

Priestley, M. & Philippou, S. (2018). Editorial: Curriculum making as social practice: complex webs of enactment. *The Curriculum Journal*, 29[2], 151-158.

Editorial: Curriculum making as social practice: complex webs of enactment

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This special issue brings together papers that individually and collectively illustrate the complexities which emerge when curriculum is ‘made’; complexities which themselves stem from the social embeddedness of both curriculum as a concept and the social actors involved in such makings. The papers all have their genesis in presentations given at the 3rd European Conference on Curriculum Studies, held over two days at the University of Stirling in June 2017. The papers, and the conference, are representative of a much needed renaissance in curriculum studies, at least in Europe, with the recent formation of the *European Association for Curriculum Studies*, and where the *European Educational Research Association Network 3 Curriculum Innovation* has greatly enhanced its profile and membership in recent years. This renaissance follows an extended period since the 1980s, often termed a crisis in curriculum (e.g. Wheelahan, 2010), and marked by a decline in curriculum scholarship and the emergence of so-called teacher-proof national curricula around the world (e.g. Taylor, 2013).

Talk of crisis in the field is not new. The field was famously proclaimed as moribund by Schwab (1969) and even, ‘for all practical purposes’, as dead by Huebner (1976). Such concerns are actually indicative of the conditions through which the ‘reconceptualisation’ of the field emerged from the 1970s onwards, led by Pinar and colleagues (Pinar, 1975). The reconceptualist movement challenged the very foundations of curriculum studies, its established concepts, directions and purposes, as these had been dominated by a narrow focus on prescription and regulation of school formal intentions and tested ‘results’, as well as by anti-hegemonic, yet overtly political orthodoxies fuelled by critical theory (Pinar et al., 2008). The focus of curriculum scholarship, when the Anglo-American curriculum and continental European ‘bildung’ and ‘didaktik’ traditions were studied as connected and compared (e.g. Westbury, Hopmann & Riquarts, 2000; Gundem & Hopmann, 2002), can be seen as another manifestation of a field in search of an identity; in other words, of a field in crisis. Other such episodes of questioning and re-defining of identity have been efforts to internationalize the field by challenging its North American focus (Pinar, 2003), as well as to problematize this internationalization as new Western expansionism, which yet again needs to be ‘de-canonized’ (Paraskeva & Steinberg, 2016).

Since 1990, scholars have pointed to another, but related, kind of crisis in curriculum (e.g. Wheelahan, 2010) at a policy level, marked by a decline in curriculum scholarship and the retirement of key scholars in the field, and characterised by the emergence of so-called teacher proof national curricula around the world (e.g. Taylor, 2013). Some have argued that the movement to reconceptualise the field and broaden its scope eventually contributed to a loss of focus, as scholars often distanced themselves from the processes of developing the curriculum in schools, being instead more preoccupied with critiquing the socio-political issues that shape that development (see, e.g. van den Akker et al., 2013). This in turn further fuelled a disconnection between curriculum scholars and actors who make the curriculum in institutional settings – policymakers, teachers, etcetera – and a common view that curriculum scholarship is not relevant to the task of developing educational programmes in schools.

A further issue lies in the increasing politicisation and economisation of schooling in general, and the curriculum in particular. Education policy across Europe and further afield has, in recent years, been an important component of wider public social policy, driven by powerful discourses from supra-national organisations, albeit of differing nature, such as the OECD, the EU and UNESCO. In an increasingly inter-connected and complex world, education policy has been utilised to achieve ambitious and often paradoxically competing social and economic goals, such as improving economic competitiveness and social mobility, and enhancing social cohesion in increasingly heterogeneous populations (Robertson & Dale, 2015). The school curriculum forms a significant part of education policy in European nation-states. Many states have re-configured their national curriculum frameworks to meet these challenges, to focus on the development of skills for the workplace, and the formation of citizens with the competencies needed for living in modern, pluralistic and complex democratic societies (Sinnema & Aitken, 2013). Curriculum scholarship does not appear to have figured highly in these developments and could even be seen in tension with such heavy political and economic agendas.

