

# Curricular justice in a complex world

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## Abstract

This paper is a response to articles published in this Special Issue of the journal. In the paper, I reflect upon the issue of curricular justice, offering comment on issues raised in the constituent papers of the Special Issue. The arguments are structured around four themes: education IS political; the questions of whose knowledge should be represented in the curriculum; the importance of pedagogy as a curricular practice; and the question of who should be involved in curriculum making. In particular, the paper reflects upon the use of principles of curricular justice – redistribution, recognition and presentation – that are prominently discussed in most of the papers in the Special Issue.

## KEYWORDS

curricular justice, curriculum, social justice

## INTRODUCTION

As a former lead editor of the Curriculum Journal, I was involved in the preliminary discussion about this Special Issue of the journal. I am therefore delighted to see the project come to fruition, with the publication of an excellent collection of papers, covering a diverse range of issues related to the concept of 'curricular justice'. And, of course, it is a privilege and a pleasure to get the opportunity to write a piece that responds to the themes and issues raised in the papers.

The year 2025 seems to be a particularly significant juncture for the publication of this important Special Issue. We are currently witnessing wars in parts of the world: widely reported in places that 'matter' (Ukraine, Israel/Palestine/Iran/Syria); and widely ignored or under-reported in less 'important' parts of the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The reporting of such conflicts reveals a colonial mindset, where certain issues (that relate to 'us') are deemed to be more worthy of reporting than those that afflict the 'other'. Moreover, many such conflicts have their roots in the former injustices of colonialism, with rippling

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effects that resonate through the ages to current times, evident, for example in the colonial aspirations of modern leaders and the historical and arbitrary [re]drawing of borders, often in ways that split ethnic communities and pit different groups against each other in competition for resources. We can be certain that many such wars are not easily resolvable—and it is likely that the scale and intensity of conflict and violence will increase in the coming years.

Similarly, anthropocentric climate change has assumed a position that is centre-stage in the lives of the majority of people in the world, clearly evident in the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, species depletion, environmental degradation (including the melting of the glaciers upon which billions rely for water), sea-level rise and competition for declining resources, leading to further conflict and the wholesale displacement of populations. While the scientific consensus is that we face a climate emergency, too often political responses are driven by self-interest, and especially the interests of corporations that profit from the status quo. Mainstream media outlets seem to downplay the causes and effects of climate change. Often this seems like denial, with the privileging of voices that claim that climate change is just a hoax. Even where reporting seems more nuanced, it is commonplace for these issues to be discussed in a manner that claims to be impartial, equating the majority view of science with the minority view of the denialists and calling it balance. Similarly, as we see in many of the papers in the collection, mainstream education has a tendency to depoliticise—and, as a consequence, airbrush—controversial issues relating to justice—social, climate, curricular, etc.

The complexity conveyed in the above discussion raises, for me, many questions about the vital role of education in general, and curriculum in particular, as part of the solution to address these apparently intractable wicked problems. How do we, collectively (e.g. teachers, school leaders, policy makers, children and young people and wider communities), develop educational practices that can contribute to dealing with the complex and multifaceted issues that face the world? How on earth do we educate young people to live in such a complex world? How do we enable them to think critically in the face of complexity? To be active and ethical citizens? And, of course, to become qualified for increasingly complex workplaces (recognising that this purpose of education is often over-emphasised, but in narrowly functionalist ways, in many modern curricula)? A key underpinning issue is the question of what knowledge, skills and attributes should be developed through education. This, in turn, leads us to questions about the selection of content from the huge corpus of human knowledge, how this is best organised and the pedagogical approaches that are best suited to developing knowledge and skills. I would suggest that contemporary schooling systems, with their emphasis on narrow measures of attainment, along with discipline and control, do not readily address these questions.

