



Mark Priestley on Curriculum and Teacher Agency

As part of TEDMEM interviews, in this interview, we host Mark Priestley*, who is a Professor of Education at the University of Stirling and the Director of the Stirling Network for Curriculum Studies. We had a multidimensional conversation with Mark Priestley, on the topics of curriculum and teacher agency mainly based on the context of Scotland and Wales, which are the countries draw attention to new approaches and practices in curriculum making. We are happy to share this interview which covered a range of issues such as the place and the importance of the curriculum in an education system, new approaches on curriculum, new trends and different practices in the process of curriculum making with a particular focus on Scotland and Wales, implementation gap, the role of teacher capacity and agency in curriculum making.

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Shall we start with the fundamental question, how do you define curriculum? What is the place of the curriculum in education system?

I see consideration of the curriculum as being absolutely fundamental, at the heart of everything that we do in education. For me, the way we currently define the curriculum is problematic. Someone told me that we have more curriculum definitions than we have curriculum theorists. I think one of the problems we have is that we are often defining curriculum in very simplistic and reductive terms, as content or syllabuses. In many secondary schools, it tends to be seen as just a list of subjects that are taught or which students choose. I think these all are inadequate definitions of curriculum. We should be thinking about curriculum much more clearly in terms of the social practices, through which education is planned, structured, enacted and evaluated. This is a much more promising definition, which allows us to think about the different components or practices that make education meaningful and purposeful.

Furthermore, those practices occur across multiple layers: they take place at macro government levels, where we are talking about, for example, the formation of curriculum policy, frameworks and so on... They happen at the meso-level; here we are talking here about support mechanisms put in place to facilitate curriculum making in schools, for example regional and local infrastructure to support teachers. And they happen in the micro-levels of schools of course, as programs are developed and as teaching takes place.

I see that you choose curriculum making but not curriculum development the term we used to. Why is that?

We have talked about curriculum development for a long time. I suppose the advantage of curriculum making is that it is a metaphor that is more evocative and meaningful than just development. It suggests that the curriculum is something that is actively constructed, which involves not just following somebody else's recipe, but it is about interpreting, mediating, translating ideas into practice. This involves professional knowledge and professional judgment, so it is much more active process than just simply implementing somebody else's ideas and intentions.

I think that in many modern education systems, curriculum development is limited by the metaphors we use. Talking about taking the product given to you by the government and simply implementing it – or even worse delivering it – is less meaningful than talk about curriculum making, and all of the processes that accompany this. Words like enact and curriculum making are more powerful metaphors for me than, say, delivery or even curriculum development.

I suppose this is also a reflection of new approach on curriculum. You have a statement that “there is currently something of a renaissance of interest in curriculum”. New forms of national curriculum are emerging worldwide. How do you characterize the new trends in curriculum making in the world?

In recent years, we have seen successive waves of different curriculum approaches emerging in policy. Since the 1980's there have been attempts to create teacher proof curriculum policy around the world. The 1989 national curriculum in England is a very good example of that. It used a highly specified approach to define what content should be taught. More recently, approaches have changed. There has been a realization that you cannot have such a thing as a teacher proof curriculum. Teachers always mediate policy. In the words of Larry Cuban, teachers change policy as much as policy changes teachers. Thus, I think there has been a realization of the need for a much more flexible approach. But I think we have also seen the development of international discourses, from some organisations like the OECD, UNESCO and the EU, which try to develop curriculum which is much more focused on what Michael Young called instrumental issues such as economic competitiveness, developing the right skills for the fast changing workplaces, and so on. These have become powerful drivers of the curriculum. And that requires a much more flexible approach. So, instead of the approach mandating highly specified content from the centre, we have moved towards a notion of teachers

making the curriculum locally. Scotland is a good example of that. Scotland uses the metaphor 'building the curriculum', which very much emphasizes the role of schools in developing local curriculum.

