

Curriculum for Excellence: making the transition from policy intention to classroom practice

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), which seemed so radical in its early days, is now part of the educational landscape in Scotland. It seems odd to reflect that its inception in policy began as long ago as 2004, and we are shortly to enter the seventh year of its implementation phase. Moreover, CfE looks as if it is here to stay, for the foreseeable future at least. The 2015 OECD report (<https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/improving-schools-in-scotland.htm>), while offering criticism of the curriculum's implementation, was broadly supportive of the general direction taken by CfE. Other countries are following suit (e.g. *Junior Cycle* reforms in Ireland, *Successful Futures* in Wales, and the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework*), and this approach to specifying national curricula, which marks a significant departure from previous directions (see [Priestley & Biesta, 2013](#)), is now the predominant approach for curriculum innovation in many countries. A particular change in focus – one that is very welcome in our view – has been the renewed emphasis in policy on the role of the teacher as an active developer of the curriculum and an agent of change. Such policy is now acknowledging the importance of teachers' professional agency (for an overview see <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/teacher-agency-what-is-it-and-why-does-it-matter>; a more detailed account is provided by [Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015](#)).

Nevertheless, CfE continues to be blighted by a number of problems. The curriculum largely remains (in the words of the OECD's Andreas Schleicher¹) an intended rather than enacted curriculum. Practices in many schools are remarkably similar to those in pre-CfE days, and the impact of CfE on issues such as school timetabling, the composition of subjects and school organisation remains limited. It is simplistic and misleading to blame schools and teachers for this situation, as the issues are multifarious and complex, and often due to system level dynamics that militate against change. The OECD pointed to at least three sets of issues that need to be addressed before CfE can make the transition from an intended to an enacted curriculum: 1] a new simplified narrative for the curriculum; 2] a more effective middle level tier for curriculum development support; and 3] more comprehensive enactment of the principles of the curriculum schools. This suggests that teachers are only part of the answer, and that more needs to be done to address the cultural and structural domains of schooling, which do much to shape what is possible in terms of innovation.

In such a context it is problematic for policymakers to demand that teachers exercise agency in their development of the curriculum. Curriculum development is to a large extent a lost art. Recent research evidence suggests that autonomy in curriculum-making can be limited by strong socialisation associated with previous curriculum policy (e.g. outcomes-based planning aligned to the former 5-14 curriculum), assessment practices (e.g. the influence of assessment standards and subject specifications in examinations syllabi) and accountability practices. In particular, there is evidence that many schools simply recycle old practices and ideas when addressing new curriculum development problematics ([Priestley & Minty, 2013](#)). Regulation of teachers' work – accountability practices such as use of data and inspections – can, in particular, send mixed messages and create impossible dilemmas for teaching seeking to innovate (see: [Priestley, 2014](#)). Time and resources (for example the availability of supply teachers) is often a problem, meaning that many teachers struggle to access professional learning opportunities. The focus by mid-level organisations, such as Education Scotland and local authorities, on producing documentation and auditing practices, rather than offering hands-on leadership and support for curriculum development, has in our view led to a tendency for schools to reinvent the wheel. Much could have been achieved had we invested, for instance, in the development of a cadre of expert teachers to work across schools. These influences,

¹ As quoted on BBC news, 6 December 2016.

and others, seem to have encouraged a risk-averse and often instrumental box-ticking approach to curriculum development, characterised by a growth in bureaucracy and paperwork; worse still, they arguably limit teachers' ability to envisage alternative futures and to manoeuvre between different repertoires in their practice.

Action to address these issues has to come, to some extent, from government and its agencies, and from local authorities. However, there is also considerable scope for action in schools to create the conditions for meaningful curriculum development in the spirit of CfE. Collaborative working by teachers, for example in professional learning communities, has been widely advocated as both professional learning and a means for developing educational practice. It is easy to overstate its efficacy; collaborative working may simply reinforce habitual patterns of working. To counterbalance this risk, highly structured approaches to practitioner enquiry show considerable promise. One such approach, named *School Based Curriculum Development through Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry* (SBCD through CCPE) has been developed through Master's level university programmes and local authority partnership working in Scotland (see [Drew, Priestley & Michael, 2016](#)). This has a number of key premises, designed to overcome the issues described above:

- The starting point is a distinct conceptual stage, rooted in consideration of both curriculum theory and clearly defined educational principles, purposes and values, including the big ideas set out in CfE. Thus, there is from the outset a clear focus on curriculum development that is fit-for-purpose.
- This is followed by a structured practical stage, comprising three phases: focusing, interrupting and sense-making. Throughout the process, practitioners engage critically with university researchers (as critical colleagues), and applicable research and conceptual literature.
- The process is collaborative, and groups are expected to comprise a range of practitioners, from early career to senior leaders. Our experience has been that, if groups do not reflect this full range, and especially if they do not include decision makers, then innovations are often stifled at the planning phase due to limited access to resources ([Reeves & Drew, 2013](#)).
- The process occurs over a full academic year, the early conceptual phase and focussing taking up a good proportion of this period. Indeed, the practical innovation (or interruption) is a relatively short part of the programme.

Research ([Drew, Priestley & Michael, 2016](#)) suggests that SBCD through CCPE is a promising approach to curriculum innovation and the development of teacher agency. We saw, in our work with a Scottish local authority, evidence of changed teacher dispositions towards their work, for example more expansive aspirations relating to what the CfE made possible. We witnessed enhanced teacher professional knowledge and greater confidence amongst our cohorts of teachers. Part of this was undoubtedly due to the new professional knowledge developed by participants through the programme. However, we would argue that CCPE did not only address the issue of individual capacity; it also addressed cultural and structural issues which shape curriculum development. These included the active fostering of what might be called relational resources for agency, and a distinct flattening of hierarchies within some of the schools on the programme. The process thus created safe spaces for critical and considered curriculum innovation, fostering the development of collegial working environments.

Further development and research are ongoing; SBCD through CCPE is currently being undertaken by Welsh 'Pioneer' teachers within one of the regional consortia developing the new *Successful Futures* curriculum, and further engagement is planned with Scottish local authorities in the coming year.

References

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