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Curriculum making: key concepts and practices

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Introduction

It would appear – after a long hiatus spanning nearly 30 years – that curriculum is back on the menu in England's schools. This observation does, of course, require some qualification. In one sense, curriculum has never gone away: reform of the school curriculum has been a preoccupation of successive governments, with policy characterised by tinkering – and occasionally larger scale overhaul – of the National Curriculum, which has continued to exert a major – some would say malign – influence on practices in schools. However, this is different to saying that the curriculum, as an object or field of study and a set of discourses subject to critical examination by education professionals, has been high on the educational agenda in England. We would suggest that this has not largely been the case, and that the field of curriculum studies – by both scholars and education professionals – has been in decline for some time. Some commentators have talked of a 'crisis in curriculum' (Wheelahan, 2010) in recent years, echoing earlier talk in the United States that the field had become moribund (Schwab, 1969). Such rhetoric is perhaps overstated; nevertheless, we would agree that the field of curriculum studies has been in the doldrums for some years in the UK (Moore, 2006; Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019). A major cause of this has been the influence of the National Curriculum, a good example of a teacher-proof curriculum (Taylor, 2013). In its various iterations, through tight and prescriptive regulation of content and even teaching methodology (Hofkins & Northen, 2009), it has sought to reduce teachers from active curriculum makers to technicians tasked with delivering a predefined product. This is amply illustrated by one particular trend in recent years – the decline of the curriculum studies Master's degree. In the early 1990s, teachers were able to undertake Master's level programmes with a primary focus on curriculum at many universities; in 2019, only one such programme remains in the UK, and it is currently projected for closure. These trends have been accompanied by a decline in curriculum scholarship and the retirement of key scholars in the field, and a distancing of curriculum scholars from the institutional settings (including schools) where curriculum is made and remade (van den Akker et al., 2013). A corollary of this has probably been the strengthening of a view amongst the teaching profession that curriculum scholarship is not relevant to the task of developing educational programmes in schools.

In the light of this apparent decline in curriculum studies, we therefore welcome signs that the field is experiencing something of a renaissance; 'a vigorous debate on the school curriculum with questions concerning curriculum design and implementation moving to the top of the educational research and policy agenda internationally' (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019, p.1). A notable trend has been the emergence worldwide of new forms of curriculum policy, which explicitly reposition the teacher as an agent of curriculum change and active maker of the curriculum in local school settings (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). Examples of such development are found in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and the new Curriculum for Wales. This approach to curriculum policy has explicitly eschewed the detailed prescription of content – input regulation of the curriculum (Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012) – which has been a key feature of policy for much of the lifecycle of England's National Curriculum. The repositioning requires teachers to be more than simple implementers of policy, but instead as professionals who interpret, translate, mediate and enact policy through the exercise of professional judgment. Overall, such curricula have placed questions about curriculum, including curriculum design/development/making, firmly back into the orbit of practitioners.

To some extent, recent trends in England reflect worldwide trajectories, although there are some significant differences, which would seem to militate against the development of the extended role of the teacher as a curriculum maker, as has been encouraged elsewhere in the world. Prominent amongst these has been the knowledge turn, following the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010. The launch of England's revised National Curriculum by Michael Gove in 2012 represented a considerable divergence from international trends towards decluttering of

content, and more autonomy in curriculum making – including selection of content – by teachers. Its prescription of content in core subject areas and the lack of specification in 'unimportant' non-core subjects (Alexander, 2012, p.376), along with its lack of clear aims, have been heavily criticised as undermining curricular balance and coherence. According to Alexander (ibid.):

> Since this contrast is reinforced by assessment requirements, with English, mathematics and science subject to national tests and 'some form of grading of pupil attainment', we can be reasonably sure on the basis of past experience that in a significant proportion of schools teachers will teach to the test and have scant regard for the rest.

Paradoxically, these ambiguities in curriculum policy seem to have opened up spaces for teachers to become more active and agentic curriculum makers. By encouraging the narrowing in the curriculum, about which Alexander warned, curricular policy has exposed the need for schools and teachers to be sites where curriculum questions are posed and addressed constructively. It is no longer the case – if it ever was – that schools can unproblematically 'implement' the government's curriculum product.

