

Curriculum for Excellence: 'A brilliant idea, but...'

Mark Priestley and Sarah Minty
School of Education
University of Stirling
Contact: m.r.priestley@stir.ac.uk

Abstract

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence typifies many international trends in curricular policy, through its emphasis on generic skills and competencies, its focus on pedagogy and its apparent extension of autonomy to teachers as agents of change. Such curricula pose considerable challenges to school systems, where prevailing practices are often at odds with policy aspirations. This article draws upon empirical research conducted in a Scottish local authority to explore how teachers make sense of the new curriculum. It differentiates between first order engagement – most teachers welcome Curriculum for Excellence in principle – and second order engagement, which relates to the extent to which the new curriculum is congruent with teachers' deeper conceptions about knowledge, learning and assessment.

Key words

Curriculum; policy; teacher; school

Introduction

Scotland's new Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was formally implemented in the 2010-2011 session, following an extended period of reflection since its first inception in 2004 (Scottish Executive, 2004). CfE has been widely hailed in Scotland as a radical departure from existing ways of both defining the curriculum and from prevailing practices in Scottish schools. It has also been heralded as unique and distinctive as a curriculum. CfE certainly represents a shift from the prescriptive culture of the previous 5-14 curriculum¹, towards a more developmental approach which positions teachers as agents of change and professional developers of the curriculum. It espouses more overtly student-centred practices than previously, based around the development of Four Capacities in young people – confident individuals, successful learners, responsible citizens and effective contributors. However,

¹ This former curriculum was introduced as 'guidance' in the early 1990s. Its impact was most pronounced in primary schools, where the assessment demands of the curriculum were particularly influential in framing practice.

whether CfE can be framed as unique and distinctive is open to debate. Writers such as Michael Young (2008; see also Yates & Young, 2010) and Sinnema and Aitken (2013, in press) have pointed to emerging commonalities and trends in curriculum policy that are arguably worldwide (Young, 2008; Nieveen, 2011), and certainly apparent across Anglophone nations.

This paper focuses on the extent to which this apparently new, radical and distinctive approach to curriculum resonates with the existing beliefs and practices of teachers – a major determinant of whether the new curriculum will be enacted meaningfully in a manner which is in keeping with the spirit of the policy. The success or otherwise of policy reform and implementation has been widely discussed within the research literature (e.g. Cuban 1998; Priestley, 2011). The differences between different levels of curriculum have been well theorised – for example in the distinction between intended, implemented and attained curricula (Thijs & van den Akker, 2009), or through their representation as prescribed, described, enacted and received (Edwards, Miller & Priestley, 2009). Such conceptualisations point to the manner in which curriculum is contextualised and recontextualised (Bernstein, 2000) at each level, mutating as it translates from one context to another. A major issue facing externally mandated reform is the ‘implementation gap’ (Supovitz, 2008) between policy intention and classroom practice. This gap is largely due to teachers’ capacity to mediate curriculum reform (Osborn *et al.*, 1997), often significantly modifying the intrinsic logics of the curriculum policy to match the institutional logics of the setting where it is enacted (Young, 1998).

We explore, here, the fit between CfE as a set of policy constructs and teachers’ existing beliefs and practices, drawing upon empirical research conducted in 2011 within a single Scottish local authority. We first offer a short overview of the key tenets of CfE, together with some reflections on the academic literature, to date, which relates to the new curriculum. In doing so, we illustrate how CfE fits within the wider, worldwide context of curricular reform – in other words, framing what is new and distinctive about CfE. After next outlining the research design, we then analyse the extent to which there is congruence and disparity between the old and the new, and how such tensions are

mediated by teachers to produce hybrid curricular forms and emergent educational practices. Our analysis focuses on the need to understand the congruence between the intrinsic logics of the curriculum and teacher beliefs at two levels, which we term 'first and second order engagement' with the underpinning philosophy of the new curriculum.

CfE – a radical departure?

Since 2002, Scottish schools have engaged with policy designed to bring about curricular and pedagogical innovations that proponents have hailed as new and radical. According to its architects, CfE is 'one of the most ambitious programmes of educational change ever undertaken in Scotland' (Scottish Government 2008, p.8), building upon earlier programmes of reform, notably Assessment for Learning (AfL: see, for example, Hayward, Priestley and Young, 2004; Hutchinson and Hayward, 2005). CfE is often claimed to be distinctive in a number of respects. Below, we examine these distinctive features under three broad headings: curricular structure; learning; and the role of the teacher.

Curricular structure

The new curriculum is fairly distinctive in terms of its big ideas, through its adoption of four capacities, often posited as the purposes of CfE. Thus, young people are expected to develop as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors as a result of their school education (Scottish Executive, 2004). However, while the language is idiosyncratic to Scotland, the basic concept is more widespread; the capacities are examples of a wider global trend, evident in many modern national curricula, to frame education around key competencies (for a fuller discussion of these issues, see: Biesta & Priestley, 2013, in press). Such competencies have been alleged to have a strongly instrumental (towards economic and civic goals) slant, being heavily influenced by publications from supra-national organisations such as the OECD (2005) and the European Union (2006). Some authors have directly criticised the four capacities. For example, Biesta (2008) has been critical of the narrowness of 'responsible citizen' capacity, with its focus on social

responsibility rather than democratic citizenship, and Watson (2010) suggests that the capacities have overtones of indoctrination, being ‘concerned with setting out not what children are expected to know, but how they should be’ (p.99).

