

Editorial 30(3)

Beyond binaries in curricular discussions: what does it mean to argue for curriculum as at the heart of educational practice?

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In our first editorial as Lead Editors of the *Curriculum Journal* we argued for the importance of curriculum being re-positioned at the centre of educational practice. Here, we took a somewhat normative stance, offering a critique of recent trends for discourses for, about and around education to focus upon or prioritize the language of business and management or the rationalities thereof, as evidenced by increasing attention to matters of output regulation, international comparisons through testing, accountability and performativity. Inevitably, our editorial attracted reactions to the effect of ‘surely children should be at the heart of educational practice’. Of course, our positioning of curriculum at the heart of educational practice was not intended as comparison with and at the expense of the important place of students in educational practice (or indeed teachers or pedagogy or knowledge), but rather in relation to and in conversation between these and other social and material actors. Child-centred education, or alternatively other approaches to curriculum, are not alternatives to thinking about curriculum practices, and will in fact be impoverished greatly if insufficient attention is paid to the curricular practices through which they are structured and enacted. That such a question can be raised is perhaps indicative of the development of often spurious education dichotomies or binary oppositions that have proliferated in recent years – for example, traditional versus progressive, child-centred versus teacher-led, and guide-one-the-side versus sage-on-the-stage. As Hofkins and Northen (2009, p.41) remind us, “there is an easy way to eliminate these facile, but dangerous, dichotomies [...] simply substitute ‘and’ for ‘not’ and ‘versus’”. And as we have argued in a previous special issue, we view curriculum-making as a complex web of enactments across multi-layered and complex sites in which numerous actors engage and “make” curricula (Priestley & Philippou, 2018). Binaries then create the conditions to reduce curriculum, a notoriously difficult concept to define, to quite constricted meanings and silence the complexity of the realities which emerge in such webs-of-sites where curriculum, as intended and as lived, entangle and shape human experience.

The journal is committed to enabling “disciplined” debate on curricular issues, simultaneously stabilizing and expanding the boundaries of the field – shaping at this historical moment and in the space of the particular historicity of this journal. It is indicative of the diverse and rich dialogue we would like to host between different traditions and approaches to curriculum scholarship, that the previous special issue entitled “After the knowledge turn? Politics and pedagogy” was guest edited by a team of scholars, Ursula Hoadley, Alka Sehgal-Cuthbert, Brian Barrett and John Morgan, who have contributed to the development of a perspective that has come to be known as social realism. This is a perspective which has sought to bring matters of knowledge, its organisational principles, its production and change “to the front and centre of the sociology of education” by means of its own conceptual language, “most prominently perhaps in the coining of the distinction between ‘powerful knowledge’ and ‘knowledge of the powerful’” (Hoadley, Sehgal-Cuthbert, Barrett & Morgan, 2019, p. 99).

This issue, in contrast, takes us in a different direction. Some of the articles are exploring ideas that could be viewed as quite distant to, and distinct from social realist priorities, emphasising instead learner agency, curriculum coherence, transdisciplinarity, the significance of culture for curriculum, and constructivist and context-sensitive approaches e.g. in using “photo-words” to teach language. We consider this diversity as indicative of the kinds of vibrant ongoing discussions in the field, as scholars explore and expand on the theoretical possibilities of understanding curriculum from various perspectives and with various analytical tools. Such reflections around the papers included in this issue seem particularly apt, as we write this editorial fresh from our experience of organizing and participating in the 4th European Conference of Curriculum Studies, where the diversity of the field was especially evident. The conference featured four keynote speakers representing quite different curriculum traditions, and welcomed 130 participants from 27 countries. The conference was followed by a summer school of the European Educational Research Association/Curriculum Network which hosted a group of 27 doctoral students and emerging scholars from 16 countries. Both events were hosted at Maynooth University, on the grounds of what used to be the largest seminary school in the world; a strong reminder that in matters educational the past is always-already in the present and that through the present we are already shaping the future.