It is heartening to see, in this political context, that curriculum debate is firmly back on the agenda in schools. The recent emergence of the Ofsted Intent, Implementation, Impact[1] approach to curriculum planning is encouraging, as it explicitly requires schools to address curriculum questions. It acknowledges that curriculum is something that 'happens' at various levels of the system, it recognises the important role of teachers as translators of policy, and significantly emphasises the importance of conceptual clarity. It recognises the importance of knowledge, something that has been 'downgraded' to some extent in curriculum policy developments elsewhere in the world (Young & Muller, 2010; Priestley & Sinnema, 2014). Nevertheless, despite these encouraging signs, there remains a need for a more nuanced approach to conceptualising and enacting curriculum. The Ofsted model remains limited in many respects: it is too linear and top-down, and replete with problematic language such as 'delivery' and 'offering', rather than 'experience' and 'development'; and there is too much focus on content, neglecting other curriculum practices, especially pedagogy and assessment, which are seen as not being part of the curriculum.

The remainder of this chapter will explore some of these issues, taking as its starting point the current debates about curriculum. To a large extent, these debates were foreshadowed by the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2009; Hofkins & Northen, 2009); this comprehensive approach to curriculum was perhaps published, however, at the wrong time to have the impact it deserved. Given current debates about the importance of curriculum, we now seem to be at a more constructive juncture to critically examine the concepts and practices associated with curriculum, many of which featured in the Review. The next section will explore the meaning of curriculum in more detail, especially examining critical concepts that should underpin the development of educational programmes in primary schools.

Curriculum concepts

It can be argued that effective curriculum making has to be underpinned by developed conceptual understanding by the curriculum makers (i.e. teachers); sense-making by teachers is suggested to be a key factor in the development of state-mandated, large scale curriculum reform in systems perceived as successful, such as Finland (Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini, 2018). It is therefore useful to start this discussion with an attempt to define curriculum, which is a contested and often misunderstood concept. At a simple level, the curriculum simply means a course of study. The word is derived from the Latin word meaning racecourse or race, and has come to mean a general course, conveying the notion of going somewhere in a predefined direction. Indeed, this simple definition is

[1] https://www.slideshare.net/Ofstednews/educationfest17

one that is current in many schools, where the curriculum is seen largely as the glossy booklets that contain the content to be taught.

However, such a conception of curriculum is clearly inadequate for understanding the complex processes of schooling in today's society. It can reduce curriculum simply to content, and ignore practices such as assessment and pedagogy that need to be considered when the curriculum is developed in schools. A more sophisticated definition is clearly required, and there have been many attempts to provide one. For example, a Dictionary of Education (Rowntree, 1981) offers the following definition:

> [Curriculum] can refer to the total structure of ideas and activities developed by an educational institution to meet the learning needs of students, and to achieve desired educational aims. Some people use the term to refer simply to the content of what is being taught. Others include also the teaching and learning methods involved, how students' attainment is measured and the underlying philosophy of education.

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, in line with this more holistic view, states that the curriculum is 'the totality of all that is planned for children and young people throughout their education' (Scottish Government, 2008). There are many other approaches in the literature highlighting the complexities of what curriculum comprises. Robitaille and Dirks (1982), for instance, discuss three levels of curriculum: the intended (a set of formal documents specifying what the relevant regional/national education authorities plan), the implemented (the interpretation of the intended curriculum by teachers and the actual implementation taking place in the classroom, based on teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experiences), and the attained (knowledge, understanding, skills, and affective variables learners actually acquire as a result of teaching). These ideas were later used as a model of what curriculum is in the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS) and have subsequently influenced the work of many educationists, who, in turn, provided more detailed/refined typologies.

Such definitions are helpful in that they provide a broad conception of the education that occurs in schools. However, this sort of broad definition can also be confusing, as the term curriculum comes to mean different things to different people. For these reasons, it is necessary to be clear about the various facets that make up the curriculum, and the ways in which these facets link together and interact in practice. One way in which this has been addressed is to identify how curriculum fits with other components of education, such as assessment and pedagogy, while seeing them as conceptually distinct practices. For example, Bernstein's (1977) famous formulation of the three message systems of schooling – curriculum, pedagogy and assessment – is one such attempt to show how these practices interrelate. However, this typology comes with dangers, if it allows education professionals to consider such issues separately, and we would advocate instead an approach which requires all such questions to be addressed as part of a holistic method of engaging with the development of educational practice.