A second structural feature of CfE lies in its articulation as outcomes, grouped into linear levels. Again, this is fairly typical of global trends (Young, 2009), and moreover continues with the tradition laid down by the predecessor curriculum, 5-14. However, there are two key differences. First, the CfE outcomes are more loosely framed than previously, being less specific and prescriptive in content, and each level now covers a longer period of a pupil’s school career, than was formerly the case. Second, and in some tension to the move away from prescription, the outcomes, now called Experiences and Outcomes, seek to specify not only the end result – the outcome – of learning, but also normally the experience undergone by the pupil in attaining the outcome.

CfE has attracted some criticism for a lack of theoretical rigour in its structure (Priestley and Humes 2010). According to Priestley and Humes, the curriculum combines features from incompatible curricular models, which, it is argued, provide two competing but simultaneous starting points for school-based curriculum development (SBCD) (Priestley, 2010). The Four Capacities thus provide a particular starting point for SBCD, based around the development of processes and the specification of content to achieve curricular aims. However, the Experiences and Outcomes offer an alternative starting point for SBCD, involving an audit approach to curriculum development and arguably encouraging a culture of strategic compliance (for further details and empirical findings, see: Priestley, Minty & Eager, in press). This distinction is an important one, as it potentially spells out the difference between radical enactment of CfE as something new and fresh, and a more tokenistic approach which seeks to maintain and justify existing practices under the umbrella of the new curriculum. These issues are explored later in the paper in relation to the empirical data from our research.

Learning

CfE can also be claimed to be distinctive in terms of the nature of learning itself. This relates to the balance between knowledge and skills and the centrality of the learner. In both respects, CfE is in fact fairly typical of worldwide trends to be less prescriptive in content. Such trends have been subject to critique; various writers (e.g. Young, 2008; Wheelahan, 2011; Yates and Collins, 2010; Priestley, 2011) have drawn attention to a worldwide trend for new curricular models to downgrade knowledge. This is largely justified within policy and by proponents as enhancing curricular flexibility to address the demands of a fast changing world, where workers and citizens will need the skills to quickly acquire new knowledge, as existing knowledge forms become rapidly obsolete. There are two main facets to this curricular shift.

The first is an overt shift from knowledge to skills as the focus of the curriculum (Whitty, 2010). This is evident in the specification of key competencies, such as CfE's framing of the Four Capacities, as discussed above. Such a shift has been criticised for over-simplifying and dichotomising the complex relationship between knowledge and skills. For instance, Young (2009, p.4) has questioned whether such generic skills can indeed be developed free of contextual knowledge and 'free of the domains in which they are realised'. Related to this is an increasing emphasis on inter-disciplinary approaches to organising the curriculum; something very prominent in the development of CfE (Education Scotland, 2012a). Again, such trends have been subject to critique. Young and Muller (2010) have pointed to dangers inherent in a weakening of traditional subject boundaries: an erosion of the distinction between academic knowledge and everyday knowledge; an attendant danger that, in the lack of specification of content, less experienced teachers will 'fall behind without knowing it, or miss out conceptual steps that may be vital later on' (p.23); and a risk that disadvantaged young people will be denied access to powerful knowledge (see also Rata, 2012, who warns of the social exclusion inherent in new curricular forms). Nevertheless, many welcome such a focus, and caution against alarmism. For example, Whitty (2010, p.34) points out that 'knowledge is not the same as school subjects and school subjects are not the same thing as academic disciplines'. Moreover,

educationalists have defined perfectly rational and rigorous inter-disciplinary approaches to defining knowledge that do not downgrade the knowledge in question (for example, Beane, 1997).

CfE exemplifies a further common trend in curriculum design, namely the positioning of the learner at the heart of schooling, alongside prominent discourses about personalisation and choice (Education Scotland, 2012b; for an extended discussion of this issue, see: Reeves, 2013, in press). Biesta (2010), referring to this trend as the 'learnification' of education, suggests that it reflects an unproblematised acceptance of learning as a good, and a failure to address educational questions, such as 'what are we learning?' and 'why are we learning it?' This discourse shift is accompanied by a growing incidence in policy documents of references to active learning – CfE is replete with such references – and the increased popularity of methodologies such as cooperative learning in schools. One issue is that the theoretical underpinnings of such pedagogy are rarely made explicit in CfE; policy tends to exhort teachers to utilise active forms of learning, *while* not articulating any form of learning theory, including the social-constructivism upon which they implicitly draw (for an extended discussion of these issues, see: Drew & Mackie, 2011).

The role of teachers

Intrinsic to CfE is a renewed vision of teachers as developers of curriculum at a school level, and more widely as agents of change (Fullan, 2003). The new curriculum:

aims to engage teachers in thinking from first principles about their educational aims and values and their classroom practice. The process is based upon evidence of how change can be brought about successfully - through a climate in which reflective practitioners share and develop ideas. (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.4)

The Scottish Government has taken seriously the changed role of teachers in this process, commissioning, for example, two major reviews of teachers and their work (Donaldson, 2010; McCormac, 2011). However, assumptions about the role of teachers as agents of change have been shown to be highly problematic; Scottish government policy has tended to focus on raising individual

capacity, while not addressing the structural and cultural issues that might constrain or enable teacher agency. According to Priestley, Robinson and Biesta (2012, p.101), there is an irony:

in the suggestion that agency is something that can be demanded. [...] simply to say that teachers should become more agentic, and simply presenting them with a situation in which they need to be more agentic, but without providing resources that would allow teachers to make such a shift, is not a very effective way to promote teacher agency.

