

CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

Valerie Drew

Introduction

Secondary education in Scotland at the time of writing is in a state of flux and flow as the sector continues to develop and implement Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive 2004) across 32 local authorities. The pace and scope of change varies as educators, schools and local authorities work, both individually and collaboratively, to make sense of how this policy will enable them to provide a ‘good’ educational experience for every child and young person in their own contexts and settings. The full potential of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) has yet to be realised and meantime offers particular challenges for the secondary sector with regards to structural and pedagogical implications.

The secondary curriculum encompasses the concluding phase of a young person’s period of compulsory education (up to 16 years) plus a two year post-compulsory phase (16-18 years) within the Scottish policy framework of lifelong learning. CfE engenders an explicit understanding of the contribution of lifewide learning which occurs in spaces and places beyond the confines of the classroom and school, for example through clubs, sports, interests, part-time work, engagement in further education and so on. The requirement to map a young person’s attainment and wider achievements throughout their secondary education renders impending changes in assessment more complex. [\[See Section VIII Assessment, Certification and Achievements\]](#)

This chapter explores the development of CfE in the secondary curriculum from its origins in the National Debate on education in 2002 through the developing policy process with a focus on the values, purposes and principles and their pertinence to the secondary curriculum. It outlines some key features of CfE in secondary education through the broad general education and senior phase. Finally it considers some of the implications for pedagogy and learning promoted through the policy by examining the constructs of ‘active learning’ and ‘interdisciplinary learning’.

The National Debate and secondary education

The Scottish Executive (SE) initiated the National Debate on education in 2002 suggesting that whilst Scottish education displayed a number of strengths, there was a need to consider aspects for improvement to ensure that schools continued to offer young people a good educational experience which prepared them for life beyond school in the 21st Century. This debate, whilst not particularly well ‘attended’ (around 1500 responses suggested to represent an estimated 20,000 people), has been taken into account in shaping the direction of future educational policy in Scotland with considerable repercussions for the secondary curriculum. The Debate reiterated the seemingly widely held view of pride in the Scottish education system and indicated strong support for the inclusive nature of comprehensive education. However it raised a number of concerns including: the lack of relevance of some learning; an over emphasis on assessment; a perceived lack of choice; and, an apparent lack of flexibility in its capacity to support the needs of all young people in preparing them for living and working beyond the period of compulsory education (SE 2003). The latter point was raised despite recent changes in the post-16 curriculum when the Higher Still initiative was implemented to offer greater choice between academic and vocational courses.

Curriculum for Excellence

The introduction of CfE (SE 2004) was a bold attempt to build on the strengths of Scottish education whilst introducing a radical new approach to prepare children and young people to address some of the challenges they would face beyond school in the 21st century. The policy set out the intention to develop a coherent curriculum spanning the early years to the end of the secondary phase, for children and young people from 3-18 years.

The initial publication in this burgeoning policy framework entitled *A Curriculum for Excellence: The Curriculum Review Group* (SE 2004) articulated the values, purposes and principles which would underpin the new curriculum. This was heralded by the policy makers as a new dawn for Scottish education, an opportunity to take account of global influences and to address some of the particular health, social and economic challenges facing Scotland. In an unprecedented move the Scottish Executive immediately endorsed the Review Group’s report, accepting the recommendations in full and outlining a programme to address the implications. This meant that the teaching profession was not required to

deliberate and debate the underpinning values, purposes and principles at this crucial early stage, consequently many secondary schools' initial engagement with the policy was at a fairly superficial level and as a result its full impact is still to be realised some ten years later. Perhaps it seemed that there was little to argue with: the policy set out a set of worthy values, aspirational purposes and robust principles to underpin the development of a new curriculum planned to move Scottish education forward apace to address the challenges of the 21st Century (SE 2004). It was difficult to dispute values of wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity 'borrowed' from the Mace in the Scottish parliament as anything other than positive qualities to be developed in young people through their engagement in formal education. The aspiration 'to enable all young people to *become*: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors' or any combination of these helps give shape to 'our' responsibilities for the development of future generations. And, finally the range of principles, old and new, (challenge and enjoyment, breadth, progression, depth, personalization and choice, coherence and relevance) were selected to inform curriculum planning to meet the needs of all individual children and young people. However the lack of (requirement for) professional debate at the time of publishing meant many of these elements remained relatively unchallenged. It was only later when the implications of putting these into practice in devising the secondary curriculum began to disrupt some of the traditional structures, systems and subject boundaries that there was a great deal of angst amongst the profession and some teachers felt they were lacking the appropriate knowledge, skills and capacity required to implement this new curriculum model.

