Leading curriculum development

Toby Greany

Aims:

This chapter aims to:

- Review contemporary debates on the purpose and nature of the school curriculum
- Outline the context of curriculum reform in England, including the recent shift towards a 'knowledge-based' curriculum
- Analyse how schools and school groups in England approach curriculum development, identifying three types of response (Pragmatists, Gamers and Missionaries)
- Discuss the implications for leaders and leadership.

Introduction

This chapter is being written during the global Covid-19 pandemic, as schools around the world begin the process of re-opening after months of closure. In addition to dealing with the many practical questions involved, school leaders must think hard about the kind of curriculum their students will need in order to re-engage in the educational and wider life of the school after such a massive disruption. Designing such a 'recovery curriculum' requires attention to numerous questions, not least: what should be the balance between 'wellbeing' and 'catch-up' and how will we know if we have got it right?

The need for a 'recovery curriculum' post lockdown could be seen as a one-off, a temporary disruption, after which schools can return to 'normal'. But, the lockdown is really just one example of why schools must engage in a process of continual curriculum renewal.

Sometimes this renewal will respond to external developments, at other times it will be internally generated. At root it must address the question: are all young people leaving our school with the kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions we think are most important, and if not what might we do differently? Addressing this question requires school teams to make decisions based on a defined set of values and a shared – even if contested - agreement on the overarching aims and purposes of schooling.

The importance of leadership in shaping and developing the curriculum in schools is widely recognized. For example, Hitt and Tucker (2016: 557-558) conclude that:

> Effective leaders focus efforts on the curricular program by requiring rigor and high expectations of all students… These leaders insist that each individual student has the opportunity to learn. Leaders monitor and evaluate continuously the alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment… Principals coordinate vertical (within subject) and horizontal (across subject) alignment through the allocation of time and the development of the master schedule to support such endeavors, a prime example being the protection of common planning time for teachers.

However, despite this recognition of the need for school leaders to be, inter alia, curriculum leaders, there is surprisingly little robust research into how leaders fulfil this role (Cordingley et al., 2020). Indeed, some argue that recent leadership research has encouraged school leaders to focus on how (effectively) teachers teach, and how (effectively) students learn, but not – or, at least, not sufficiently - on the question of what students should rightly learn in today's world and how any such curriculum should be conceived, enacted and evaluated (Uljens and Ylimaki, 2017).

Debates about leadership and the curriculum thus take us to the heart of Peter Earley's question – posed in Chapter 7 – 'Leading learning for what?' Addressing this question is by no means straightforward, because the purpose and content of the

curriculum is deeply contested in many societies, reflecting differing cultural beliefs as well as epistemological and educational debates. What is clear is that national or state/provincial governments have taken a more active role in defining curriculum aims, content and outcomes in recent decades, and that school leaders are increasingly held accountable for enacting these requirements, with standardised test results used to evaluate their success. Furthermore, these curriculum requirements are rarely static, but are subject to almost continual change and adaptation as policy makers seek ways to respond to changing priorities and needs (Mullis, et al., 2016). However, as Taguma and Barrera (2019) show, policy-makers everywhere find that their ambitious curriculum visions are rarely, if ever, fully realised in the classroom.

These issues place school leaders on the front-line in sometimes fraught curriculum debates; required to respond to external requirements, but alert to the need to adapt the curriculum so that it engages and meets the needs of children in that particular context. The focus of this chapter is thus on exploring the ways in which school leaders conceive and work to enact the curriculum and to mediate external and internal pressures and expectations. It draws on various studies that the author has led or contributed to in England (Greany and Higham, 2018; Greany, 2018; Cordingley et al., 2018, 2020) as well as research from a wider range of national and international contexts.

The chapter is structured in three sections. The first outlines key concepts, evidence and debates relating to the school curriculum. The second provides a brief summary of curriculum-related policy developments in England, particularly the new 'knowledge-based' National Curriculum introduced in 2014, and then explores how three groups of school leaders – Pragmatists, Gamers and Missionaries - have responded. The Conclusion discusses the implications, highlighting the need to help school leaders to really think through their

curriculum vision, values and approach and the importance of subject-specific CPD for teachers.