With the above in mind, we offer an alternative, holistic definition of curriculum: <u>the multi-layered social practices, including infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated</u>. Such a definition moves us beyond thinking of the curriculum as a product which needs to be delivered or implemented. Instead, it views curriculum as something that happens – or which is done – differentially across different layers of the education system, as the curriculum is <u>made</u> in different institutional settings. Put differently, and to paraphrase Bernstein (1990), the curriculum is contextualised in policy, and recontextualised as it is [re]made (interpreted, translated, enacted) in different schools. This definition of curriculum also requires us to consider how different curricular practices interrelate, and how the curriculum relates to educational purposes, students and the wider social context, for example:

- Questions relating to curriculum for what, by whom … and for whom?

- The necessity of considering context, including the 'hidden curriculum', when engaging in local curriculum making.
- The importance of teacher professional development, bearing in mind Stenhouse's (1995) aphorism that there can be no curriculum development without teacher development.
- The role of system dynamics as barriers to and drivers of curriculum making.
- The perspectives and experiences of traditionally marginalised groups.

A regular response to the argument that curriculum needs to be viewed holistically as described above is the refrain 'but that is not curriculum, it is pedagogy (or assessment)'. A couple of examples will illustrate why we should resist such thinking, as the curriculum is made in schools. We offer these examples on the assumption that how one learns is as significant as what one learns in shaping the intellect. The first example relates to the development of new subject content, and has been a commonplace issue in Scotland as Curriculum for Excellence has unfolded (Priestley, 2011; Fenwick, Minty & Priestley, 2014). Many schools have discussed the possibility of developing new courses, in the spirit of the new curriculum, to integrate teaching in the sciences and social studies. In practice, what has emerged has been the development of modular programmes that continue to teach the constituent subjects separately, the sole difference being that a single teacher is responsible for teaching all of the subjects, instead of different subject specialists. This has defragmented the student experience, by reducing the number of teacher contacts per week, but has arguably reduced quality in teaching, and has done little to make connections across the curriculum. The new practices have been constrained by timetabling arrangements, the availability of teaching resources and limited prevailing understandings of integrated curricula. In Scotland, these decisions have been left for schools to make, with a comparative absence of national level resources. Our point here is that it is not possible to make decisions about changing content, without consideration of the infrastructure (support, guidance, resources, timetabling) that facilitates the new approach. The second example relates to pedagogy. A Scottish school introduced cooperative learning as a pedagogical approach widely deemed appropriate for Curriculum for Excellence (Minty & Priestley, 2012). In this case, the initiative was unsuccessful, largely because of existing structural arrangements (the 50 minutes period made extended activities difficult) and the physical characteristics of the school (desks bolted to the floor and facing the front made group work all but impossible). Again our point is that decisions about what has been traditionally seen as the curriculum (i.e. content) are shaped by many other factors, and these need to be taken into account when curriculum making.

In contrast to the view outlined here, curriculum is more frequently narrowly conceived as knowledge/content. We do not deny the importance of knowledge here, and would agree with the Cambridge Primary Review, which rejects arguments that:

> process is all that matters, and that knowledge is ephemeral and easily downloaded after a Google search. Knowledge matters because culture matters […]. In fact, culture is what defines us (Hofkins & Northen, 2009).

Instead we would argue that a conception of curriculum as simply knowledge is potentially reductive. As well as often failing to acknowledge the interconnectivity of curricular practices, as outlined above, there is a tendency to reduce knowledge to subjects. As Whitty (2010, p. 34) points out, 'knowledge is not the same as school subjects and school subjects are not the same thing as academic disciplines'. Such thinking runs the risk of subjects becoming the ends of education, rather than, as they should be seen, as particular means of organising knowledge in the curriculum. Subjects have a tendency to become set in stone, and we have seen over the years how some subjects have established themselves on the curriculum as unchallengeable entities, supported by powerful subject associations (Goodson & Marsh, 1996). A corollary of this has been the development of gaps in the curriculum as society changes (do we adequately cover social, political and environmental issues in the current school curriculum?) and overcrowding as new subjects are

sometimes bolted on to address the issue of gaps (e.g. citizenship in the secondary – but not primary – National Curriculum). This incremental approach does not lend itself to a coherent curriculum. Moreover, there are alternative rigorous approaches to teaching disciplinary knowledge that are inter-disciplinary in nature, rather than being framed as traditional subjects (for example, see Beane, 1997). Addressing these problems requires a shift in thinking – the key question is not 'what subjects do we teach?', but instead 'what knowledge, skills and attributes are required for educating the human to be a participant in a complex and pluralistic modern society?'. And crucially, this includes the questions 'who are the learners?', and 'how do we get there?', which further raise questions around the issues discussed above, concerning pedagogy, assessment, provision and support infrastructure. To some extent, this process can be captured by the metaphor that sees curriculum planning as organising a trip: a] Where do we want to go? (knowledge, skills, attributes); b] who is coming to the trip? (knowing the learner); c] how do we get there? (pedagogy); and d] what did each traveller get from the journey? (assessment).