In the first paper of this issue entitled “Learner agency and the curriculum: a critical realist perspective” by Manyukhina and Wyse, a much-debated concept is explored, namely agency, specifically the agency of learners in relation to the curriculum. The authors highlight the significance of the topic by reminding us that “what children are taught in schools and what kind of meanings the curriculum gives or denies access to affects not only students’ intellectual development, but also their view of themselves, their place in the world, and their ability to influence their learning and life chances”. The authors thus explain how important they consider “the potential impacts of curriculum content on students’ sense and exercise of agency in the classroom, with the ensuing implications for children’s immediate and long-term educational outcomes.” Manyukhina and Wyse first review the literature to unpack the essential components of learner agency and what they view as key factors affecting its development; they do this by drawing on current debates grounded in critical realism as a theoretical foundation, in order to place their argument beyond agency-structure binaries “where opinions are polarised as to whether agential intentions and actions play the key role in shaping the social order or themselves are determined by the objective contexts in which agents are placed”. Critical realism, instead, “locates the source of all personal and social outcomes in the relationship of reciprocal causality between the two elements” – in this paper between learner agency and curriculum content. Having argued that “agency is contextually, interpersonally, intra-personally, and temporally situated”, they suggest that such recognition “is a crucial step in considering the potential implications of different national curriculum types for learner agency” and indeed for “portraying it as a multi-dimensional, dynamic, and contextualized entity, a process.” The authors thus frame the context for the argument of pointing towards the connections between curriculum content and learner agency, which they put forth as the main contribution of their paper; their arguments are informed by recent empirical work of a content analysis comparing the place of knowledge in the official primary curricula texts of four jurisdictions (Australia, Canada (Ontario), Hong Kong, and England), which informed their reflections on the potential implications of different curriculum designs for learner agency. In this paper, they focus on “those aspects of the analysis which bring into focus the apparent assumptions made by the

curriculum texts about learner agency within the primary classroom, and consider their potential impact on student development and learning behavior”. The authors suggest a typology of curriculum content structure and form, argue for its significance and propose some future research implications to explore the relationship between curriculum content and learner agency in both theoretical and empirical ways. The paper thus contributes in discussions around developing a comprehensive and nuanced theoretical framework for decisions about curriculum content that enable rather than constrain learner agency.

In the second paper the curriculum-as-official-text research agenda is extended to explore perceptions of stakeholders of both the curriculum text and of its perceived potential to facilitate school development. In “Curriculum coherence as perceived by district-level stakeholders in large-scale national curriculum reform in Finland” Jenni Sullanmaa, Kirsi Pyhältö, Janne Pietarinen and Tiina Soini turn our attention to large-scale national curriculum reform as pursued in the Finnish context, wherein the district level is key because district-level stakeholders are involved in transforming the goals and principles of the Finnish national core curriculum into the local curricula. Having acknowledged that curriculum coherence is crucial in successful educational reform and that perceptions of curriculum coherence within the context of large-scale national curriculum reform has been scarcely empirically researched, they argue that “curriculum coherence is a complex construct that comprises more than alignment within the elements of the curriculum: it also depends on the consistency of the aims being pursued and the intended effects of the curriculum.” They thus explore how the stakeholders involved in curriculum development at the district level in 54 municipalities in Finland perceived curriculum coherence. The Curriculum Reform Inventory was used, which includes a curriculum coherence scale addressing the perceived coherence regarding the direction and purpose within the core curriculum document (i.e. a content-oriented approach to the written curriculum document); and the school impact scale, which focuses on the perceived potential of the curriculum reform work to trigger school development (i.e. a process-oriented approach to the curriculum work). Survey data (n=550) were analyzed using structural equation modelling, and a confirmatory factor analysis showed that curriculum coherence consists of three complementary components: consistency of the intended direction; an integrative approach to teaching and learning; and alignment between objectives, content and assessments. The results also showed that curriculum coherence contributes to the expected impact of the reform on the school level development. The study thus adds to curriculum reform research by showing that curriculum coherence is a central determinant for the reform to take root at the school level in Finland.