The Scottish Executive Ministerial Response to the Review Group in 2004 provided some indication of the changes ahead in setting out a number of challenges for secondary education. A call for clarity in expected outcomes was accompanied by a demand for renewed focus on literacy and numeracy across the curriculum. In addition a 'reformed approach to education in S1-S3' was proposed to increase challenge and improve pupil motivation during early secondary education. This was an attempt to maintain pace and eradicate the perceived S2 'slump' so often lamented by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe) and heralded one of the most significant changes ahead.

This call to envision new and revised curriculum architecture opened up possibilities for schools to imagine curriculum differently. This was especially challenging in the design and administration of the secondary school timetable and marked a significant change to

timetabling arrangements latterly designed to accommodate the number of subjects studied over the week. The Ministerial Response suggested creating longer periods of time to allow pupils to engage in more demanding extended learning activities which moved beyond and across traditional subject boundaries and required an increasing emphasis on pedagogies. Finally the importance of the skills for work agenda was highlighted and followed up with a more focused and integrated strategy for schools and their partners published some five years later (Scottish Government (SG) 2009) (see further discussion).

Whilst work behind the scenes got underway with consultations to begin planning systems and structures for change, it was business as usual in many secondary schools. To inject some adrenalin into the system the SE published *A Curriculum for Excellence Progress and Proposals*(2006a)which reiterated key messages and articulated future directions. In essence, all educators in every educational setting had the responsibility to develop the four capacities in each child and young person through a coherent 3-18 curriculum; and a number of cross-cutting themes, including enterprise, citizenship, health, creativity and problem solving were to be embedded and developed coherently across the curriculum. It was proposed that this would be achieved through focus on pedagogy and learning; renewed consideration of the how of teaching building on the relative success, mainly in primary schools, of the Scottish Assessment is for Learning programme. This would help to ensure that assessment during S1 – S3 was ‘integral’ to teaching and learning.

The establishment of the curriculum areas was a defining moment for CfE (SE 2006a). The curriculum from early years to the end of the secondary phase was structured around eight curriculum areas:

- expressive arts
- health and wellbeing
- languages
- mathematics
- religious and moral education
- sciences
- social studies
- technologies

These areas were designed to offer opportunities for ‘learning and the development of skills across a broad range of contexts’ (SE 2006a, p.15). However these groupings represented little change from earlier curriculum models and seem to refute the claim that CfE has ‘profound implications for what is learned’ (SE 2004, p.3). A less ambitious statement, some two years on, claiming curriculum areas and subjects would be ‘refreshed and re-focused’(SE2006a, p.10)appears to represent the sort of dampening down of ambition which led Priestley and Humes (2010, p.358). to suggest that CfE ‘runs the risk of promoting innovation without real change’.

The second phase of policy documentation with direct implications for those working across the secondary sector was published four years after the initial document. *CfE Building the Curriculum 3 a framework for learning and teaching*(SG 2008) provided some of the anxiously awaited detail to help educators imagine how the new curriculum might evolve and develop. This document promoted the wider understanding of curriculum(originally outlined in SE 2006a) as:

the totality of experiences which are planned for children and young people through their education, wherever they are being educated. It includes the ethos and life of the school as a community; curriculum areas and subjects; interdisciplinary learning; and opportunities for personal achievement. (SG 2008, p.14)

This recognition of curriculum as providing an educational rationale for the pupils’ experience beyond that of subject disciplines necessitated secondary schools to consider how to incorporate some of the previously informal or extra-curricular experiences into the planned curriculum for every child and young person. This move has potential to address some of the inequities for the young people previously unable to access such opportunities. This document reiterated the need for change, calling on evidence from HMIe and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to address, through strategies such as strengthening vocational education, the number of young people leaving secondary education with ‘minimal or no qualifications’.