A related issue, which has characterised debate around the curriculum in England, but less so elsewhere in the UK, concerns the development of spurious dichotomies. These include knowledge vs skills, children vs subjects and traditional vs progressive. The latter meme has become extremely prevalent in recent times, undermining the assertions of many, who advocate a view of curriculum based solely on knowledge, that curriculum is a separate issue from pedagogy, as they regularly conflate so-called 'traditional' curricular structures based on subjects with 'traditional' teaching methodologies. According to Hofkins and Northen (2009, p.41), 'there is an easy way to eliminate these facile, but dangerous, dichotomies'. This is to 'simply substitute 'and' for 'not' and 'versus'' (ibid.). Put simply, a good teacher will draw upon a range of teaching methodologies regardless of whether they are deemed to be traditional or progressive, and will value the acquisition of knowledge. Similarly, John Dewey (1907), regarded by many as the father of progressive education, explicitly rejected what he saw as the false dichotomy of knowledge and process, emphasising the importance of the 'accumulated wisdom of the world'. In both cases, the key criterion for selection should be fitness-for-purpose.

This brings us to the discussion of educational purposes or aims. A strength of the Cambridge Primary Review was its advocacy of a curriculum rooted firmly in educational aims, and guided by clear principles. Many modern curricula (e.g. Curriculum for Wales) are similarly grounded in a clear expression of purposes, which are intended to drive practice. In effect, a statement of aims is an invitation to discuss the question 'what are schools for?'. Conversely, the various iterations of England's National Curriculum have been at best weakly rooted in aims. As Alexander (2012, p.372) so neatly put it, this is the:

> Mrs Beeton approach --- first catch your curriculum, then liberally garnish with aims --- is not the way to proceed. Aims must be grounded in a clear framework of values --- for education is at heart a moral matter --- and in properly argued positions on childhood, society, the wider world and the nature and advancement of knowledge and understanding. And aims should shape curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and the wider life of the school, not be added as mere decoration.

A clear statement of aims in curriculum policy is only the starting point. It should be accompanied by systematic sense-making by teachers. Clarity of purpose is a necessary prerequisite for constructive and purposeful curriculum making. This requires time to be set aside for structured and ideally collaborative discussion about curricular purposes, their meaning and their implications for practice.

Thinking of curriculum as social practice, with due consideration of aims and subsequent development of practice, then leads us to consider the role of the curriculum makers – teachers – and how their professional agency as curriculum makers might be developed. The term capacity is sometimes used to refer to teacher agency. This usage is in line with modern political discourses

around teaching – for example the oft-expressed truism that the quality of a system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. However, this sort of thinking is at best incomplete, and at worst can be misleading, leading to the misallocation of resources, and reductionist thinking that places the responsibility – and the blame – for curricular failure at the door of teachers. Alexander (2012, p. 380) offers a more nuanced account of capacity, suggesting that:

> curriculum capacity' refers to the human and other resources that a school is able to command in two areas:
>
> - relating to the aims, scope, structure, balance and content of the curriculum as a whole;
> - relating to the detailed planning and teaching of individual curriculum subjects, domains or aspects.

This view suggests that 'capacity' – or more accurately 'agency', as capacity is only one aspect of teacher agency – is dependent on the availability of resources. The ecological understanding of teacher professional agency (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015) takes this thinking a step further. Personal capacity (e.g. professional skills and knowledge, and teacher dispositions and beliefs) is only part of the story; agency is dependent as well on the resources available to teachers, and shaped by the social context within which, and by means of which they act. Agency is not therefore something innate to an individual, but is achieved in particular, and always unique situations, through an interplay of personal qualities and contextual conditions. Therefore, if we are serious about enabling teachers to become effective curriculum makers, then we need to not only raise their professional capacity – we also need to address their cultural and structural working conditions. Even the highest calibre teachers can be disabled by their environment. The ecological understanding of agency thus suggests that we need to focus less on excellent teachers and more on excellent teaching.