The above discussion, albeit brief and underdeveloped, leads us neatly to the papers in this collection. The papers share a common theme, curricular justice. Eight of the nine papers draw upon a particular set of authors writing about social/curricular justice (e.g. Connell, 1992; Fraser, 2008), concerned with ideas about *redistribution*, *recognition* and *representation* as the core pillars of social and curricular justice. The papers are, nevertheless, extremely eclectic in their approaches and subject matter, covering topics as diverse as climate change education, the experiences of indigenous peoples, the role of teachers as curriculum makers, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) or Training (ITT), inclusive practice, early years provision, gender inequity, poverty and socio-economic marginalisation, Islamophobia and students as curriculum makers. Contexts include schools and higher education, as well as less formal educational spaces. Methodologically, the papers are varied, involving quantitative and qualitative approaches, including detailed policy analysis. Many papers foreground the voices of children and young people and the wider communities served by education. Visible in the papers is the strong potential for education to reproduce social inequalities—or, alternatively, to challenge them. I do not propose to comment on

each paper in the collection in detail. Instead, I am offering some reflections on some of the themes that emerge and the possibilities for future curricular directions that will be needed if we are to address the wicked problems that threaten the world—people, other species, and wider ecosystems.

## EDUCATION IS POLITICAL

The first theme is a challenge to the idea that education can remain apolitical. Of course, issues such as climate change and social inequality can never be viewed in such a neutral way, not least because they affect different people in different ways. The idea that schools should avoid politically sensitive issues for fear of being seen as politically partisan is not only misguided—it is dangerous to the health of democracies. To deny students access to ideas—and to shroud the existence of ideologies in society—is an issue of curricular justice, because it subsequently limits their abilities and opportunities to make decisions about these issues, which are ever present in their lives. Failure to inculcate an understanding of complex socio-political issues can only lead to ignorance that is susceptible to exploitation by unscrupulous populists. A fairly recent example in Scotland, where I am based, relates to the 2014 independence referendum, when many schools avoided teaching about the topic for fear of being seen as favouring one side or the other. Other schools explored the issues thoroughly, holding mock referenda and encouraging students to advocate for the different positions in open and frank debate. The latter approach is infinitely preferable, allowing exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of opposing arguments—a vital educational function in an era of contentious politics and populism. It addresses the foundations of curricular justice articulated by Fraser (2008), as it surfaces *recognition* of diverse views, and ensures that these voices are *represented* in any debates.

The idea that education should or should not be political is highly visible in the accounts in this collection. Mayes and colleagues (the ninth paper in this collection) refer to the ‘myth of curriculum neutrality’ and ‘the depoliticising tendency of climate change education in mainstream schooling’. Education is always ideological, as powerfully emphasised by Michael Schiro (2012); for example, supposedly ‘neutral’ approaches such as competency-based education or education concerned with teaching academic disciplines are respectively ideologically oriented towards social efficiency and scholar-academic traditions. The question is not *whether* education is political/ideological, but instead *how* it is political/ideological—and whether it is legitimate to orient it towards alternative ideologies, for example social reconstructionist approaches that overtly seek to address injustice through education. To do so entails education that explicitly recognises inequality and its antecedents. As Rushton, Walshe and Johnston (the first paper in this issue) state, ‘Rather than asking questions framed through action competence, such as: What is the problem? Why do we have this problem? Where do we want to go now and in the future? How can we change the problem? [...], we might [also] ask: Where and how do injustices exist in the past, present and future? How can we disrupt injustices and create reparative futures?’

In any case, we currently see a strong politicisation of these supposedly apolitical issues in the national and regional policies of many countries, driven by neoliberal thinking (e.g. about marketisation) and ideological approaches to educational governance through outcomes steering. For example, Brooks (in the fifth paper in this issue) draws our attention to the ills of standardised approaches and a reliance on ‘what works’, ‘evidence-based’ thinking. According to Brooks, ‘In its most simplistic form, the political argument is that all new teachers should have access to content based on the “best available evidence” on what we know about how pupils learn, however that assertion relies on how “best available” is interpreted and understood’. In other words, we see the imposition of a particular ideology

about education imposed on ITT providers. The result, according to Brooks, is a reduction of provision in rural and remote areas (compromising the social justice principle of redistribution) and the precluding of certain forms of pedagogy and locally responsive approaches (compromising recognition and representation), to the detriment of potential teachers and subsequently the experiences of school students. By privileging one educational ideology, premised on notions of so-called effectiveness, curricular justice is compromised, as dissenting voices are silenced and erased through the exercise of political power.