Transitions and phases in, through and beyond the secondary curriculum

An entitlement for all young people to experience a smooth transition throughout their 3-18 education demands attention to transition processes as young people prepare for, engage in

and move on from secondary education. The transformation from a three stage model (2+2+2) secondary education encompassing S1/2, S3/4, and S5/6 into a two phase model(3+3) was proposed to smooth this pathway. The revised model comprising a broad general education(S1-S3) and the senior phase (S4-S6)was introduced to ensure a more coherent educational experience for young people through the secondary curriculum. However careful planning is required to ensure valid and reliable assessment of attainment and achievement throughout to ensure that individuals' needs are addressed as they progress through each phase.

The expectations for learning and development in the curriculum areas and associated skills for learning, life and work are set out in the experiences and outcomes (<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk>). The experiences and outcomes articulate the quality of the learning experience and what is to be achieved. A young person's progression in their education will be described through the experiences and outcomes against one of the six levels: from early, through first and second level to the end of primary seven for most pupils; and from third and fourth levels with progression to qualifications in the senior phase for most secondary pupils. The introduction of broad levels was intended to be flexible to meet the needs of all pupils and thus ensure smooth transition from one level through to the next. [See Chapter 3 *The 3-18 Curriculum in Scottish Education for further information on curriculum levels*]

- ***S1- S3 (Broad General Education)***

CfE(SG2008) states that every child and young person is entitled to a period of broad general education extending from pre-school to the end of S3. This entitlement includes all the experiences and outcomes across all curriculum areas to and including the third level, although some young people will progress to the fourth level. This broad foundation will ensure young people experience a range of subjects from which they select options to study in more depth during the senior phase. And most importantly this broad experience will enable them to:

- achieve the highest possible levels of literacy and numeracy and cognitive skills
- develop skills for life and skills for work
- develop knowledge and understanding of society, the world and Scotland's place in it

- experience challenge and success. (SG 2008)

The planning of this broad general education is proving challenging to secondary schools. The removal of the Age and Stage Regulations for external assessment had resulted in some schools asking pupils to select options to study towards qualifications during S1, although most schools offered choice for specialism at the end of S2. Now schools are required to embed assessment in the broad general education phase as part of the learning process and to ensure recognition of wider achievement is included in this practice.

At the time of writing, this development is causing considerable consternation for teachers and schools as they begin to plan this phase of secondary curriculum. The accountability of the attainment agenda has played a major role in shaping the first four years of the secondary curriculum as schools attempted to raise pupils' performance in high stakes examinations over recent years. The government suggests this has resulted in a narrowing of curriculum as teaching to the test has permeated professional pedagogical practices in some secondary schools. Even the Assessment is for Learning programme has been appropriated by many teachers in an attempt to improve examination results through concentrating mainly on techniques which would enhance cognitive understanding (a focus on product orientated learning) rather than developing longer term strategies to enhance pupils' capacity to learn (a focus on the processes of learning). The tensions between what teachers espouse – that there is too much focus and pressure on attainment in secondary schools - and what they practise, for example teaching to the test, will not radically change until they have more confidence in their ability to manage the risks involved in the new curriculum related to pupils' attainment and their own reputation.