This raises important questions about the extent to which an educational system allows teachers the 'discretionary space' to approach curriculum as a social practice. This is linked to some extent to how centralised/decentralised an educational system is. In the case of the Republic of Cyprus (a highly centralised system), for instance, teachers do not have significant discretionary space to 'deviate' from the prescribed agenda, despite policy rhetoric about autonomy. In this sense, they are not allowed to be curriculum makers. In the case of Scotland, teachers are, at least in theory, given more freedom and space to take decisions, and yet system dynamics, for example accountability mechanisms, often preclude this (Priestley, Biesta, Philippou & Robinson, 2015; Kontovourki, Philippou & Theodorou, 2018); moreover, many teachers lack the professional knowledge and confidence to make use of the space afforded (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015).

Curriculum process

Over time, curricula have been developed around content, often delineated into traditionally configured subjects. As we have noted, this approach comes with problems, notably a conflation of knowledge and subjects, and a tendency for subjects to become the ends rather than the means of the curriculum. Recently, national curricula have tended to eschew this approach, instead framing education around competencies and learning outcomes, often highly specified and set out as linear ladders of progression. The tendency for such frameworks to drive teaching through assessment, becoming effectively tick lists of criteria, has been well documented, along worth associated issues around strategic compliance, workload and bureaucracy (e.g. Minty & Priestley, 2012). A more constructive approach seems to be the process model of curriculum, grounded in clear educational purposes and paying attention to the processes then necessary to achieve them. The Cambridge Primary Review appears to adopt this approach, with the specification of 12 purposes, and a number of guiding principles.

According to Kelly, 'the starting point for educational planning [in a process curriculum] is not a consideration of the nature of knowledge and/or the culture to be transmitted or a statement of the ends to be achieved, whether these be economic or behavioural, but a concern with the nature of the child and with his or her development as a human being' (Kelly, 1999, p. 78). The starting point is educational purposes through, as previous noted, critical sense-making by teachers of curriculum policy and critical engagement with the question' what are schools for?'. Such engagement involves balancing nationally agreed priorities in policy with local imperatives, and also, as emphasised, inevitably involves professional judgment as the official curriculum is made – interpreted, translated and enacted – in local contexts. Curriculum making entails three linked processes, as teachers derive the following from curricular aims:

- *Selection of content*: deriving appropriate knowledge (including skills and dispositions) to meet curricular purposes. We reiterate here that a process approach does not preclude the acquisition of wat has been called powerful knowledge (e.g. Young & Muller, 2010).
- *Selection of method*: structuring education programmes to ensure that pedagogy is coherent and fit-for-purpose, building in regular opportunities for assessment.
- *Provision*: organising the curriculum to ensure a coherence and progression, accounting for links between different domains of knowledge where applicable (e.g. subjects, cognate areas of learning, interdisciplinary approaches).

We conclude this section with two points. First, and often neglected in curriculum making, it is essential that teachers identify barriers and drivers to their curriculum making, and [importantly] address them through concrete actions. This may include enhancing professional knowledge (e.g. a reading group), setting up new structures (e.g. establishing a professional learning community, or a new role in the school) and/or discussion with external partners such as local authorities. Second, schools should not neglect the hidden curriculum (e.g. Hargreaves, 1982). We do not have space here to discuss this in detail; suffice to say, for example, that there is little point in developing a curriculum, based around the voice of children and young people, if the discipline practices of the school undermine this, or if the school's culture marginalises their voices. Similarly, establishing a vocational strand to the curriculum, or a co-curricular programme will be limited in effectiveness, if the predominant message is that certain subjects (Mathematics, English, Science) are more important. It is helpful to make a school's values explicit in its curricular documentation and policies; but they need to be lived values too.

A summary of key points

In closing this introductory chapter, we would like to recapitulate some key points that readers might find useful to take with them as they read on to the next pages.

- After a long period of recession in the field of curriculum studies in the UK, there are signs indicating that the field is experiencing a renaissance.
- In talking about the curriculum, we suggest that we should move away from definitions that approach the concept as a product. We propose an alternative definition of curriculum: the multi-layered social practices through which education is structured, enacted, and evaluated. Such an approach renders teachers as curriculum makers and emphasises the important role of teacher agency in the process of change. On the one hand, highly centralised educational systems do not always allow teachers the discretionary space to act as curriculum makers. On the other hand, highly decentralised systems may, in theory, allow teachers the freedom and space to act as such, yet without necessarily providing them with the tools and opportunities for professional development that would facilitate constructive curriculum making.

For curriculum to be an effective set of social practices, systemic changes need to take place. Those changes should not only allow teachers the space to act as curriculum makers and decision takers;

they should also address issues regarding perceptions of some school subjects as more important than others, and the extent to which the voices of learners and their respective cultural communities can be heard, are valued and are considered.

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