

Teacher Agency and Curriculum Development

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Recent curriculum policy in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence, Successful Futures* in Wales, and the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework*) marks a significant departure from previous directions (see [Priestley & Biesta, 2013](#)); a particular change in focus has been the renewed emphasis 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](#)).

It is all very well for policy to demand that teachers exercise agency in their development of the curriculum. Nevertheless, achieving this in practice is problematic: curriculum development, as described recently to one of the authors by Michael Apple, 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 with the former 5-14 curriculum), assessment practices (e.g. the influence of assessment standards and subject specifications in examinations syllabi) and accountability practices (e.g. see [Priestley & Minty, 2013](#)). These influences seem to encourage a risk-averse and often instrumental approach to curriculum development, and limit teachers' ability to envisage alternative futures and to manoeuvre between repertoires in their practice. In particular, there is evidence that many schools simply recycle old practices and ideas when addressing new curriculum development problematics (*ibid*). Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, an early variant of the new curricular turn, illustrates many of the above issues, remaining at best partially enacted; as the OECD's Andreas Schleicher stated on BBC news on 6 December 2016, Scotland needs to move from an intended curriculum to an implemented curriculum.

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 however easy to overstate its efficacy ([Watson, 2014](#)). Collaborative working can just as easily be employed to subvert educational purposes and values, and to reinforce habitual patterns of working. In this context, highly structured approaches to practitioner enquiry show considerable promise. One such approach, named *Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry* (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 national curriculum documents. 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 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 new curriculum 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.

Further development and research are ongoing; CCPE is currently being undertaken by Welsh 'Pioneer' teachers within one of the regional consortia developing *Successful Futures*, and it will be interesting to see how this approach works in the Welsh context.

References