University of Glasgow research (Baumfield *et al.*, 2010) similarly highlighted the difficulties faced by teachers in taking advantage of the autonomy afforded by CfE. A major problem lies in the accountability practices – including use of attainment data and internal inspections – that continue to accompany the new curriculum despite the renewed emphasis on teacher autonomy, and the cultures of performativity that have been shown to develop in schools as a result of these practices (Cowie, Taylor & Croxford, 2007). Such competing pressures potentially leave teachers, seeking to implement CfE, between a ‘rock and a hard place’ (Reeves, 2008).

Research design

The above summary of Scottish curricular policy describes the context within which our research took place. This illustrates the very real challenges faced by teachers and schools implementing a new curriculum, which is in some ways radically different to what has gone before, which has been critiqued for its flaws, and which is to be developed in a difficult environment. The research was undertaken in 2011. It adopted a case study approach, initially drawing from three types of professional network within a single Scottish education authority: teachers and headteachers within an associated schools group (ASG – a cluster of a secondary school and its associated primaries); secondary teachers within specialist subject support networks; and local authority development officers. This article is concerned with the former two networks.

The research addressed the following research questions:

1. What are stakeholders' understandings of CfE? How does this differ from teachers' existing practices?
2. What changes have emerged as a result of CfE, in relation to whole school practices, school culture and teachers' personal abilities?
3. What factors have enhanced or hindered teachers' implementation of the changes?
4. How do teachers respond to perceived increased levels of professional autonomy and creative freedoms inherent in CfE?

Data were mainly generated through one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. A total of 31 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 participants, including three headteachers, 14 teachers and four representatives from the local authority. In total, teachers from nine schools (two primary and seven secondary) were involved in the research. Further details about the school interviewees are provided below.

Figure one. Overview of interviews

Gender	Sector	Role	Subject specialist working group members	Number interviewed twice
Female: 14 Male: 3	Primary: 5 teachers and 2 headteachers Secondary: 9 teachers and 1 headteacher	Headteachers: 3 Teachers: 14 (of whom 3 were Principal Teachers, and 1 was a Chartered Teacher)	Science group: 3 teachers Maths group: 3 teachers	13 out of 17 interviewees

Most respondents were interviewed twice, with an interval of 3-6 months between interviews designed to gauge perceptions of progress in curriculum development, and changes in teachers' views towards the implementation of CfE; however, we do not differentiate in this paper between the stages of interview. Interview data were supplemented with data from journals kept by three teachers (two secondary teachers from the subject specialist working groups and a primary teacher). These detailed some of their thoughts and observations on their experiences of implementation between the two interviews. The researcher also attended and observed various professional development events, an Associate School Group (ASG) meeting and a specialist subject working group meeting. The notes taken from these formed part of the data collection, as did the collection of relevant policy and curricular documents during visits to schools.

In order to test whether findings from the interviews were replicated across the authority, an online survey of all schools was conducted during August and September 2011 (N= 716). The findings of the survey will be reported in forthcoming papers. For the purposes of this article, we are only interested in responses to an open-ended question inviting respondents to comment on their experiences of the implementation of CfE. More than a third of respondents left a comment, and these are drawn upon to supplement the interview data where applicable.

Analysis of data followed an interpretivist approach (Corbin & Holt, 2005) which allowed for both a grounded approach to coding and the application of social theory (Archer, 1988) to make sense of

the complex social systems encountered in each school. Data were open-coded to identify themes, then were subjected to a cross case analysis to identify complementary and contradictory trends. This latter process entailed an analytical separation of structure and culture in each setting, guided by the social theory of Archer.

All interviewees were provided with information about the research prior to being interviewed, and gave their informed consent. In order to protect the anonymity of the schools and individuals involved, we do not refer to schools, sector or teaching role; instead teachers' responses are only designated as being from the interviews or the survey, and all teachers are identified as female. Interviewees maintained the right to withdraw throughout the project. The research complied with the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association.

Emerging practices

The data suggest a widespread engagement by teachers with CfE, in respect of pedagogy, assessment and provision (curricular models). In general, there was a sense that teachers perceive CfE primarily as a pedagogical innovation. The research points to highly variable rates of progress, both between and within schools. Despite the fact that CfE has been anticipated in schools for some time, some schools had only started to implement changes in 2010, when it became absolutely necessary for them to do so. A secondary teacher noted that it was only with the arrival of the new S1 pupils in 2010, that CfE became real for some teachers; in other words, when it became a requirement to implement it.

But for as long as it was a piece of theoretical work in a green folder, it wasn't going to mean anything to anyone. And until you are actually prepared to put yourself out there and do it in front of a class of pupils then you are not going to know what the pitfalls are and what you can and can't do. (Interview)

Another secondary teacher pointed to difficulties in her school, where individual teachers and departments were at varying points in development. For example, she and departmental colleagues

had spent time developing a shared understanding of the terminology relating to reporting. Colleagues in other departments had not held the same discussions. In this case, lack of clarity and consistency resulted in a return to the old style of reporting to parents. Such narratives are indicative of the more pronounced challenges facing secondary schools. We noted virtually no innovation in terms of whole-school approaches to timetabling, and only minimal innovation in terms of the organisation of knowledge. Subjects remained the order of the day, and inter-disciplinary approaches tended to appear only on the margins, through either the development of one-off rich tasks or the addition of a weekly timetabled inter-disciplinary session that stands alone like a subject.