I think this places quite new demands on teachers to be curriculum makers rather than being curriculum technicians, who simply take policy and deliver it. I think we have also seen a renaissance of curriculum thinking in academia. When I first started attending a European curriculum network around ten years ago, there were often only three or four people attending seminars; we are now sometimes see people giving seminars to 60 to 70 people. This has become a very wide network. Thus, there is presently a great deal of interest not only in policy circles and demands on teachers do things differently, but we also have a lot of new curriculum scholarship emerging. This is really exciting.

In Scotland and Wales, as good examples of this trend, recently there has been an intense process of educational change especially in the aspect of curriculum making. Can you describe the nature of change in these contexts in the consideration of the weak and strong sides of those reforms? What can the other systems learn from these contexts?

These curriculum models are very similar in terms of their articulation at the macro-level of national policy. One thing to emphasize is that I was very much an outsider in Scotland in terms of the development of the current curriculum. I was an academic commenting as an outsider while curriculum policy emerged. In Wales, on the other hand, I have been more of an insider in that I was on one of the advisory groups that helped government develop the curriculum. At the macro-level, we have got policy in both countries based to a notion of child centred education and flexible curriculum making, and both are extensively based on outcomes. There is only limited specification of content in both countries – what has been called input regulation. But both countries do specify heavily in terms of macro-level output regulation, via performance indicators, learning outcomes and inspections, and schools' performance is measured against these.

However, there are some macro-level differences as well. For example, there are probably 600 outcomes in Wales and in Scotland there are about 2000. These differences are likely to play out differently in relation to how schools engage in curriculum making. In Scotland, there is technically official permission for schools to make their curriculum in local settings. But at the same time, we have contradiction because the curriculum is highly regulated through output regulation. This means that what becomes important is not whether you have developed the curriculum in line with curricular goals, but whether you have evidenced that you are meeting the performance indicators, which are exemplified in the learning outcomes. That's become, I think, a real problem in Scotland. We've regularly seen tick-the-box approaches for developing the curriculum, which are more concerned about providing evidence for an outside audience than providing a meaningful curriculum experience for young people. I think that is a real problem that Wales possibly will face. In Wales, there is some understanding of this problem, and even though they have a similar macro-level model, I think there are things being put in place that will stop that happening, or at least mitigate its worst effects.

So in summary, at the macro level, we have policy which is ostensibly formulated around the notion of what young person will become through education. But it is framed around very detailed outcome statements, which I think develop potentially very reductive forms of curriculum making in schools. That's one issue at the macro level.

The meso-level is crucial here. Wales is developing quite sophisticated approaches to professional learning, which go hand in hand with curriculum making, using Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry, a model that a colleague and I have been working on over the last ten years (see Priestley and Drew 2016¹). This approach involves developing a capacity at the regional level and supporting schools through what are called pioneer teachers, and these pioneer teachers are actually acting as leaders of enquiry to develop curriculum in schools.

¹ Priestley M & Drew V (2016) Teachers as agents of curriculum change: closing the gap between purpose and practice. European Conference for Educational Research, Dublin, 23-26 September 2016, 23.08.2016. <http://www.eera-ecer.de/ecer-programmes/conference/21/contribution/39307/>

In Wales, you mentioned they are educating teachers and developing their capacity in curriculum making. So, this is one of the first steps in curriculum making process right?

I think it is an essential first step. Finland has a reputation for doing that well. In Scotland, unfortunately, the initial dissemination of the curriculum was very much top-down, often delivered by a PowerPoint approach. Schools were subsequently left to get on with developing their curriculum, with official advice being that they audit existing practice against the new outcomes. Moreover, while the guidance that has arrived subsequently has been extensive, it has often been confusing for teachers, with contradictory changes over time.

In Scotland, more recently, we have seen the establishment of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives, organisations modelled on the Welsh approach. The purpose of these is to develop the infrastructure to support curriculum making in schools. Will they be successful? I'm not sure, because they still also focus very much on developing performance evidence and measurement, which I think is a problem. However, it must be emphasised again that meso-level activity is important for supporting schools as they make the curriculum.