- *The Senior Phase*

The Senior Phase comprises young people in 'S4-S6' and includes 16 to 18 year olds out of school, for example in colleges. Although young people can officially leave school at 16 years of age, increasing numbers choose to stay on at school through S5 and S6 and are now actively encouraged to do so until they have planned to move onto a 'positive and sustained destination' such as training, further education or employment (SG 2008). The 16+ learning choices are designed to support planning and development of a coherent curriculum for all young people in the senior phase. During this phase it is expected that the young person will continue to develop the four capacities through a range of activities including for example service to school or community, work experience or sports coaching, as well as beginning to

build their lifelong learning portfolio of qualifications. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) sets out the criteria for skills and learning to be achieved from SCQF level 1 to SCQF level 7 to meet the needs of all young people during this phase. At or towards the end of their broad general education most pupils will be expected to choose subjects from the curriculum areas to study in more depth towards qualifications at National 4 and 5 (SCQF levels 4 and 5); they may then progress to Highers in S5 (SCQF level 6) and Advanced Highers or Scottish Baccalaureates in S6 (SCQF level 7). Some pupils in the senior phase will study for qualifications through partnerships with colleges, employers and other agencies. A number of curriculum models are currently being developed and trialled across schools and local authorities in order to ascertain which one provides young people with a smooth progression into the appropriate SCQF level. Models are being developed which allow young people to select different numbers of subjects to study in more depth at different stages. The system is designed to be flexible. For example, some schools are starting this process during the phase of broad general education to enable their students to undertake study for Highers over a two year period; consequently the senior phase will not comprise a standard 3+3 model across schools and local authorities. [See Section VIII Assessment, Certification and Achievements]

- *Skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work.*

Notwithstanding the global phenomenon of rising youth unemployment, the Scottish Government propose that prioritising skills development will help to bring about the ‘transformational changes’ required to improve young people’s opportunities in life by providing them with the knowledge, skills and attributes to be flexible and adaptable lifelong learners. *Building the Curriculum 4: skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work* (SG 2009) highlighted the entitlement of all children and young people to develop and apply skills in learning across all sectors from early years to the senior phase. These skills include:

- literacy, numeracy and associated thinking skills;
- skills for health and well-being including personal learning planning, career management skills, working with others, leadership and physical co-ordination and movement skills; and,
- skills for enterprise and employability. (SG 2009, p.10)

These skills are embedded in the Experiences and Outcomes in an attempt to diminish the boundaries between academic and vocational education and skills progression is signposted to enable educators to support young people in recognising and valuing their progress in this aspect of their education. The development of skills is the responsibility of all ‘partners’ working with children and young people across schools, colleges, universities, voluntary organisations, youth workers, employers and so on. The secondary school will be responsible for planning and mapping the development, application and progression of young peoples’ skills from primary transition through their broad general education and senior phase which may take place in partnership with other post 16+ providers listed above. This will be challenging for secondary schools working across curriculum areas and providers to ensure successful integration and coherent progression of skills development for all young people.

Implications for pedagogy and learning in the secondary curriculum

Active learning and interdisciplinary learning are promoted through *Building the Curriculum 4* (SG 2009, p.2) as a means of enabling young people ‘to develop, demonstrate and apply a wide range of skills’. However there is a lack of clarity surrounding the definition of these constructs in both the policy and literature which has resulted in some teachers struggling to make sense of these leading to a range of interpretations being enacted in practice.

- ***‘Active learning’***

The discourse of ‘active learning’ promoted through *CfE* appears to be a means of developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions, including literacy and numeracy, considered necessary by the European Commission (2009) for lifelong learning to enable young people to address the social, political and economic challenges they will face in life beyond formal education. In this respect active learning is concerned with the skills of learning (process orientated) rather than as a set of pedagogic strategies to enhance learning outcomes (product oriented) which has implication for learning and teaching.

CfE fosters an implicit expectation that learners will engage in active lifelong learning through developing their capacities as: *successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens* and *effective contributors*. The only explicit definition ‘[A]ctive learning is learning that engages and challenges children’s thinking using real-life and imaginary situations’ is

found in *Curriculum for Excellence- Building the Curriculum 2 Active Learning in the Early Years* (SE 2007, p.5) where active learning is defined and justified in terms of engagement and challenge linked to conceptions of learning through play (ironic perhaps given the implicit understanding of developing skills for work). In subsequent policy documents related to secondary education there is an explicit acknowledgement that active learning approaches will ‘encourage participation’, ‘build upon children’s enthusiasm, inventiveness and creativity’, as well as ‘promote the development of logical and creative thinking and encourage a problem-solving approach’ (SG 2008, p.30).