Curriculum definitions and contemporary debates

Defining 'curriculum' can be fraught with complexity, but a common definition is that it incorporates the purposes (the 'why'), content (the 'what') and processes (the 'how') of learning in schools. In practice, there is an acknowledged difference between the formal curriculum as planned and enacted, and the curriculum experienced by students, which will encompass both classroom and non-classroom-based aspects and will reflect hidden or tacit elements (such as whether some subjects are perceived to be higher status than others) (Huber, et al., 2017). Therefore a simple definition might be that the curriculum is the sum total of the formal and informal learning opportunities offered by a school.

Biesta (2017: 184) identifies a trend for 'Head teachers' to be renamed 'Lead Learners', but argues against this because 'the point of education is not that students learn, but that they learn *something*, that they learn it for particular *reasons*, and that they learn it from *someone'.* Critically, while 'education is always about the transmission and acquisition of some content (knowledge, skills, dispositions)' it also ''connects' students to particular traditions and ways of doing and being and, in addition, has an impact on their formation as a person' (ibid: 185). School leaders must therefore consider questions of content, purpose and relationships from an educational – not simply a learning – perspective.

Navigating these issues in practice is challenging, because there are multiple possible purposes for education, so policy makers and school leaders must make choices based on their own beliefs and values. For example, Young et al., (2014) identify three possible 'futures' for the curriculum:

- Future 1: Knowledge is treated as largely given, and established by tradition (i.e. Matthew Arnold's 'the best that has been thought and said'). This model tends to be associated with one-way transmission pedagogy and pupil compliance. It offers high achievers a route to leading universities. The future is seen largely as an extended version of the past.
- Future 2: Knowledge is no longer treated as given, but is seen as 'constructed' in response to particular needs and interests. Curriculum boundaries between subjects are weakened and new inter-disciplinary and vocational subjects are introduced to meet the needs of a wider group of, often less academically able, students, preparing them for future employment.
- Future 3: Does not treat knowledge as 'given' and fixed (as in Future 1), but as fallible and open to change. Unlike Future 2, this openness to change is not arbitrary; it occurs through debates and research within and between specialist subject communities. Future 3 thus treats subjects as the most reliable tools for enabling students to acquire knowledge and to make sense of the world. The curriculum must balance the stability of subject concepts, changes in content (as new knowledge is produced) and the activities involved in learning.

Young differentiates Future 3 from the work of influential curriculum theorists, particularly E.D. Hirsch, who believe that the curriculum has been 'dumbed down' and that the answer is to return to a content-based approach (i.e. Future 1). Instead, Young argues that Future 3 offers a progressive alternative, based on the central importance of 'powerful knowledge' as an entitlement for all pupils. This 'powerful knowledge' takes students beyond their

everyday experience and is specialised and systematic. It therefore places considerable demands on teachers and school leaders to be experts in their respective subject areas, but Carolyn Roberts (a practising headteacher) argues (Young et al., 2018) that this is justified because all children need powerful knowledge to understand and interpret the world, and to become useful citizens in a just and sustainable democracy.

While the ideas of Hirsch and Young have been influential in England, it is important to note that many – perhaps most – school systems around the world are pursuing quite different models. In their study of six 'high-performing' countries and two US states, Creese et al., (2016) identified a clear direction of travel towards integration of the curriculum, linked to plans for embedding '21st Century' skills and dispositions (a broad term encompassing both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, persistence and learning to learn - Pellegrino and Hilton, 2012). The precise definition of '21st Century' skills and dispositions is hotly contested, but the core argument is that the school curriculum should prepare young people to thrive in a transforming world (Lucas, 2019; Hannon and Peterson, 2020). A key theme in these arguments is that education must equip young people with the confidence and skills to believe that they can actually change the world as well as understand it – or to exert agency. Student agency does not really feature in any of Young's curriculum 'futures', but – as Rupert Higham argues in Chapter 23 – is nonetheless essential in the context of current global challenges.

Curriculum developments in England and school leaders' responses

The idea of a National Curriculum in England was introduced in 1988 and conceived as an entitlement for pupils, helping to ensure a consistency of provision, thereby breaking down the walls of what Prime Minister James Callaghan had earlier called the 'secret garden' of

education. In practice, the process of defining the Curriculum has led to a protracted and often heated debate between politicians, employers, professionals, academics and the media about the rightful purpose and priorities for the nation's education system, resulting in regular reviews. Teachers and school leaders have thus become accustomed to remodelling their plans to align with external requirements, with some arguing that teachers have lost the art of designing their own curricula.