## **WHOSE KNOWLEDGE?**

A related theme is the question of ‘whose knowledge’ is privileged in curriculum making, whether that is in national policy or local practices. This question goes to the heart of what it means to educate, raising troubling questions about how many communities can be excluded from educational processes. Many curricula emphasise that the existence of a common or core curriculum addresses issues of social justice and equity, ensuring equal access to education for all through ‘standardisation’, but this, as we see in this collection, can be misleading. Such practices can erase difference, engendering homogeneity and ignoring cultural distinctiveness that might be better addressed through local curriculum making. Priestley, Mouroutsou and Uthmani (the third paper), writing about inclusive education and pre-service teachers, highlight the importance of teachers recognising difference to achieve social justice goals, in contrast to standardised approaches in policy that tend to homogenise. As with other papers in this collection, they emphasise the importance of redistribution, recognition and representation—and (drawing upon the work of Nancy Fraser) the prevalence of ‘misrecognition’, the tendency to marginalise or dehumanise.

Standardisation, imposed through centralised policy, can have a number of tangible consequences, some clearly unintended. In our research in Scotland (Shapira et al., 2023), we encountered examples where the drive to a standardised curriculum has led to socially stratified divergence in provision, with resulting effects on students’ attainment and future educational transitions. Put simply, students in schools serving disadvantaged communities are likely to experience a watered-down version of the standardised curriculum with less choice and fewer subjects, attain less highly (controlling for social factors) and have delayed transitions to higher education. This is a clear curricular injustice, resulting from a failure to consider redistribution, recognition, and representation.

Mills, Riddle and McGregor (the fourth paper) challenge the logic of standardisation cogently, stating that the rich common curriculum they advocate is not a standardised offering for all, ‘but that all students experience a curriculum with common features [where] all young people engage with important disciplinary concepts, are intellectually challenged and enabled to critically frame knowledge’. This is a curriculum that ‘that does not erase difference but has “recognition” as a central tenet’ and combines ‘rich disciplinary knowledge with the students’ lives, interests and community funds of knowledge’. Skattebol and Press (paper eight), writing about early childhood provision, make a similar case, drawing upon work by Judith Butler, for inviting ‘the other’ to provide an account of themselves, with a view to surfacing their figured worlds—ensuring recognition and representation. Similarly, Sutton, Youdell and Kitching (paper seven) focus on surfacing difference and dissensus through Charlotte Mouffre’s concept of agonistic pluralism.

As we have seen, in relation to Claire Brooks’s paper on ITT in England, policy can actively erase certain ideas from the curriculum—the null curriculum or ‘epistemicide’ (Paraskeva, 2016). This can happen by neglect or by design, as the research of Lehner-Mear and colleagues (paper six), on gender in early childhood policy in England, clearly illustrates. It can also occur in more subtle ways (deliberate or otherwise), as documented

by Woods and colleagues (the second paper in the issue). These authors note that while the Australian National Curriculum explicitly acknowledges the importance of recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people, its technical form militates against these aspirations. Simply adding more Indigenous content to the curriculum does not work in addressing the persistent social justice issues that afflict many communities in what are becoming more heterogeneous societies. The framing of Indigenous content as cross-curricular priorities embedded within learning areas and most often expressed as 'voluntary' elaborated content, rather than as a discrete learning area in its own right, downgrades this content, which can be then addressed by schools in a tokenistic way: 'a context where Indigenous content is atomised and structured to remain subservient to the disciplines'.