The third paper again explores the latest Finnish Reform during which a new core curriculum was introduced in 2014 and put into phased implementation in 2016 focusing on one of its emphases, that of meeting the skills and competence requirements of the 21st century by highlighting transversal competence areas ‘that cross the boundaries of and link different fields of knowledge and skills’ (FNBE, 2016, p. 21). Lasse Eronen, Sirpa Kokko and Kari Sormunen in their paper entitled “Escaping the subject-based class: A Finnish case study of developing transversal competencies in a transdisciplinary course” explored Finnish eighth graders’ views of the transversal competencies they developed and how they experienced studying in a problem-based transdisciplinary course without defining the specific subject-based content to be learnt. The project task of the course was to create an escape room, whilst working in teams, which the school’s other students would use. The project was conducted with the context of an optional

science course in spring 2017 and developed by a Finnish teacher to achieve the targets of developing their transversal competence through integrative instruction, in the context of efforts to try out new approaches to teaching and learning before the national core curriculum for basic education in Finland came into force (2016–2018). The course lasted four months, was conducted as a 150-minute lesson once a week and was arranged so that the students took the main responsibility for the contents and methods of learning in a project-based manner. The qualitative data consisted of questionnaires and interviews and were analysed with methods of qualitative content analysis. When asked about their learning, the students commented on not having learnt much in terms of discipline-based knowledge. Instead, they reported having learnt skills through teamwork, problem solving, and expression of their views and opinions, areas which they did not clearly connect with their expectations of learning at school, since the acquisition of specific subject content as discipline-based knowledge was what they have learnt to anticipate from school. Many students felt that they acquired the competencies that they would need later in their lives. The authors discuss how students' teamwork seemed to have a crucial impact on their learning experience and suggest that the timeframe for the integrative approach needs careful consideration, as they view its long duration as key to its success. They also argue that their study highlights that focusing on students' views is critical when reforming curriculum, since the students "appreciated the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning; moreover, they valued acquiring transversal competencies" by creating an escape room, thus also symbolically also escaping the subject-based school.

In the fourth paper entitled "Changing culture, changing curriculum: a case study of early childhood curriculum innovations in two Chinese kindergartens" authors Weipeng Yang and Hui Li remind us through their study how broader contexts matter in curriculum change, as they seek to "deeply examine the underlying sociocultural mechanism of curriculum innovations with an informative case study of SBCD (School-based curriculum development) in two Chinese kindergartens from a cultural-historical perspective". Drawing on a multiple case study and comparing two kindergartens, they consider the micro-level as the school-based curricular change and the macro-level as the cultural change happening in contemporary China to illustrate their complex and dynamic interplay in two early childhood settings. They explain how SBCD has been advocated to enhance the quality of early childhood education within the context of modernization and globalization in other contexts, whereas its potential in China has been under-researched. They also point towards the scarcity of studies examining how social change and globalization may shape the early childhood curriculum. Their study examined SBCD in two Shenzhen kindergartens via interviews, observations and documents to understand their curriculum innovations, and how and why the SBCD took place in the Chinese kindergartens. The authors argue that the curriculum in each case was an integrated system, balancing different curriculum approaches and hosting both conflict and fusion of cultures: social change, reflected by conflicting motives, such as child-centredness versus teacher directedness, individualism versus collectivism, and imported versus local approaches, played a decisive role in the SBCD. The implications of these findings are discussed, especially in light of the authors' concern that "social change (e.g., the opening-up reform in China) and cultural conflicts (i.e., local culture versus imported cultures) were driving China's ECC reform.", against the background of ECC more broadly viewed as a process of somewhat uncritical transfer of western ideas in China about the child, autonomy and play throughout the 20th century. The authors conclude that nevertheless, their study shows "how cultural conflicts and fusion occurred in SBCD and how

imported curricula have been localized and incorporated into a unique mixture of various approaches” thus illustrating the “dynamic and complex relationship between culture and curriculum, and unveiling how ECC innovations may be achieved in the current globalized era with great social change and cultural conflicts.”