There was greater evidence of whole-school approaches to CfE in the primary schools participating in the research. Such activity included developing planning of inter-disciplinary teaching, the introduction of new weekly planning sheets, and tracking sheets for numeracy and literacy. In both primary and secondary schools, significant progress seemed to have been made in respect of collaborative and collegial professional working practices; a number of teachers had joined authority-wide teacher learning communities² (for a detailed overview of the concept of teacher professional learning communities, see Stoll *et al.*, 2006) and some of the secondary schools had also developed their own peer observation and learner partner programmes.

Interviewees identified a range of emerging practices in terms of learning, teaching and assessment, and their levels of confidence with regard to implementing these appeared to increase between the first and second interviews. They suggested that CfE had helped to promote an environment, in which teachers reflected on and questioned their practices. A teacher said 'obviously I think there are always people that are a bit scared of changing, or stick to what they do, but overall I think it has started to change'. Another said, 'it's altering our teaching in a way, definitely with older children'. There was a general sense that teachers were becoming more open to experimentation. Teachers spoke of trying to move away from the use of textbooks, and increasingly replacing them with more

² The local authority in question participated in an external, commercially-driven initiative called Tapestry, which promotes collaborative working to develop formative assessment.

active and collaborative lessons, and as one said, 'just trying different things'. Teachers from the specialist subject groups in particular described CfE as providing a mixture of new ideas, techniques and teaching styles which can be adapted to suit the needs of the class. As part of a more collaborative and active learning approach, teachers reported making greater use of dialogue, different forms of brainstorming and more practical work. Some interviewees pointed to the justification CfE provided for doing more outdoor learning, or for approaching classroom lessons differently by moving furniture around the room. Progress was reported by both primary and secondary teachers, in terms of increasingly handing control and choice over to pupils about what and how they learned.

Teachers also pointed to developments in assessment and in experimenting with new forms. One teacher said she had 'become less reliant on being desperate to have a piece of written evidence'. Primary interviewees spoke of increasingly using photos as evidence of learning, while a number of teachers in one of the specialist subject groups were using photos and short videos for formative assessment. Secondary teachers also reported increased use of peer and self-assessment.

However, even the most enthusiastic supporters of CfE described such practices as challenging, requiring teachers to relinquish control of the classroom and to 'move out of their comfort zone':

Because you go from a situation where you are very much in charge and you are directing things within quite limited parameters, to a situation in which you are still in charge but the kids are doing more of the moving and shaking. And you have to accept that that's happening without losing what you consider to be acceptable control within your classroom. And that's quite scary. (Interview)

Such a move, teachers said, required a good deal of confidence on their part, and one interviewee conceded that 'we still have a long way to go in letting [pupils] take charge of the room'. This was partly due to classrooms being seen as 'noisier' as a result of cooperative learning and group based discussion activities.

A particular challenge for teachers seems to lie in learning to think differently and to avoid returning to old ways of working.

I think it's a difficult thing just now; everybody is getting used to it. I think it's so easy to fall back into just teaching the way you're used to teach, but you have to make a concentrated effort to think about how to do things differently. I think that's what we find is very difficult.

(Interview)

It is this fit (or lack of), between the new cultural forms introduced by CfE and existing teacher practices and beliefs, towards which we now turn.

Teachers' understandings of CfE and its philosophy

It is clear from the above discussion that teachers in schools participating in the research, both primary and secondary, were changing their practices at variable levels of pace, especially in terms of pedagogy, and that this is at least partly in response to the new curriculum. However, equally clear is a sense that such changes are not consistently dispersed across the system. Teachers spoke positively about the principles and practices of the new curriculum. However, we were puzzled to see the same teachers levelling trenchant criticisms towards many aspects of CfE. In part, this can be explained by negativity towards the implementation process and resourcing issues. However, the research suggests a deeper set of reasons for this apparent contradiction. This section explores the extent to which the philosophy of CfE fits with the beliefs and values of teachers. The question of congruence is addressed at two levels of engagement with curriculum change:

1. First order engagement is related to whether or not teachers welcome – in general terms – the philosophy and 'big ideas' of CfE;
2. Second order engagement relates to how CfE fits with teachers' implicit theories of knowledge and learning, and whether there has been a thorough engagement with the underpinning ideas of the curriculum.

This is an important distinction, as it is quite possible that teachers welcome CfE, while remaining unable to implement it meaningfully because of fundamental tensions between its core ideas and their beliefs about and existing practices of education.

First Order engagement

In terms of first order engagement, teachers generally responded very positively to the philosophy and ideas behind CfE. The majority of interviewees welcomed CfE, saying that it tied in with their own ideas and beliefs about education. Teachers described the Four Capacities as ‘a strong hook’; ‘exceptionally important’; and ‘a brilliant idea’. CfE was seen as having the potential to ‘refresh’ teaching, encouraging teachers to reflect on their own practices. A number of interviewees, particularly those who were part of the specialist subject working groups, indicated that they had been working in ways similar to those advocated by CfE for some time, and that CfE enabled them to feel justified that they were working ‘along the right lines’. One teacher described feeling vindicated, having ‘battled’ with colleagues for some time to introduce new approaches.