The mobilisation of education and school curricula for social engineering purposes at a national level, shaped by supra-national influences, has had profound influences on the forms curriculum policy has been taking in recent years and on how it is expected to strongly frame practice. In general terms, curricular orthodoxy has tended to move along a continuum from input regulation to output regulation (see: Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012; Leat, Livingston & Priestley, 2013). National curricula in the early part of this period were epitomised by England's seminal 1988 National Curriculum, with its tightly prescribed regulation of inputs (e.g. specification of content). Later variants of national curriculum, increasingly commonplace around the world and termed the 'new curriculum' (Priestley & Biesta, 2013), have tended to eschew the specification of content, instead emphasising the importance of the development of skills and (in a rhetorical sense at least) the autonomy of schools and teachers in making the curriculum. Subsequent experience suggests that the much vaunted autonomy afforded by the new curricula remains elusive, as governments have tended to replace the former regulation of input with tight regulation of output, achieved via a combination of marketisation, the measurement of schools' performance in respect of attainment data and external inspections (e.g. see Wilkins, 2011). Indeed, the outcomes steering associated with the new curricula has been claimed to have eroded teacher autonomy more comprehensively than the input regulation that preceded it (Biesta, 2004, 2010).

Furthermore, one can argue that more permissive curricula actually have much in common with their more prescriptive predecessors. Both are premised on an assumption that curriculum practice in schools can be determined, or at least led, by national policy. Both approaches have tended to be dominated by thinking about curriculum making – amongst policy makers and widely by teachers and leaders in schools – as implementation 'from' policy 'to' practice. In both cases, curriculum making has been dominated by simplistic metaphors which underplay and misrepresent its complexity as social practice. The term 'delivery' has become ubiquitous in education; teachers are expected to deliver policy, deliver learning outcomes, and deliver curricular entitlements, etcetera. Similarly, when discourse mobilises metaphors such as the implementation 'gap' (Supovitz, 2008) or curriculum 'alignment', it creates the conditions for construing schools and teachers as failing to deliver policy faithfully.

Narrow conceptualisations of implementation are unhelpful, and they constrain the development of more sophisticated understandings about how curriculum is made in diverse settings and about how curriculum making occurs as a non-linear recontextualisation process (Bernstein, 2000). As evident in previous research, but also in some of this issue's papers, even under the most prescriptive 'teacher proof' curricula, spaces exist for teachers to mediate the curriculum. Such mediation often occurs in constructive educational ways, and sometimes in strategic ways which deliberately undermine the aims of curriculum policy. Research suggests that high capacity teachers in high capacity schools are often very adept at the latter (see Bowe, Ball, with Gold, 1992; Osborn et al., 1997). Curriculum research has long suggested that teachers do not implement policy; they enact, translate, mediate it (e.g. Braun, Maguire & Ball, 2010), through a process of iterative refraction (Supovitz, 2008), filtered via existing professional knowledge, dispositions and beliefs. This has been powerfully demonstrated by the work on teachers' 'personal practical knowledge' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). It is this kind of work from which the image of the teacher as a curriculum maker has emerged, drawing on previous theorisations of education that constructed teachers as important actors (e.g. Dewey, Tyler and Swab: see Craig, 2010). These arguments resonate as well with older theorisations of curriculum implementation that warn against the 'fidelity perspective' – curriculum as something to be implemented or at least 'mutually adapted' when negotiated by 'experts' and teachers in particular contexts, rather than curriculum as an *enactment* or *social practice*. In the latter view, curriculum is instead a process of interaction of teachers, pupils, materials and the official context in class, entailing the construction of personal meaning by the participants in the process (see Snyder et al., 1992). Arguments accounting for such complexity have also been put forth in theorising curriculum change as transformative rather than incremental (Macdonald, 2003).

In using the 'web' metaphor in the title of this special issue and in this editorial, we are aware that we build on a tradition of using metaphorical language in curriculum theory to re-imagine curriculum (e.g. cf. Kliebard, 1975). We are also aware that, as with any conceptual metaphor used as a figure of comparison, the web metaphor highlights some aspects of the analogy whilst it silences others. Webs are often seemingly similar. For example, spider-webs in nature appear to have particular parts arranged in some recognisable patterns. Yet they are also simultaneously quite dissimilar, as spider-webs are in reality organically formed under/drawing upon unique circumstances, thus also themselves becoming unique and unduplicable. We chose to use it in this special issue for its potential to illustrate curriculum making as often seemingly similar and organised, but as actually complex, unique, organically formed in a number of different but connected sites. The sites explored in the papers encompass: national and regional bodies and agencies; universities and teacher education institutions; local communities and school worlds; teacher biographies and classroom contexts. Some of these sites have already been theorised as existing and operating within system 'levels'; these are, however, rarely distinct or clear-cut (e.g. Goodlad, 1984; van den Akker et al., 2013).