Considering the integration of the visual channel into the teaching and learning processes in the twenty-first century as important, whilst acknowledging the lack of research on the impact of standardized models of photography-assisted language instruction in general and in Israel in particular, Ofra Walter, Ya'ara Gil-Glazer and Billie Eilam, in their paper entitled “‘Photo-words’: promoting language skills using photographs”, describe a study which sought to develop an intervention based on the methodology and concept of Photo-Elicitation (PE). They examine and assess its impact on the acquisition of higher order thinking and language skills by elementary school students. Using a mixed methods design, they explored the use of a photograph-based model, which they designed and developed to include a set of specific learning tasks of increasing complexity, using photographs as a learning tool, in order to improve students’ language and writing skills. Classes were assigned to receive the photograph-based intervention (experimental) or to receive the regular language-based curriculum (control). The authors argue that both second and fifth grade students in the experimental group significantly improved their language and writing skills, compared to the control group, with this improvement being significantly larger for the second grade rather than the fifth grade students. Through these findings, the research team identified deficiencies that required specific modifications in the language curriculum design. The paper concludes with recommendations for its improvement which focus on: allowing the child to comment on the cultural, social and ethical content in relation to the visual cues in the photographs; drawing on constructivist understandings to enable students to draw connections of what they are learning with their everyday experiences; and locating students at the centre of the teaching-learning process, whilst the teachers mediate and guide that process rather than transmit knowledge.

Finally, Erica M. Barnes and S. Joy Stephens, in “Supporting mathematics vocabulary instruction through mathematics curricula”, explored mathematics vocabulary instruction by evaluating four common mathematics curricula to determine how each supported teachers’ instructional practices around mathematical vocabulary. They do so in an effort to contribute to a research gap around how curricula could support or drive teachers’ pedagogical practices, particularly potential support of teachers’ instructional practices around mathematical vocabulary. The authors begin by addressing how children learn words, then discuss instructional strategies related to children’s word learning using literature from the ELA and mathematics fields; more particularly they explain why they draw on both research on instructional strategies for teaching mathematics vocabulary and on general vocabulary instruction from an ELA lens to identify potentially effective strategies for instruction of mathematics vocabulary, categorizing such strategies as either verbal or nonverbal. Drawing attention to the disciplinarity of mathematics, the authors argue that these strategies are highly significant if one considers how “[u]se of mathematical vocabulary is essential for mathematicians as it permits precision and accuracy, displaying an expert stance”; that it is a vocabulary that children are less possible to encounter in their everyday lives; and that some mathematical terms “may have precise meanings that differ from everyday use (table, leg, and)” They thus conclude that explicit instruction may be critical for the precision of mathematical

vocabulary acquisition”. In the reported study they examine four of the most commonly-used core mathematics curricula in the USA for evidence of support for research-based instructional strategies for mathematics vocabulary in the first and second elementary school grades. Content analyses of the teachers’ editions of two units for each grade level were analyzed per curriculum (n=16). Statistically significant differences among curricula were found for a number of target words (range 6–51 per unit), level of difficulty of terms (basic to technical), and number of support strategies per word. Multiple means of representation varied in terms of verbal and non-verbal strategies for target terms. The authors “sought to identify how curricula might support teachers’ pedagogical practices for mathematics vocabulary instruction” and conclude that “while all four curricula focused on similar topics and addressed the same Common Core standard, tremendous differences were observed in the suggestions for instruction regarding the number of target words per unit, degree of difficulty of target words, amount of strategies for instructing the target words, and the degree of support provided for more challenging or technical terms”. These differences are considered important by the authors, because they may have important consequences for students’ mathematics vocabulary learning opportunities; “those hearing fewer words with less support may be at a disadvantage when compared to peers hearing more terms with more support”. Implications for practice, curriculum development, and future research are discussed, in concluding the paper.

This issue also includes a review by Frances Howard, of the book “*Inclusion and Intersectionality in Visual Arts Education*”, edited by Kate Hatton. Howard argues for the significance of the book in being the second in a series that “addresses social justice and visual arts education as the setting for wider debates on inclusion”. Her review highlights how the book problematizes the notion of “inclusion” as one sitting uncomfortably, if at all, with “visual arts”, since existing literature has documented their “being divisive, reinforcing social categorisations defined by taste and consumption and equating hierarchies of arts practices to differing levels of education and social class”. The book challenges, therefore, mono-dimensional analyses and the 10 cases comprising it “offer a critical perspective on inclusion within higher education through the lens of intersectionality”, a lens used “to question and examine the layering of identities and experiences both prior to and during university”. The review is structured along three key themes which cut across the various chapters: positionality, pedagogy and paradigms, since these are conceptualized as “key pathways for the book’s main argument for the re-thinking and re-categorization of intersectionality for improving visual arts education within higher education”.

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