The 2014 National Curriculum iteration officially applies only to maintained schools, although evidence indicates that most academies stick broadly to its requirements, especially in core subjects (English, Maths, Science) (Cirin, 2017; 2014). The 2014 curriculum retains a commitment to 'a balanced and broadly based curriculum', but is substantially different from previous, Labour iterations in several ways. Firstly, it aimed to 'raise the bar', so that academic expectations in England match those in 'high performing' jurisdictions (Gove, 2011). Secondly, it is consciously 'knowledge-based', rejecting the '21st-century' skills agenda and aiming to impart 'core knowledge' (Hirsch, 1999). Thirdly, it was intended to minimise the level of prescription on schools, giving them space to innovate, with minimal support for implementation (DfE, 2013). Finally, as in previous iterations, it was inextricably linked with the introduction of new tests, qualifications and accountability measures for schools.

As outlined in the Introduction, the 2014 National Curriculum was part of a wider set of reforms introduced by Conservative-led governments since 2010 aimed at developing what it calls a 'self-improving, school-led system' (SISS). The government has argued that these reforms, which include an expansion in the number of academies and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and the roll back of Local Authorities (LAs), will 'dismantle the apparatus of central control and bureaucratic compliance' (DfE, 2010: 66) by 'moving control to the

frontline' (DfE, 2016: 8). However, as detailed in Chapter 3, Greany and Higham's (2018) research into the impact of these reforms found that any increases in operational autonomy for schools were more than balanced out by changes to the accountability framework. School leaders reported feeling under constant pressure to perform, by demonstrating improvements in annual pupil exam results and by preparing for the possibility of an Ofsted inspection. As a result, the research concluded that rather than 'moving control to the frontline', the SISS agenda has actually intensified the state's powers of oversight and intervention while further constraining the professionalism of school staff – a model of 'coercive autonomy' (op cit: 16).

The research drawn on here (Greany and Higham, 2018; Greany, 2018; Cordingley et al., 2018, 2020)[1] was not designed specifically to evaluate how schools have implemented the new National Curriculum, but it includes extensive evidence in this area. The overall picture that emerges is that the sheer pace and scale of the curriculum and assessment changes created significant stress for school leaders. One issue was that the changes were introduced with minimal support – in line with the government's argument that it was reducing 'bureaucratic compliance'. LAs and national agencies, which had provided guidance and support for curriculum implementation under the previous Labour government, were either closed down or stripped back. This left schools to decide for themselves how to interpret the new curriculum and to prepare for the new – more academically demanding - tests and exams.

In order to analyse school leaders' responses to the curriculum changes, I draw here on Julian Astle's (2017) categorisation of schools in England as either 'Gamers' (i.e. leaders whose priorities and practices are shaped by the accountability system) or 'Missionaries'

[1] See Chapter 3 for more detail on the research by Greany and Higham (2018) and Chapter 18 for more detail on Greany (2018).

(i.e. leaders whose priorities and practices are shaped by their own sense of purpose, which goes beyond meeting the demands of the accountability system). Astle argues that the design of England's school system, in particular its punitive accountability framework, incentivises 'gaming' behaviours, from teaching to the test through to 'off-rolling' the hardest to teach children in order to boost the school's exam performance (Long and Danechi, 2020). Astle studied various examples of 'missionary' schools, showing that while some adopt a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, others pursue '21st Century' alternatives. However, Astle acknowledges that the 'gamers' and 'missionaries' are, in practice, only tiny minorities and that 'most school leaders are in neither camp' (2017: 3). Therefore, I introduce a third group – 'Pragmatists' – who represent the mainstream response to the new National Curriculum. These Pragmatists seek to comply with its requirements while holding true to a core set of professional values; however, their ability to do so is significantly conditioned by their school's performance level.

Pragmatists: network support for curriculum change

Pragmatist school leaders in Greany and Higham's (2018) study described change as relentless – something 'that just keeps coming'. These leaders rarely articulated a distinctive vision or set of values which guided their response to these changes, they simply looked for pragmatic solutions.