At the micro-level, there are strengths and weaknesses. One of the strengths is the high level of professionalism among teachers in both countries. There is a difference in Wales and Scotland. In Scotland, schools can be very hierarchical and many teachers have limited professional capacity and expertise for making curriculum. In Wales there seems to be a more collegial environment and a more constructive, supported approach to curriculum making.

How do you explain this difference, with culture of trust or more capable teachers or what?

I think this is partly structural and partly cultural. At the structural level, local authorities as employees of the school teachers, are very strong in Scotland. Whereas in Wales (and England) local authorities were weakened over years by successive governments. There is thus a very hierarchical top-down system in Scotland, which can discourage initiative by schools and teachers.

I think the cultural elements are important here as well as the structural ones. The culture in Scotland's secondary schools has been very much framed around the teaching of a very traditional canon of subjects, and teachers are quite rigidly accredited to teach particular subjects. In Wales, there is more flexibility about that. As a history teacher working in Wales, I could legitimately be asked to teach geography. As a history teacher in England, I was not only teaching geography I have also taught business studies, religious education and science. In Scottish schools that wouldn't be allowed; it is a very rigid system where basically you are accredited to particular subjects and they are the subjects you teach. This can, I think, discourage innovation: the development of hybrid approaches such as social studies, for example. To some extent, both countries are limited by prevalent thinking in schools that education is, particularly in secondary schools, about teaching subjects, and not primarily about knowledge, which can be, of course, organised in different ways.

In Wales, at the early stages of their new curriculum, there seems a more open approach to curriculum making, although there are big similarities. I think there are weaknesses and strengths respectively in the systems. I think the big problem is that many teachers really lack the knowledge and indeed the agency to make the curriculum in the ways demanded by curriculum policy. The capacity issue is a problem because teachers are used to being told what to do. I think also we have got a situation where there is pressure on schools to provide evidence of performance, and it takes a lot of time. The emergence of very bureaucratic evidence gathering systems takes up a lot of time, which could be used for curriculum making.

In the case of many countries, such as in Turkey, the gap between policy design and implementation processes has always been an ongoing discussion. What are the primary factors causing this gap?

There is a lot of talk about implementation gaps. I don't find it to be terribly helpful for a number of reasons. One reason is that actually the term 'implementation gap' implies that the government knows best about

what teachers should do and teach. And it really reduces the teacher role to the role of a technician who deliver the curriculum – what Stephen Ball called unselfconscious classroom drones doing what they're told. Therefore, we need a more sophisticated way of looking at implementation gaps, as this policy to practice view is very linear. It also raises some serious questions about what policy is for; it calls into the question whether the policy should be highly restrictive and highly regulative. I think policy should be about creating frameworks: the resources, the ideas and framing for curriculum making, rather than telling schools how to make the curriculum. And that framework should include some specification of content knowledge, in my view.

I think the more productive way of looking at gaps is to think about them in terms of a gap between what might be called education principles and values on the one hand and practices on the other. Thus, if we have a curriculum that encourages people to tick boxes and to provide evidence, the significant gaps between purposes of education and the practices of the classroom will remain. And that for me is a more serious issue than the gap between policy and practice, because policy is something that should be looked at critically by teachers. We spent a lot of money educating teachers to degree level and beyond. We should be giving them some responsibility to make decisions and professional judgements on the curriculum.

Well, what do you recommend for improving implementation process?

There are two things that I think we should focus on. One is, as we discussed, about sense making. So just putting reform after schools and saying that get on with it is not a good idea. There has to be a systematic approach to getting people to understand the reforms. And this is what Finland does very well. Their 2014 curriculum reform process was preceded by at least a year of systematic sense making activities. It was not just focused on teachers, it was focused on system level actors such as regional and district administrators, and so on. The focus was on getting people to understand what was different about the new policy and what implications were for practice. So when the policy finally is implemented it is not a rushed and semi-understood activity. It is a considered look at the ideas in the policy and how these ideas are different to what we were doing already, what sort of resources we need, what we need to change within the system to make this work properly etc.. It is also about what barriers and drivers there are, and how we might strengthen the drivers and address the barriers. One implication might be that we need more people in the system who have capacity and expertise in curriculum making, for example.