There is an assumption that educators understand the term and how to enact this concept in their practices: a notion reinforced by HMIe who single out active learning as one of the elements for improvement in learning and teaching to enable schools to move from ‘good to excellent’ (HMIe 2007, 2010). An exploration of the literature suggests that ‘active learning’ is used to cover any and all activities experienced in education, for example: reading, writing, listening, discussing and problem solving; through individual, peer, collaborative and co-operative activities; and includes using resources inside and outside the classroom (Drew & Mackie 2011). This lack of clarity creates opportunities for policy makers, academics and educators to define the concept to suit their own intentions and renders the concept hazy and often empty of meaning. Indeed, active learning is immediately problematic in that it appears to be placed in opposition to *passive* learning, a notion which seems intrinsically improbable if learning is defined as a change in behaviour, knowledge, understanding, skills attitudes and/or values (Coffield 2008).

Watkins *et al.* (2007, p.71) offer a comprehensive framework which suggests that active learning encompasses three dimensions:

- Behavioural: the active employment and development of resources;
- Cognitive: active thought about experiences to make sense and so foster construction of knowledge;
- Social: active interaction with others on both a collaborative and resource driven basis.

The exploration of the literature on active learning indicates these dimensions are most frequently found in combination, although few definitions encompass all three dimensions (Drew & Mackie 2011). In addition, the literature reveals an affective dimension (see for

example Stephen *et al.* 2008) absent from this framework which encompasses factors such as pupil attitudes and values, intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, and pupil engagement. Drew and Mackie (2011) suggest that the addition of a fourth dimension –the affective dimension pertaining to a mindful disposition - would support the development of a more robust framework to explore this construct.

Not unsurprisingly Drew and Mackie’s (2011) literature search revealed some apprehension concerning the implications of active learning in practice. There is a perception that implementing active learning might diminish the role of the teacher in the classroom; however, it seems to involve additional responsibilities as teachers are challenged to motivate, guide, facilitate, innovate, mentor, coach and collaborate. The lack of clarity in definition and understanding can lead to the employment of a range of techniques which may have short-term impact on pupil attainment rather than long-term impact on developing pupils’ skills in metacognition. Some teachers alluded to factors such as lack of confidence, slower progress in curriculum, lack of time to develop strategies, loss of control and increased workload. There were also concerns regarding some pupils’ ability or inclination to engage with certain approaches or their stated preference for teacher-led lessons. These perceptions have particular implications for the senior phase where teachers feel under pressure to cover the curriculum prior to examinations.

- ***Interdisciplinary learning (IDL)***

Interdisciplinary learning is one of the four contexts of CfE curriculum planning. IDL seems to present greater challenges for secondary schools where traditionally most pupil learning has taken place in discrete subject disciplines; consequently secondary teachers require space to collaborate with colleagues and/or partners from other disciplines to plan authentic IDL opportunities.

There also appears to be some lack of clarity of understanding surrounding this construct. The Curriculum Review Group’s use of the term ‘cross-subject activity’(SE 2004, p.3) and their appeal for ‘more teaching across and beyond traditional subject boundaries’(p.16) may have led some educators and local policy makers to use the terms cross-curricular learning and interdisciplinary learning interchangeably. This has resulted in a multiplicity of practices

being enacted in schools across Scotland. Later policy documents attempted to clarify this construct stating:

The curriculum needs to include space for learning beyond subject boundaries, so that learners can make connections between different areas of learning. Through interdisciplinary activities of this kind, young people can develop their organisational skills, creativity, teamwork and the ability to apply their learning in new and challenging contexts. To be successful, these activities need to be well planned with a clear purpose and outcomes in mind. (SE 2006a, p.10)

This sentiment was reiterated in the first of the *CfE Building the Curriculum* series (SE 2006b, p.3) which urged schools to be innovative and creative in planning for ‘wider cross connections and interdisciplinary work’. This document suggested IDL was likely to ‘involve both research and a strong element of presentation’ (p.17) and be ‘challenging and motivating’ (p.40). In an attempt to further clarify the construct Learning and Teaching Scotland produced a paper on IDL in 2010 which suggested there are two, sometimes overlapping types of interdisciplinary learning:

Learning planned to develop awareness and understanding of the connections and differences across subject areas and disciplines. This can be through the knowledge and skill content, the ways of working, thinking and arguing or the particular perspective of a subject or discipline.