Curriculum making in this special issue is thus theorised as occurring across multiple sites, in interaction and intersection with one another, in often unpredictable and context-specific ways, producing unique social practices, in constant and complex interplay, wherein power flows in non-linear ways, thus blurring boundaries between these multiple sites. In the first article, Lambert and O'Connor explore how teacher educators respond as policy actors from

inside spaces where multiple policies and policy discourses collide; this is a lens through which they provide insights into the ways in which policy does or doesn't play out in practice in educational contexts. By engaging and working with the uncertain space of their own contextual 'policy storm', they provide a narrative of enactment that highlights the roles and actions of policy actors, who are simultaneously constrained and inspired by policy. The authors draw upon the policy actor framework outlined by Braun, Ball, Maguire and Hoskins (2011) to unpack the kind of work involved in making meaning of policy within university and faculty climates, teacher education and national curriculum reform in Health and Physical Education (HPE) in Australia. In moving beyond reductionist descriptions of policy narratives in education, they provide policy possibilities that illustrate and embody enactment, which are innovative, and which explore the productive potential of reform in both teacher education and school curriculum spaces. The paper is especially distinctive in the sense that the authors depart from much of the research in the educational policy field by *being* the participants *doing* the enactment as opposed to being the researcher looking in, thus illustrating in great detail the complexity and non-linearity of policy-to-practice processes.

A crucial element – and one often neglected in curriculum making – relates to how teachers make sense of new and often complex ideas enshrined in curriculum policy. Put bluntly, if teachers do not fully comprehend the goals and form of new policy, then their efforts to 'implement' will invariably fall back on existing practices and ways of thinking. The second paper in this issue explores how a particular national jurisdiction, Finland, has invested considerable resources in developing shared sense-making as part of its ongoing programme of curriculum reform. In their article, Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini explore the hands-on strategies for sense-making and enactment utilised in district-level curriculum development work. Finland is often held up as a paragon of educational virtue; this paper suggests powerfully why Finnish reforms have been traditionally successful, through exploring the non-linear processes that occur as curriculum policy is translated into school practices.

Leat and Thomas take us into quite different territory through their exploration of the role of external curriculum brokers – community members who work with schools, often in the face of engrained practices, to develop new approaches to curriculum making that draw upon community resources. The authors make a powerful case for engagement with local communities, in 'an era of commodified and marketised education' characterised by 'significant collateral and 'highly performative educational systems'. The paper provides a vivid picture of the difficulties involved in crossing boundaries – and the 'logistical, communication and cultural' issues that shape relations between teachers and external brokers – while arguing that 'localised curriculum making is fundamental to providing young people with participatory opportunities to develop competences, work collaboratively and make authentic contributions to society'.

In the fourth article, Kirk, Lamb, Oliver and colleagues explore the possibilities of using a pedagogical model for working with adolescent girls in physical education, as a means of balancing the challenge of external prescription from outside the school with teacher and pupil agency. They worked with four schools in Glasgow, within the framework provided by Curriculum for Excellence, the national curriculum for Scotland. This is a 'broad and bold' type of curriculum that provides teachers with 'spaces for manoeuvre', in order to shape local curricula and better meet pupils' needs and interests; this is particularly the case in

physical education, since in the Basic General Education phase for 12-15 years olds there is no well-established assessment regime. The authors identified four spaces for manoeuvre for teachers and pupils within an activist model: new forms of communication based on authorising pupil voice; offering choices and opening up learning possibilities; the co-construction of a safe class environment; and opportunities to rethink traditional structures based on the multi-activity curriculum form. The paper concludes by suggesting that an activist pedagogical model provided teachers and pupils in the four schools with spaces curriculum making as they explored alternative practices to traditional forms of physical education.

Erss picks up on a theme that is visible in most of the papers, namely teacher agency. Erss's article theorises the differences between agency and autonomy, two oft-used terms that are frequently under-conceptualised and under-theorised. The paper draws upon empirical data, to explore the views and experiences of teachers in Estonia, Finland and Germany. In all cases, agency would appear to be a significant prerequisite to curriculum making by teachers. In its ecological sense (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015), successful curriculum making requires skilled teachers, with a firm grounding in professional knowledge and professional dispositions, an ability to envision alternative future trajectories, and a propitious context that offers affordance for agency (e.g. relational and cognitive resources) and minimises constraints. The paper concludes that agency is culturally situated, with evidence of different attitudes towards autonomy in the three countries. This, in turn, would seem to cast doubt on the widespread practice of policy borrowing – the unproblematic transplanting of fully formed ideas from one jurisdiction into another.