One of the things I think Scotland has done really well in recent years is providing funded opportunities for teachers to undertake Master's-level study in education. Master's-level study is important for two reasons. One is at very general level; it engages teachers intellectually with educational ideas and discourses. We have evidence of experienced teachers describing their practice using the latest policy terminology, for example. Instead of this, we should be looking at the ways to help teachers develop an educational language, which enables them to bring some criticality to understand what the new policy is trying to do and how that might best be implemented. The second thing the Master's level study in Scotland has done – and this really takes us back to the work of Stenhouse back in the 1970s – is that it addresses the idea that if you want curriculum development, then you have to have teacher development as well. Thus, it is about equipping people with the knowledge of curriculum making processes.

You describe a process teacher development and curriculum development go hand in hand. So, teachers should take primary role in curriculum making process?

Yes, I would say that. At school level, a teachers' role is to be a key agent for curriculum making. And that has to be accomplished by teachers who have high capacity. We need to appreciate here that teacher agency is about having access to right resources and support; it is about much more than just personal capacity – expertise, knowledge etc. High quality teachers can be disabled by their working conditions.

But I think that we can go beyond just seeing teachers as curriculum makers in their own schools. There have been some interesting experiments done in recent years, involving having teachers as curriculum policy

writers, who are writing the policy at the national level. In Scotland that was done on a very limited basis. Teachers were seconded to the national agency to help write specifications, but were subject to quite tight control. They were put in the teams, but they had very little autonomy and limited impact.

British Columbia in Canada is said have a system where the teachers wrote the curriculum. And this was so exciting to the Netherlands Government, that they put teachers in charge of their curriculum. As I understand it, it has been based on a slight misconception, as teachers had a much more minor role in British Columbia than was believed. The Netherlands has been for the last four or five years rewriting the curriculum, primarily letting teachers do it. There have been a few problems. One of the key problems is teachers don't necessarily have the academic expertise in curriculum.

Wales has done this a little differently. They brought teachers into writing the curriculum, but they were situated within wider teams which included civil servants and curriculum experts. And they have been through a process which involved them producing multiple drafts which were then looked at by curriculum experts. They have also done a lot of consultation with discipline experts. For example, the humanities group has been talking to geographers and historians and so on. They have been through quite an extended process of writing a curriculum, where the teachers have played a leading role, but they did also within a very structured process. I think they produced some reasonable curriculum specifications within a framework, which, as I stated earlier, has a few problems (in its structure of learning outcomes, for example).

So, some really interesting stuff happening around the world, and especially in Wales, where there is neither a top-down model nor an entirely bottom-up model, where teachers decide everything. It is a structured hybrid of top-down and bottom-up, which takes into account the need for people to make sense, to learn and to become experts in curriculum as part of the process of making the curriculum.

How do you see this changing role of teachers in curriculum making process?

I don't see as much change as perhaps the rhetoric suggested. There is a lot of talk in Scotland, for example, about teachers as agents of curriculum change, or as curriculum makers in the recently adapted language of empowered schools. But if you talk to teachers, many say "well, I don't feel empowered". One high school principal recently said to me that 'tell the government I do not feel empowered'.

So it is mostly in policy papers or academic talking...

It goes beyond rhetoric I think. This is not just about positioning the system. I think there is a general belief that this is a good thing, but what we are perhaps seeing is a lack of understanding that it takes more than just saying "you are now empowered". We have to look at the system issues as well. And this goes right to the heart of teacher agency. We can't demand that teachers become agentic unless we provide people with the resources and the tools, and remove the constraints that make agency very difficult. We can have excellent teachers but their agency can be hindered by these constraints.

It is important to understand that empowered schools and teachers actually need resources to become empowered. And that requires a more sophisticated view of what empowered actually means.

You already said something about teacher agency. But I want to ask this specifically, as you are one of the pioneer researchers on teacher agency. How do you define teacher agency?