However, interviewees had differing understandings about what CfE would mean for their own practice. There were those who understood CfE as providing new ways of working, to which they could adapt and tailor their teaching, improving upon existing practices. Their understanding was largely based on the notion that CfE was about new approaches to teaching and learning, rather than content. Other interviewees understood it in terms of requiring new approaches to teaching and learning and an extensive revision of content, which generated a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. A teacher noted that ‘too much good practice has been thrown out as everyone interprets CfE in their own way due to the woolliness of the documents’. A minority held negative views towards the new curriculum, describing it as ‘change for change’s sake’. One interviewee repeatedly said, ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’; she saw the former 5-14 curriculum as being fit for purpose, without need of change.

Teachers' responses to CfE appeared to be linked to their views on teacher autonomy. It was clear in the interviews that teachers held considerably varied views about the level of autonomy achieved as a result of CfE. For a number of interviewees, CfE's lack of prescription was widely welcomed, particularly after what was perceived to be the over-prescribed nature of the 5-14 Curriculum. These teachers appreciated the flexibility brought by CfE; there was a sense from some that it had rejuvenated their teaching, and allowed them to enjoy teaching again. They spoke of being able to 'go off on tangents', to be creative. A primary teacher explained that, within constraints, 'we're probably free to go wherever we want and then do extra things as the kids want to'. Crucially for these, mainly primary teachers, CfE was perceived to accord greater autonomy to pupils, enabling them to tailor learning to pupil needs. Such changes would, it was felt, have the potential to engage and motivate young people in their learning. Moves towards topic-based and thematic learning were described as taking teaching 'back to what we used to do long ago', according to a highly experienced teacher, making learning more relevant for children. A primary teacher said her identity as a teacher had changed as a result of CfE, shifting from being an imparter of knowledge to a facilitator of learning. While such comments were more common among primary teachers, they could also be found amongst secondary teachers. One secondary teacher described how teachers are moving away from the notion of being the 'expert' who tells students what to do, and are instead taking the place of learner alongside the students.

However, a number of interviewees (both primary and secondary) lacked the confidence to be able to adapt to new ways of teaching. One teacher described the new curriculum as having moved 'from extreme prescription to extreme woolliness'. Interviewees, including those who were very positive about CfE in general terms, frequently used the term 'floundering in the dark' to describe their situation at the time of the interviews. The perceived vagueness and lack of clarity around the new curriculum was a concern which was raised repeatedly throughout this research. While the move away from the 'regimented' 5-14 was welcomed, interviewees and survey respondents indicated that CfE has moved too far in the opposite direction. Even teachers who were developing their practices

in line with CfE, and who had embraced change, still looked for reassurance that what they were doing was right. Despite CfE positioning teachers as agents of change, our interview data show that many teachers are not yet ready for such a sudden shift from prescription to autonomy.

Second order engagement

While most teachers welcomed the underpinning philosophy of CfE, we found second order engagement to be more problematic. There are a number of facets of this. Firstly, there is the issue of whether the teaching workforce has been able to take the time to make sense of the big ideas of the curriculum. We found only occasional examples of meeting with colleagues to discuss the meaning of the principles of CfE. A secondary teacher identified this as an area of development which would bring benefits.

I don't think we do enough of 'let's look at the philosophy behind it'. How often in a school would teachers sit down? You just said to me 'have you got a philosophy of education?' I'm sure most people have. But we don't talk about it. We don't ever sit down and say 'right let's all share our philosophies and come up with a philosophy for our school'. We just look at minutiae. (Interview)

Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, one should question whether the assumptions within CfE about learning and knowledge are congruent with teachers' own implicit theories of learning and knowledge. CfE advocates a broadly constructivist view of learning, at least implicitly. Thus, there are notions that students learn best through active engagement and experience, and through dialogue with other learners. Our research suggests, conversely, that many teachers, particularly in secondary schools, harbour implicit transmissionist views of knowledge and learning, viewing it as delivery of content, whether or not organised into discrete subjects.

These points should not obscure the fact that it is probable there will be a continuum of practice and philosophy in each case, and that most teachers will be influenced by a combination of different beliefs and values. There are likely to be tensions between conflicting beliefs and forces, which may

be exacerbated if teachers cannot make time to make sense of new curricular ideas. The following themes illustrate these second order issues in more detail.

Tensions between inter-disciplinary learning and specialist subjects

Many teachers' understanding of CfE centred around the idea of the 'grouping' or 'bringing together' of subjects, and of helping children to 'see the links between things'. By 'broadening' education in this way teachers said they hoped CfE would have the potential to remove boundaries and allow children to see cross-curricular links. On the whole, interviewees agreed that Scottish education needed to be updated in order to meet the needs of today's fast-paced society. Moving away from traditional subject divides was seen to tie in with the changing needs of society, and increasingly over-crowded curricula.

However, such evidence of first order engagement with these issues risks obscuring deeper [mis]understandings of inter-disciplinary working. While the data do not provide a clear picture of how teachers understood inter-disciplinarity, it was apparent that tensions existed between the perceived push for inter-disciplinary learning and knowledge specialism. Despite acknowledging the need to be inter-disciplinary, a minority of secondary teachers were opposed to it in practice, viewing CfE as a possible threat to their subject, and resenting emergent practices of inter-disciplinary learning. A secondary teacher, who had enjoyed the breadth of subject matter that she was able to bring to her school's inter-disciplinary courses, emphasised the need to ultimately prepare students to pass exams for which, she repeatedly said, you 'still need to have your experts'. Another interviewee queried whether teachers should be able to teach outside of their discipline: 'very few people will go into a field without sufficient training from educated professionals and do things correctly'. Part of the perceived threat to subjects discussed above also arises from the fact that, in some cases, subject time was lost to newly-developed inter-disciplinary projects. We emphasise that those interviewees who had been involved in developing and/or delivering inter-disciplinary work tended to be highly positive about it, even when they expressed reservations. They clearly emphasised its potential to make learning more locally relevant and the enjoyment they experienced

in being able to veer away from the norm. As one teacher explained, the potential to make pupils 'aware of the bridges between subjects' is very important, 'whereas, before, there were bridges but nobody really paid attention to them'.