Kontovourki, Philippou and Theodorou discuss curriculum making by constructing two case studies of elementary school teachers in the Republic of Cyprus, to illustrate how it relates to teacher biographies and sense of professionalism. Drawing on the ecological model of teacher agency (ibid.), teachers' biographies and sense of professionalism are seen as shaped at the intersection of their professional history and projections for the future, informed by and informing their constitution as professionals in local institutional and broader social contexts. The two cases are thus utilised to examine how teachers' narrated professional experiences in past and current schools were at interplay with their general sense of professional role and purpose as teachers, including curriculum making in the classroom. This is shown to be simultaneously connected to the ways in which they perceived and constituted their pupils, as well as to the ways they themselves were constituted by others as professionals. The examination of the two cases problematises the codification of professionalism in distinct 'types', and foregrounds the notions of teacher agency and of curriculum making as contingent, negotiated, and negotiable. The authors thus open up the space to consider the politics of both teacher agency and curriculum making as permeated by micro-processes of subjection and subjectivation within the distinct context of a (post)colonial Cypriot public service, wherein both notions of professionalism and curriculum carry particular meanings.

Finally, Ott, Macalpine and Hibbert further zoom in closely to curriculum making in classrooms, by using their preferred perspective in tracing curriculum making from policy to the classroom – a 'sociomaterial attunement to how different agencies assemble curriculum'. They do this through a narrative inquiry of a lesson intended to develop pupils' perspective-taking. The inquiry links the authors' understanding of teachers as curriculum makers, with a sociomaterial analysis of the ways that materials, forms, and time are also

actors in producing curriculum. The same lesson is closely read as it is enacted in three classrooms to discuss ways that these instances of curriculum making expanded or diminished opportunities for elementary pupils to communicate shifts in perspective through personal narrative writing. The authors conclude that temporal, spatial, and material resources, including schedules, technologies, and forms of assessment, play key roles in shaping relations in curriculum making.

We conclude this editorial with some brief reflection on some distinctive trends we see in the papers. First, a key theme running through the papers is that of agency – of teachers and other educational actors. Moreover, the papers complement one another by largely making the case for agency as ecological, providing the analytic frame to investigate the conditions and motivations which organically shape curriculum making in diverse contexts by different social actors. Second, the papers provide a rich snapshot of curriculum making within these diverse contexts. They illustrate how curriculum making actually occurs in multiple sites, not only in the classroom, but in other settings relevant to the work, priorities, decisions, etcetera, of different actors in various roles, and with different tasks in curriculum making. The web metaphor is therefore a helpful contribution to theorisation in the field, through its problematisation of neat linear models of curriculum development, and the notion that no web in nature is ever – or should be – the same. Likewise, curricular concepts and policies acquire different meanings in different political/cultural contexts. We see, for example, from the papers in this collection that concepts such as autonomy and professionalism play out differently between and within different national and regional systems. Moreover, we see that there can be considerable variation within institutions, between teachers, and across time relating to the same teacher or teacher educator.

There is at least one major implication that emerges from this body of work. This is a challenge to the 'levels' metaphor – supra/international; macro/national; meso/regional or school; micro/school or classroom– that often underpins curriculum policy, and which rests on modernist assumptions of linearity, predictability, and clear-cut containment of each level from the rest. Such assumptions have, we would argue, led to policy framed as learning outcomes and steered by performance indicators, which more often than not neglects the importance of developing processes to stimulate and facilitate the social practices – sense making, enactment, brokering, etcetera – that are so vital in curriculum making. Instead, we would argue for the development of more nuanced approaches that construe curriculum making as a multi-layered series of social practices, differentiated not by institutional boundaries (government, schools, etc.), but by their effects as social practices (framing of policy intentions, support for sense making, enactment of practice, etc.). Such an understanding would not aim at necessarily higher fidelity between policy and practice; it could, however, through the surfacing of processes, assumptions and influences that shape curriculum making, enable social actors, in their complex networks, to develop practices that are more sensitive to broader pedagogical purposes and educational principles, and less likely to be influenced by non-pedagogical pressures which render education a means to an end, a performance to be delivered, and an ongoing game of performativity.

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