In the absence of clear guidance or support, these schools had come to rely more heavily on networks, particularly local school clusters. These networks could offer practical support as schools sought to navigate the reforms – as sources of expertise, inspiration, professional development and mutual support. One primary headteacher explained that

networks offered a source of ‘power’, by which she means a sense of solidarity and confidence to resist being ‘Ofsted-driven’.

However, forming and working within such networks was not always easy, not least because of competition caused by market mechanisms, such as parental choice of school. Furthermore, networks did not always provide high quality solutions to curriculum challenges, as the vignette below illustrates. In this example, the Maths Lead Teacher values her second, smaller network, but her colleague, who leads on ICT (Information and Communications Technology - a largely new curriculum area for primary schools in 2014), finds little value, because ‘no one seems to really know what the answer is’. In this sense, networks can be seen as a cheap and sometimes effective, but ultimately pragmatic solution for schools.

Vignette: responding to curriculum change through networking

The Maths Lead Teacher in one primary school explained how the new National Curriculum incentivised her to develop a network with other leaders:

> *When the new curriculum came out, in common with many maths leads, we looked and we panicked. I saw that Year 2 children would be doing column addition and I thought 'oh my goodness, how are we going to manage that? Let's get the maths leads together!' So I put out a meeting to the local cluster, through the headteachers' group, and every single maths leads came… so that was my start of multi-school working.*

Over time, however, the Lead Teacher had stopped co-ordinating this larger group. Instead she was focussed on working with a smaller subset of people, as she explained:

> *I really believe in working in groups… But when I'm really up against the wall, which we are at the moment, I am going back to the people that I know, and who our head is keen that we work more with for the Catholic partnerships.*

Meanwhile, the ICT Lead in the same school had found networks less helpful – essentially because no schools had sufficient expertise or confidence to take a lead in a new curriculum area:

> *It's a guessing game. I seem to go to ICT cluster meetings and we're all just sharing what we're doing... and it's major trial and error… no one seems to really know what the answer is.*

Gamers: prioritising the needs of the school or MAT

Greany and Higham's (2018) research explores in detail why and how the accountability framework places pressure on school leaders. The introduction of a new, more demanding

Ofsted inspection framework after 2012 and the use of forced sponsorship (whereby a school judged to be failing is required to join a MAT) created a fear of failure across the system, encouraging school leaders to prioritise the needs of the school over the needs of particular groups of pupils. Greany and Higham show that a common (though by no means universal) response is to narrow the curriculum or to encourage teaching to the test, in order to secure the best possible exam results.

In a similar vein, Greany (2018) identifies a group of MATs which are very much performance driven, for example using Ofsted language to reflect the MAT's core mission (e.g. 'Good or better every day'). In these MATs, the emphasis on improving test and exam results is relentless, and it is common for academy leaders to narrow the curriculum by increasing the focus on key subjects (e.g. literacy and Maths in primary schools) or by extending the amount of time spent preparing for national exams, with extensive use of 'mock' assessments.

Another strategy for improving exam scores is to focus any professional development for staff on understanding the requirements of the exam board (i.e. the organization that sets the exam and awards any resulting qualification). Cordingley et al., (2018) found that schools (particularly lower performing schools) tended to prioritise whole school improvement approaches and generic pedagogic CPD, rather than subject-specific CPD, because this was seen as more likely to address Ofsted inspection requirements. Where schools did engage in subject-specific CPD, it tended to involve one or two members of staff attending briefings run by exam boards, rather than extended professional development programmes for all staff.

Examples of the most egregious forms of gaming were relatively rare in the research. One example comes from an Acting Principal in a secondary academy, who had visited a

local MAT, but was shocked at how it had narrowed its curriculum and 'off-rolled' its harder to teach students:

> *It's just shocking. There's no drama. There's no music. There's nothing out of school that's going on. The kids are all pinned in at break and lunchtime. It's efficient… They got the best results in [the city] last year, though—big improvement, everybody's happy, and all the rest of it. But they're also—and I cannot believe this—they're also effectively excluding kids, sending them home, and using the code 'B - educated elsewhere', because they're providing them with online learning materials… He was absolutely open, the head there. He basically said, 'Your good kids are going to do good everywhere. Your bad kids are crap, so we need to get rid of them. It's those middle kids that you have to worry about'.*