Tensions between skills and knowledge within CfE

A further tension lies in the balance between skills and knowledge. In some cases those same interviewees, who highlighted the benefits of inter-disciplinary learning, also emphasised the need to be able to test pupils' knowledge. Similar themes were evident in the survey responses, as this comment shows:

The ONLY plus I see from CfE is inter-disciplinary learning- something I have advocated for a long time. But in order to fully link with other subjects and make meaningful and relevant connections then pupils need to understand the subject first. At every level in its implementation CfE, dumbs down subject specialism BUT it is only through subject that we can really make wider links and judgements about all other areas. (Survey)

There was a perception among some teachers (both interviewees and survey respondents, and both primary and secondary) that knowledge was disappearing from the curriculum in favour of skills. Such opinions tended to be expressed by teachers holding transmissionist views of knowledge, and was in conflict with the more constructivist views of knowledge implied within CfE.

While many teachers expressed support for the notion of developing of children's skills for life, it was evident that some, especially secondary teachers, mainly saw their role as imparting knowledge and raising attainment. As one secondary teacher said, 'at the end of the day you're going to be looking at kids trying to get those qualifications to get a job or further study. And you have to make sure they get there.' Another teacher suggested that colleagues were reluctant to go outside of their comfort zone, because they held the view that 'I am here to teach and you will learn what I am going to teach you'.

Concerns were raised by some teachers that there is too much emphasis on soft process outcomes, group learning and active learning at the expense of content, as shown by this response to the survey:

“IT’S NOT WHAT WE LEARN BUT HOW WE LEARN”. Who coined that disaster? In order for there to be any meaning in the acquisition of knowledge then what we learn HAS to be as vital and important as how we learn. (Survey)

Secondary teachers in particular raised concerns that specialist subject knowledge was being ‘watered’ or ‘dumbed’ down, possibly to the detriment of ‘higher ability’ pupils. Primary teachers, who were generally more comfortable with this way of working, also raised concerns that basic skills, such as arithmetic, are not taught properly or in enough detail.

Tensions around assessment

The greatest tensions we encountered in this research were in relation to assessment. This was an area of concern for all interviewees – both primary and secondary – and for many survey respondents also. The changes to assessment arising as a result of CfE, and also as a result of changes to the exam system in the form of the new National Qualifications (to be implemented from 2014), require a substantial change in the mind-set of teachers. Teachers expressed anxiety, and in some cases fear, with regards to this, as they were often unsure exactly what was being asked of them. Teachers expressed a number of [mis]understandings of assessment in relation to CfE. For example, a minority of interviewees’ understanding of CfE was based on the erroneous idea that it required the replacement of summative assessment with formative assessment. This led them to see CfE as having an over-emphasis on formative assessment; as one teacher said ‘we have swung too far the other way’.

The data suggest that curriculum development is perceived by some teachers, especially in primary schools, to be establishing mechanisms for assessing, recording and reporting. Such a view existed among a number of interviewees, including some who had clearly engaged with CfE, and is indicative

of the culture of performativity within which teachers work (see Cowie, Taylor & Croxford, 2007; Priestley, Robinson & Biesta, 2012). According to one primary teacher:

At the end of the day a parent still wants to know where exactly their child is in language and maths. Are they on a par with their peers? Are they below or above and although we shouldn't be labelling children in these ways, there is still pressure to do so. And it doesn't just come from parents. It comes from the authorities as well (e.g. the [standardised] tests).

(Interview)

Significantly, this points to the difficulties many teachers face as they try to move from prescription to greater teacher autonomy. Such views are likely to be remnants of the former 5-14 system. Some teachers reported becoming so 'engrained' in this way of working, that they now find it hard to think in the ways required of them by new forms of assessment.

We had possibly become so engrained in the 5-14 and everybody knew that at 100 paces, where we stood with that ... it really gelled for us. We were kind of getting frustrated at not knowing what we were supposed to be doing and where we were going. Why didn't they give us materials that we could just go out and use? [...] All that kind of worry, and it was getting to the point that we were getting really up-tight about it. [...] I was quite concerned about that, that things were not going to go right because we haven't got the right kind of frame of mind for this. (Interview)

Such concerns were most prevalent among primary teachers, who expressed frustration in relation to the move from 5-14 to CfE assessment levels. These were considered to be too broad and too vague to be meaningful. In secondary schools, teachers involved with inter-disciplinary projects puzzled over ways to assess, record and report on children's learning in these classes. Some of those who had introduced portfolios, which charted children's progress, remained unsure as to how best to assess such information. The perceived lack of clarity, around the details of the National Qualifications, also generated great confusion among secondary interviewees. A teacher

sympathised with those colleagues who found CfE more difficult, explaining that people were bound to find it difficult when 'every frame of reference' for teachers used to working towards exams has been taken away. Another interviewee said:

We have been preparing and knowing about the assessment in Scotland for years and years, and to suddenly change it... we don't know what it is like yet. We are not prepared and not experienced in it yet; never mind getting the students to actually do as well as they can in it.