## PEDAGOGY MATTERS

A second related theme concerns the 'how' of education. Too often, the concept 'curriculum' is reduced to the selection and/or specification of content, with little consideration of how other curricular practices, for example pedagogy and assessment, might articulate with this. A social practice view of curriculum (Priestley et al., 2021) can help avoid such thinking by viewing curriculum [making] as systemic, occurring across multiple sites and comprising different forms of activity. Mayes and colleagues (paper nine) offer a similar view: drawing upon Connell's concept of curricular justice, they posit 'an expansive view of curriculum', as not only about content but also 'embodied in classroom and whole-school practices' (Connell, 1992, p. 137). Such conceptions illustrate the importance of enacting curricular justice through pedagogical processes. While the teaching of propositional knowledge is necessary when developing understanding of social justice issues, this is not sufficient. More active, authentic and participatory approaches are required, again considering principles of redistribution, recognition and representation, along with Connell's (1992) principle that a starting point is consideration of the needs of the most disadvantaged. This is prominent in the Knowledge+ approach advocated by Mills, Riddle and McGregor (paper four), where curriculum content is enacted through pedagogies that embrace recognition and representation, ensuring that all students can have access to quality educational experiences that foster their agency.

In the light of this, educators therefore need to consider the extent to which issues of social justice are addressed through active—or activist—approaches to learning. The evidence presented in these papers suggests a reluctance, perhaps deriving from conservatism or nervousness, across multiple sites of curriculum making, from policymaking arenas to classrooms. Rushton, Walshe and Johnston (in the first paper) make the case for more activist approaches to climate justice. They point to the existence of action-based approaches to Climate Change and Sustainability Education (CCSE), which have the goal of achieving climate justice and have been well-established for at least 30 years. These comprise more than just propositional knowledge about issues and consequences but also exploration of root causes and knowledge about alternatives and strategies for change. Their research suggests that CCSE in England is currently a long way from this approach, being mainly embedded as content in subjects such as geography and science. Moreover, they report that the issue has been depoliticised, lacking attention to values and overly focusing on economic imperatives. This situation is redolent of the model of citizenship education proposed by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), whereby education often fosters only limited forms of citizenship (personal responsibility and participation), while neglecting the sorts of social activism that might come with a social justice orientation and which are essential to deal with the wicked problem of climate change.

There are, of course, persistent tensions between issues such as climate justice, which requires an activist stance, and mainstream schooling, which is geared towards compliance. These tensions are clearly visible in the paper (nine) by Mayes and colleagues, which documents [mixed] school responses to climate strikes and other activism in Australia—in some cases support, but often ambivalence, or opposition and sanctions. Interestingly, these authors found that schools serving more privileged demographics, including independent schools, are more likely to be tolerant of or to support climate justice activism, albeit within parameters, illustrating some deficits in relation to curricular justice, especially redistribution, but also recognition and representation. They also noted the tendency for climate justice to be better addressed in extracurricular spaces (e.g. lunchtime clubs and social movement organisations beyond the school), reflecting the inadequacy of formal curricula in addressing this issue and in a similar vein to Rushton and colleagues' research in England. The uneven nature of climate change education is certainly a curricular justice issue, given that so many voices are marginalised and excluded by the education system.

There are tangible benefits to offering a curriculum that is active and participatory. Mills, Riddle and McGregor's paper (paper four) provides powerful evidence that such an approach works, even within cultures where education is framed as attainment. Their paper outlines a case study of a school serving an area of multiple disadvantages, where 'cycles of teacher inquiry', supported by researchers, are succeeding in transforming practice. Empirical data suggest that the project has resulted in enhanced levels of student engagement with school, including from those previously disengaged, as well as improved academic outcomes. Interestingly, the research also suggests that teachers' professionalism and professional agency have been reinvigorated by participation in the project; the authors report, for example changed dispositions towards curriculum making and the use of research to inform practice, and changed pedagogical practices. These findings mirror similar research in Scotland, involving the methodology of Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry (Priestley & Drew, 2019).

