alternative might be something like '*Pedagogy and the NLS*' or '*The implications of the NLS for pedagogy*'.

The first two paragraphs deal with what is often considered the contentious issue of the paradigm shift in thinking about learning, the recognition that knowledge is no longer enough and that it is essential to also develop learners' competencies. It is important that this case is worded carefully and persuasively so that all stakeholders are convinced, including those who tend to be resistant to change.

A key element of this message is the point that knowledge is not being set aside or devalued in favour of skills, attitudes and competences. Instead, as a result of a focus on skills, attitudes and competencies, learning takes place in meaningful contexts and so knowledge is deepened. Crucially, students therefore become accustomed to making use of their knowledge, applying their learning and so building their abilities and confidence.

It is useful to explain that, when carrying out a fundamental review of the curriculum, it is important to explore all aspects of the educational process (as listed in the first paragraph) and to give examples of some of the competencies and abilities that are important (as in the first and second paragraphs).

The section headed *'The curricular content to develop competencies'* usefully provides some general background to competencies before each of the three groups is amplified. It would help if there was a simple introductory sentence explaining that everyone needs a wide range of competencies in order to operate effectively in their personal life and their working life. This would provide a lead into the existing explanation about the competencies learned outside of school and those developed as part of formal education.

The explanation of the meaning of the term 'competency' in the first paragraph could be clearer. A figure may help. For example:

Knowledge + **Skill** needed to apply the knowledge + **Attitude** to think about the knowledge & use the skill appropriately = **Competency**

The organization of the competencies into three distinct groups is appropriate and helpful in enabling education professionals and students to understand them and to plan / participate in effective learning strategies.

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[2] This could be a translation issue.

The detailed descriptions of the three groups give a comprehensive overview of the competencies encompassed by each. All three descriptions are intellectualised and may prove too complex for some readers, particularly those who are not education professionals. This issue could be addressed by inserting a simple overview sentence at the start of each section. For example:

Social and Personal Competencies
These are the competencies needed to enable individuals to make the best of their own attributes and abilities and of their interactions and relationships with others.

Cognitive Competencies
These competencies are important for embracing and making the best of learning opportunities, for making sense of information and for applying learning effectively.

Communicative Competencies
These are the competencies required for effective communication in all its forms.

Adding some simple introductory sentences such as these would not require much change to the existing text that would follow.

Specific comments relating to the text under each heading

SOC: Two of the competencies commonly used internationally are *collaboration* and *working in teams.* Both of these are implied in the existing text under 'Social and Personal Competencies' but it would be good to include these specific terms.

COG: The three competencies commonly used internationally under this heading are *critical thinking, creativity* and *problem-solving.* All are covered to some extent in the existing text, although consideration should be given to the degree of emphasis of each. The second bullet point ('*Exercising intellectual curiosity and adopting…..*') could be taken to mean that these competencies apply to sciences and not to other subjects. It would be advisable to re-word this to make it clear this is not the case.

COM: The foundation of effective communication is good literacy (speaking, listening, reading and writing) in the native language whereas the first sentence of the existing text seems to suggest that it requires people to be multilingual. It would be good to make this point before going on to cover communication in other languages and using different media. Another key element of effective communication is having the confidence to make oneself understood. This could be expressed more clearly.

General NLS competencies and a full education model

This is a useful section, giving the reader a clear explanation of the rationale for educating the whole person rather than focusing solely on the brain and memorisation. This is described in the text as a 'full' education whereas in English the terms normally used are a 'whole' or a 'complete' education[3]. The use of these terms avoids the confusion with full-time education and captures the theory behind the move towards a balanced approach and away from pure memorisation.

As this section provides a background to the competency approach, it would make sense to place it before the detail of the three groups.

NLS competencies and interdisciplinarity

This is another useful section. The message regarding the importance of integrating competencies into subject learning across the curriculum is well explained.

There is a strong focus on the role of schools in organising the curriculum and a statement that 'the three proposed groups of general competencies' should be 'used as a reference for school curricula'. It would be worthwhile linking this with section 1.2 where the role of the States, the Federal District and the Municipalities is mentioned.

It should be clearly explained that, as curricula are revised at State, Federal District and Municipality levels, account will have to be taken of the new NLS and competencies will have to be incorporated at the same time. Some explanation could also be included relating to the need for decisions to be made about how to ensure an approach is adopted that is:
a. simple enough to be manageable and achievable and
b. comprehensive enough to ensure an appropriate range of competencies is included.

2. The structure of the NLS

Is section 2 part of the introduction? It is unclear whether this section is intended as a guide to the structure of the NLS document or to the standards themselves. It would have been useful to see the full document so that a judgement could be made regarding to the alignment of this section with the standards themselves.

Some more thought needs to be given to this section so that the text aligns with the figure and so helps to improve understanding. At present the reader has work to do to understand the relationship between the text the diagram.

General competencies

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[3] This could be another translation issue.

It is also unclear whether the message in this section is:
a) the competencies have been incorporated into the NLS at national level or
b) the competencies need to be developed by curriculum developers at State, Federal District, Municipality or school level as they plan and implement the NLS

Readers can infer that b) is correct by referring back to section 1.4 but it would be good to make this clear in section 2. Readers will not always read the whole of the introduction through from start to finish.

Stages

A description of the stages of education is important but this may be misplaced under the heading '*The structure of the NLS'*. Would it be more appropriate to describe the stages and then explain how the NLS have been structured to align with the stages?

In Early Childhood Education, it could be confusing that there are six learning **rights** that lie beneath the learning and development **rights** that apply at all stages. It would aid understanding if a different word could be used for the learning rights[4]. Commonly, around the world, a general term such as 'learning areas' is used.

The explanation relating to primary and secondary education is also unclear (although this could be partly explained by translation issues). Presumably the specific competencies are specific to each of the knowledge areas. This could be more clearly expressed. The statement that '*Each specific competency ties in with one or more general competencies, which is pointed out in each area'* is misleading. Experience shows that learning experiences normally involve developing a number of competencies, both general and subject specific, at the same time. Teachers have to apply their judgement to decide which competencies to focus on particularly at different times.

Another point that could be clearer is the distinction between learning objectives related to skills and those related to knowledge. Should 'Knowledge Objects' have been translated as 'Knowledge Objectives'?

The final sentence suggests the 'means' refers to 'what is taught by the teacher'. In fact an accurate interpretation of 'means' would be '**how** the teacher presents the learning experiences'.

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[4] This comment may be irrelevant if the same word is not used in Portuguese.