(Interview)

In secondary schools, then, it is clear that the possibilities for curriculum development were being limited by the way teachers viewed their role; as being ultimately to prepare students to pass exams, which goes against the principles of CfE. This was further hampered by the 'wait and see' approach taken in some secondary schools, where teachers waited to see the details published of new National Qualifications by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, before the development of senior phase curriculum models. Teachers in both primary and secondary described the development of assessment in CfE as an 'afterthought', and complained that it has been developed 'back to front'.

Conclusion

In summary, it is clear then that one needs to be cautious in accepting at face value the fact that many teachers appear to welcome the principles of CfE. Our data suggest that, if we think in terms of first order engagement, then a great many teachers do indeed welcome the new curriculum. However, a look at second order engagement suggests that the terrain is significantly more complex than it initially appears. This research suggests that teachers have different [mis]understandings of the purposes and philosophy of CfE, which relate inherently to their prior experiences of the 5-14 Curriculum, the long tradition of subject specialism (in secondary schools), and to their own personal beliefs and values about education. In particular, the research points to the need to find ways of engaging those that don't engage – extending the reach of the teacher learning communities, and facilitating a higher incidence of second order engagement with CfE. It points to the need for greater

opportunities for sense-making about new curricular and pedagogic ideas. Fuller understanding of the key tenets of CfE and its underpinning philosophy would seem to be a prerequisite for its successful enactment in schools (and we note here that enactment is not the same thing as faithful implementation of government policy, but is more about substantive engagement with policy, informed by careful reflection on the aims and practices of education). Such understanding is essential, if clarity of purpose is to engender clarity in practice; our research suggests that Scotland's schools have a distance to travel before this is achieved in relation to CfE. Moreover, we do not wish such critique to be seen as a deficit view of teachers and schools. The research also points to a lack of clarity in the policies surrounding CfE, suggesting a need for clearer exposition of policy at its macro (e.g. Scottish Government) and meso (e.g. Education Scotland) levels of development, including better defined processes for engagement.

In this vein, we add a further caveat to this plea for greater teacher engagement. Current curriculum policy in Scotland and elsewhere explicitly constructs teachers as agents of change in the development of such policy (see Priestley, Robinson & Biesta, 2012). Raising capacity of individual teachers through continuing professional development is clearly important if they are to act as agents of change. However, we also note that agency is ecological; agents act by means of their environment, so that the achievement of agency strongly depends on cultural (meaning, interpretation and understanding), structural (relationships, power) and material resources. The promotion of teacher agency is therefore not solely a matter of enhancing individual capacity, but also requires change to the cultural and structural conditions within which teachers work. This includes developing spaces for generative dialogue (Imants, 2005), establishing substantive relationships in schools (see Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2012) and tackling the performative cultures that act as an inhibitor to innovation (Keddie, Mills & Pendergast, 2011). In short, this is about creating a collegial culture where innovation is encouraged and where teachers are enabled to act as agents of change.

Acknowledgement

We wish to thank the dedicated teachers and local authority officers who participated in this research. We also acknowledge the Scottish Government, who funded the project, within which this research was undertaken.

References

- Archer, M. (1988) *Culture and agency: the place of culture in social theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baumfield, V. Hulme, M., Livingston, K. & Menter, I. (2010) Consultation *and* Engagement? The Reshaping of Teacher Professionalism Through Curriculum Reform in 21st Century Scotland, *Scottish Educational Review* 42(2): 57-73.
- Beane, J. (1997) *Curriculum Integration, Designing the Core of Democratic Education*, New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bernstein, B. (2000) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*. (Revised edition), Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield publishers.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2007) *Beyond learning: democratic education for a human future*, London: Paradigm Publishers.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2008) What kind of citizen? What kind of democracy? Citizenship education and the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, *Scottish Educational Review*, 42(2), 38-52.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2010) *Good education in an age of measurement: ethics – politics – democracy*, Boulder, Co: Paradigm Publishers.
- Biesta, G.J.J. & Priestley, M. (2013, in press) Capacities and the curriculum. In M. Priestley & G.J.J. Biesta (Eds.), *Reinventing the curriculum: new trends in curriculum policy and practice*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Corbin, J. & Holt, N.J. (2005). Grounded Theory. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.), *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (pp.89-96), London: Sage.
- Cowie, M., Taylor, D. & Croxford, L. (2007) 'Tough, Intelligent Accountability' in Scottish Secondary Schools and the role of Standard Tables and Charts (STACS): A Critical Appraisal, *Scottish Educational Review*, 39(1), 29-50.
- Cuban, L. (1998). How schools change reforms: Redefining reform success and failure. *Teachers College Record*, 99(3), 453–477.
- Donaldson, G. (2010) *Teaching Scotland's Future: Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- Drew, V. & Mackie, L. (2011) Extending the constructs of active learning: implications for teachers' pedagogy and practice, *The Curriculum Journal*, 22(4), 451-467.
- Edwards, R., Miller, K. & Priestley, M. (2009). Curriculum-making in school and college: The case of hospitality. *The Curriculum Journal*, 20[1], 27-42.
- Education Scotland (2012a) *Curriculum for Excellence Briefing 4: Interdisciplinary Learning*. Online at: http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/c/genericresource_tcm4732286.asp (accessed 21/01/13).
- Education Scotland (2012b) *Curriculum for Excellence Briefing 5: Personalised Learning*. Online at: http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/c/genericresource_tcm4741644.asp (accessed 21/01/13).
- European Union (2006) *Key competences for lifelong learning*. Online at: http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11090_en.htm (accessed 21/01/13).
- Fullan, M. (2003) *Change Forces with a Vengeance*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Hayward, L., Priestley, M. & Young, M. (2004) Ruffling the Calm of the Ocean Floor: Merging Practice, Policy and Research in Assessment in Scotland, *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(3), 397-416