## **CURRICULUM [MAKING] BY WHOM?**

The point above about teachers leads me to some final reflections about the role of different actors in curriculum making. I have long been an advocate of enhancing the role of teachers as curriculum makers (e.g. Priestley et al., 2015, 2021, 2023). I do not see this as being purely about affording teachers greater autonomy in their classroom curriculum work, although this is important to consider, along with serious thought as to how systems might enhance the professional agency of teachers. (I note here that simply increasing teacher autonomy may not increase teacher agency—it may even have the opposite effect by eroding conceptual framings and support provided by intelligently framed curriculum policy.) I would argue for an enhanced professional role for teachers, who are enabled to work across schools as leaders of curriculum making and as participants in the writing of national policy (for an interesting example of this, see Kneen et al., 2023, writing about Pioneer Teachers in Wales). It seems to me that excluding such a key stakeholder group as teachers from macro- and meso-level curriculum making is a social injustice, as it erases the perspectives of those largely charged with enacting policy into practice. Moreover, even where teachers are involved in national-level curriculum making and subsequent curriculum leadership, through participation in working groups, through consultation and through involvement in regional curriculum leadership, too often their voices can be silenced or ignored by those in positions of power (e.g. Finnanger & Prøitz, 2024; Kontovourki et al., 2021). Teacher agency is a crucial issue here. This is only partly, as suggested by an ecological understanding of agency (Priestley,

Biesta, & Robinson, 2026), to do with teachers' personal qualities as educators. Teacher capacity is clearly important, and this points to the vital significance of initiatives such as funding for Master's-level study. However, agency is also contingent on the structural and cultural conditions that surround teachers' professional lives; consequently, it is also important to develop meso-level support (e.g. meaningful teacher networks; see Priestley et al., 2023) and to mitigate intrusive accountability systems that act as genuine constraints to the sorts of pedagogy advocated by papers in this Special Issue.

I utilise the example of teachers here, as a stakeholder group who can be silenced, marginalised and excluded from processes that are fundamental to the performing of their roles. This should not be read as privileging the voices of teachers over other groups, such as students and members of local communities. The papers in this collection provide strong arguments for education that is participative, involving active forms of pedagogy and students as active curriculum makers. My point is that curriculum making is enhanced by the inclusion of diverse voices, particularly those being educated and who are experiencing the effects of issues such as climate change and social inequality. The agency of children and young people is an especially crucial factor in developing education that aspires to a better future. Again, the ecological understanding provides a strong conceptual foundation for fostering student agency (Priestley, Cathcart, & Johnston, 2026) through requiring attention to both the development of *personal capacity* (knowledge, skills and attributes) and the *social and material conditions* that shape the agency of young people. Both aspects might be addressed by curricular innovations such as Knowledge+ (Mills, Riddle and McGregor, paper four), which redistributes powerful knowledge while recognising the distinctive funds of knowledge that students bring to their educational encounters, and which does so through powerful pedagogies—active, activist, authentic and participative curriculum events (Doyle, 1992)—that foster genuine representation. A final point here is that fostering the agency of students in the here-and-now of schools today will likely enhance their future agency as adults, by constructing a rich reservoir of experience to inform active, ethical and informed citizenship.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Good curriculum making, whether policymaking, the construction of programmes of study in schools or pedagogical practices in classrooms and other educational spaces, must attend to curricular justice. The framing utilised by most of the authors in this collection is extremely helpful here. To cite Woods and colleagues (paper two), redistribution entails:

more than the provision of a common curriculum to all. The curriculum is not encompassed in a document; rather, the curriculum is the sum of the resources brought together in the pedagogic relations that play out in classrooms across systems.

Recognition 'requires that all students and their families and communities can see themselves and people like them as belonging within the education system'. Representation 'requires governance and decision-making at a local level [for example] the opportunity to locally negotiate curriculum, to draw on community expertise and values, and to centre the aspirations, needs and desired outcomes of children and young people, and the communities within which they are living, into the education that they are provided with'.

In summary, this Special Issue provides an insightful and critical collection of papers with strong messages for all working in education—teachers, school leaders, district administrators and policy makers. It should be taken seriously.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper is a response to articles in this Special Issue of the journal. There are no obvious ethical issues.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest in the preparation and publication of this article. Note that this is an invited article—a response to the papers in the Special Issue edited by Stewart Riddle and colleagues.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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