Missionaries: not radicals, but determined and quietly confident

None of the schools in Greany and Higham's research were undertaking the kinds of radical curriculum innovation that Astle describes.[2] However, a number were engaged in less ambitious forms of innovation, usually based on a staunch belief that children benefit from a genuinely broad and balanced curriculum. These schools tended to be led by more experienced, confident headteachers and to be performing above minimum accountability thresholds. A small minority had gone further, adopting a distinctive curriculum approach, for example inspired by Steiner or Montessori. The quote from the primary head below is fairly typical of this group:

> *I have gradually, over the years, said that we need to do enough to stop them (Ofsted) putting us into Special Measures and also it's right and proper for children to leave being able to do x, y and z (i.e. literacy and numeracy), but... if they don't know about a range of authors, about a love of books, they only know how to pass a SATs test, then that's not really equipping them.*

[2] This is not surprising, Astle's sample was purposive (i.e. designed to identify radical examples), whereas both Greany and Higham and Greany identified samples that were representative of the wider population.

Interestingly, Greany's (2018) research in MATs indicated a stronger appetite for curriculum and pedagogic innovation. Thus, in addition to the 'Gamer' group mentioned above, there was another group (around a quarter of the sample of twenty-three) that could be classed as 'Missionary' MATs. Their innovations varied widely, reflecting differing underlying values and purposes, but the following two examples give a flavour:

- one large MAT had created a specialist 6th Form, with a curriculum designed to give bright but disadvantaged young people the social capital and academic qualities they would need to enter Oxbridge (i.e. the best universities)
- another large MAT had created a 'Framework for Excellence', which all member schools were using. This was centred around 'powerful knowledge' and 'education with character'. Primary schools across the trust were audited, to assess the amount of curriculum time spent on each subject and to ensure breadth and balance, but schools could deliver the National Curriculum in their own way, while the MAT's central team supported this by facilitating inter-school 'excellence visits' and sharing resources.

Conclusion

As noted in the Introduction, there is relatively little research which explores the nature and process of curriculum leadership in schools, although much of the wider work on learning-centred leadership and the leadership of change addresses curriculum development to some extent. The studies that focus more specifically on curriculum leadership and development emphasize: the importance of active leadership from senior leaders, establishing the intent, with regular curriculum reviews and clear internal lines of accountability for assessing the quality of implementation and the impact on children's

learning (Ofsted, 2018); the need to address curriculum scope, continuity, sequencing and integration to ensure coherence (Kärkkäinen, 2012); and the impact of wider factors, such as financial implications and parental engagement (Brundrett and Duncan, 2014).

This chapter has explored the different conceptions of curriculum that exist (e.g. Future 1, 2 and 3 and '21st Century' alternatives), each of which has significant but different implications for how school leaders might work with teachers to realise their curriculum vision in practice. It has also illustrated how wider system design features impact on curriculum decision-making, characterising three distinct responses (Gamers, Missionaries and Pragmatists) based on data from schools in England. This analysis reveals the extent to which England's accountability framework, particularly Ofsted inspections, drives school behaviour, so it is interesting to note that the new framework, introduced in 2019, includes a much stronger emphasis on assessing a school's curriculum thinking and practice.

Two implications emerge from this analysis.

- Firstly, the curriculum of a school will inevitably reflect the beliefs and values of the school's leadership and teachers, even in systems where the 'national' curriculum is prescribed. School leaders must therefore be helped to co-design their school's preferred approach, involving wider stakeholders in this process, and to clarify and address any implications that stem from their preferred approach.

- Secondly, it was Lawrence Stenhouse who first argued that there is no curriculum development without teacher development. If teachers are to subscribe to and feel confident in how they implement any new curriculum, they will need sustained, high quality CPD. In particular, Cordingley et al., (2018, 2020) highlight the importance of

subject-specific CPD and pedagogic content knowledge in this process. Leading this professional learning process is arguably the key role of leaders in any curriculum development.

Further reading

- Alexander, R. (2012) *Curriculum freedom, capacity and leadership in the primary school*, Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.
- Ofsted (2019) *Education inspection framework: Overview of research.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/813228/Research_for_EIF_framework_100619__16_.pdf
- Young, M., Lambert, D., Roberts, C., Roberts, M. (2014) *Knowledge and the Future School: Curriculum and Social Justice,* London: Bloomsbury: London.