Teacher agency at a very basic level is about enabling teachers to make decisions, to potentially act and to critically navigate complex situations with multiple repertoires of manoeuvre and multiple possibilities for action. To put it in very simple terms, if you have only one course of action, you have no or limited agency. But if you have multiple courses of action and you choose how you are going to exercise those, then that is agency. So agency does not have to be exercised, it is a potential. It is certainly not the same as action. For

example, “I decided not to teach my class face-to-face today, because in my professional judgement the class were better served by going online to visit a virtual museum”. That is agency. However on the other hand, if I am not able to make this decision because of pressure on me, then that is not agency. So agency is about the potential to make these decisions. This can include making decisions that go against the flow; it can be about resistance as well. The foundation of agency is basically the capacity of the teachers themselves. I think it is absolute truth that high capacity teachers will achieve more agency; it is about the idea that if I have got lots of experiences, repertoires I can draw upon, I can selectively use my past experiences in order to deal with present day and future problems.

So we can say that teacher agency is an achievable state for teachers, but it is not only about capacity of teachers it is about whole system.

Yes, it is not something innate in individual, it is achieved. It is dependent upon much more than the capability of the individual. It is also dependent upon what resources you have available at any given time and the constraints that are put in your way. Agency is seen in this view as a temporal-relational construct. It is relational because it depends upon your context and your relationship to socio-material resources, as well as your ability to use them. So, for example, a teacher working in isolation will find it more difficult to achieve agency than people who are able to achieve collaboration through groups. Agency is also about risk, so perception is important. I talk to teachers who potentially could do something but won't do because they see it as risky. Sometimes there is something they want to do and their values drive them to do it, but they won't do it because it is seen as dangerous. As Elliot Eisner told us, if you put a bird in a cage for 20 years, and then you leave the door open, it is no surprise that if the bird does not want to come out.

Agency is also temporal. It is about drawing upon past experiences. It is oriented to the future, so we have more agency if we are able to imagine more possibilities for future action. One of the issues we found in our research was the limited capacity of many experienced teachers to imagine different future possibilities. They perceive one way forward, not multiple ways forward. Consequently, part of the work we are doing through Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry, is to inject ideas that interrupt patterns of thinking. Agency is also oriented towards the present. It is subject to the resources and constraints that people face, and also the judgements about what is possible and not possible in the present. I think it is important to understand that enhanced teacher agency is something that can only happen if teachers work within the right environments.

Most of the situations you describe achieving teacher agency requires teacher autonomy.

Yes, up to a point if you restrict the autonomy, then you restrict the agency. But this is not the whole story; agency is not the same as autonomy, and too much autonomy can erode agency. If you afford lots of autonomy, this can have the effect of also removing the resources, the ideas and the framings that make agency possible. This emphasises the importance of intelligent policy that is framed around providing people with resources and frameworks, not policy which is framed around restriction and managing risk and controlling people's behaviour. I think those are two quite different approaches. As Alan Luke reminds us, the technical form of the curriculum (that is its structure) and the ways in which curriculum is specified can have profound effects on the ways that teachers make the curriculum.

You made some system level recommendations, as last words what would you say for teachers to improve their educational practices?

One of the pieces of advice I have for teachers is to become more engaged with educational ideas. They can do that in a variety of ways. At the school level, they can do it through having a reading club among teachers, reading the article and discussing it and having a professional discourse which is not about procedures and processes, but it is about educational ideas and educational practices. Teachers can also do a Master's degree. It is a significant process that makes them think from different perspectives about their own practice.

I would also encourage teachers to work outside of their immediate environments. One of the problems that teachers have is they work in bubbles. They work with other teachers who think similarly to them in the same environment. They don't tend to work outside of their department or the school. So they tend to work around the existing ideas.

Wales has been very successful on connecting teachers across different schools. But it was a government initiative. And of course, it is important that schools also need to support this collaborative work by arranging working hours.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Sinem Hızlı Alkan for her recommendations on translation of some of the terminology related to curriculum and teacher agency into Turkish.