Using learning from different subjects and disciplines to explore a theme or an issue, meet a challenge, solve a problem or complete a final project. This can be achieved by providing a context that is real and relevant, to the learners, the school and its community. (www.ltscotland.org.uk)

This definition seems to incorporate the key elements of Repko’s (2012) integrated definition:

Interdisciplinary studies is a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline and draws on the disciplines with the goal of integrating their insights to construct a more comprehensive understanding. (p.12)

However some of current IDL practices in schools are based on themes such as energy or a particular country where each subject can plan the learning activities in relative isolation from others. This practice appears to conflate an interdisciplinary approach with a cross-curricular or multidisciplinary approach. A multidisciplinary approach refers to ‘the placing side by side of insights from two or more disciplines’ (p.16). This approach often necessitates the researcher or pupil making the connections between the disciplines. This is in contrast to an authentic IDL experience where complex questions may initiate from the pupil themselves, who look to the relevant disciplines (or subjects) to explore and develop answers to open questions.

The policy drivers for interdisciplinary education require learners to develop the skills required to explore the complex problems confronting society in the spaces in-between disciplines. CfE alludes to this practice by identifying sustainable development and health promotion as examples of some of the complex problems facing Scotland today which might be addressed through this form of enquiring approach. However there are inherent tensions between promoting IDL and planning a curriculum using fairly traditional curriculum areas. The reaffirmation of fairly traditional subject boundaries is at odds with the Government’s plea ‘to include space for learning beyond subject boundaries, so that learners make connections between different areas of learning’ (SE 2006a, p. 10) and appears to restrict the potential of interdisciplinary learning in the secondary curriculum from the outset.

CfE Building the Curriculum 3 (2008) suggested that IDL should be ‘planned around clear purposes’ (p.21):some of the current ad hoc IDL development will prove problematic when schools attempt to map the young person’s coherent experience across the curriculum.

An absence of focus on IDL during early discussions on summative assessment seems to have resulted in less attention being paid to the development of this context for learning since generally the current model of assessment does not embrace IDL. An exception to this is the Interdisciplinary Project, unique to the Scottish Baccalaureates, however these qualifications are only offered at SCQF level 7 (<http://www.sqa.org.uk>). However recent developments including the proposal for Scottish Studies and the exemplification of assessment of literacy and numeracy at National 3, 4 and 5 appear to be founded on an interdisciplinary approach.

‘What are we going to do now?’

HM Inspectorate of Education (2007, 2010)ask schools to envision the future through consideration of this question, although they are perhaps less concerned with imaginings of how things might be and more concerned with the practicalities of how schools intend to get ‘there’. CfE is a model of educational reform which seeks to develop ‘the imagined community the nation wishes to construct through schooling’ as well as ‘the skills and dispositions thought necessary to the so-called knowledge economy and globalization’ (Rizvi & Lingard2010, p.96). CfE opens spaces to articulate the values and enact the purposes and principles educators believe are important; in other words it provides opportunities for educators to be creative, to explore possibilities and realise imaginings. Secondary schools and their partners must continue to engage in debate and deliberation about the purposes of education and how these are communicated to the young people in their care.

Curriculum for Excellence offers educators space to enhance and develop the secondary curriculum to ensure Scotland continues to offer good education to prepare young people for the rapidly changing demands of the 21st Century. The current economic, environmental and social global challenges require young people to be creative, flexible and adaptable; the secondary curriculum has an important role to play in ensuring they have the opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, dispositions and resilience to lead healthy and sustainable lives and be able to deal with uncertainties and dilemmas ahead. The challenge for schools is not how to hold onto all of the practices which have served us well in the past but to continue to grapple with the challenges of developing a good secondary education fit for purpose in the 21st century.

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