- Hutchinson, C. & Hayward, L. (2005) The journey so far: assessment for learning in Scotland, *The Curriculum Journal*, 16(2), 225-248
- Imants, J. (2002) Restructuring schools as a context for teacher learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 37(8), 715–732.
- Keddie, A., Mills, M. & Pendergast, D. (2011) Fabricating and identity in neo-liberal times: performing schooling as ‘number one’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 37(1), 75-92.
- McCormac, G. (2011) *Advancing Professionalism in Teaching: The Report of the Review of Teacher Employment in Scotland*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- Nieveen, N. (2011). *Teachers’ professional development in curriculum design in the Netherlands*. Paper presented at the European Conference for Educational Research, Berlin, 14 September, 2011.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005) *The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies: executive summary*. Online at: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/35070367.pdf> (accessed 13/09/12).
- Osborn, M., Croll, P., Broadfoot, P., Pollard, A., McNess, E. & Triggs, P. (1997) Policy into practice and practice into policy: Creative mediation in the primary classroom. In G. Helsby & G. McCulloch (Eds.), *Teachers and the national curriculum* (pp. 52-65), London: Cassell.
- Priestley, M. (2010) Curriculum for Excellence: transformational change or business as usual? *Scottish Educational Review*, 42(1), 22-35.
- Priestley, M. (2011) Whatever happened to curriculum theory? Critical realism and curriculum change. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 19(2), 221-237.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G.J.J. & Robinson, S. (2012) *Understanding teacher agency: The importance of relationships*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, Canada, 13-17 April 2012.
- Priestley, M., Minty, S. & Eager, M. (in press) School-based curriculum development in Scotland: Curriculum policy and enactment, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*.
- Priestley, M. & Humes, W. (2010) The Development of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: amnesia and déjà vu, *Oxford Review of Education* 36(3), 345-361.
- Priestley, M., Robinson, S. & Biesta, G.J.J. (2012) Teacher Agency, Performativity and Curriculum Change: Reinventing the Teacher in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence? In B. Jeffrey & G. Troman (Eds.), *Performativity across UK education: ethnographic cases of its effects, agency and reconstructions* (pp.87-108). Painswick: E&E Publishing.
- Rata, E. (2012) The politics of knowledge in education, *British Educational Research Journal*, 38(1), 103-124.
- Reeves, J. (2008) Between a Rock and a Hard Place? Curriculum for Excellence and the Quality Initiative in Scottish Schools, *Scottish Educational Review* 40(2): 6-16.
- Reeves, J. (2013, in press) The Successful Learner: A progressive or an oppressive concept?. In M. Priestley & G.J.J. Biesta (Eds.), *Reinventing the curriculum: new trends in curriculum policy and practice*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Scottish Executive (2004) *A Curriculum for Excellence: The Curriculum Review Group*, Edinburgh, Scottish Executive.
- Scottish Executive (2006) *A Curriculum for Excellence: Progress and proposals*. Edinburgh, Scottish Executive.
- Scottish Government (2008) *Building the Curriculum 3: A framework for learning and teaching*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- Sinnema, C. & Aitken, G. (2013, in press) Trends in International Curriculum Development. In M. Priestley & G.J.J. Biesta, *Reinventing the curriculum: new trends in curriculum policy and practice*. London: Continuum.
- Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M. & Thomas, S. (2006) Professional Learning Communities: A Review of the Literature, *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 221-258.

- Supovitz, J.A. (2008) Implementation as Iterative Refraction. In J.A. Supovitz & E.H. Weinbaum (Eds), *The Implementation gap: understanding reform in high schools* (pp.1-21). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Thijs, A. & van den Akker, J. (Eds.) (2009) *Curriculum in development*, Enschede, SLO.
- Watson, C. (2010) Educational policy in Scotland: inclusion and the control society, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 31, 93-104.
- Wheelahan, L. (2010) *Why knowledge matters in curriculum: a social realist argument*, London: Routledge.
- Whitty, G. (2010) Revisiting school knowledge: some sociological perspectives on new school curricula, *European Journal of Education*, 45(1), 28-44.
- Yates, L. & Collins, C. (2010) The absence of knowledge in Australian curriculum reforms. *European Journal of Education*, 45[1], 89-101.
- Yates, L. & Young, M. (2010). Editorial: globalisation, knowledge and the curriculum, *European Journal of Education*, 45(1), 4-10.
- Young, M. (1998). *The Curriculum of the Future: from the 'new sociology of education' to a critical theory of learning*. London: Routledge.
- Young, M. (2008). From Constructivism to Realism in the Sociology of the Curriculum. *Review of Research in Education*, 32: 1-28.
- Young, M. (2009) *Alternative Educational Futures for a Knowledge Society. Socialism and Education*. Online at: <http://socialismandeducation.wordpress.com/2009/12/06/alternative-educational-futures-for-a-knowledge-society> (accessed on 29/01/10).
- Young, M. & Muller, J. (2010) Three educational scenarios for the future: lessons from the sociology of knowledge, *European Journal of Education*, 45(1), 11-27.