

Designing a curriculum for the 21st century: a case study of Northern Ireland's curriculum review

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If designing a curriculum for the 21st century was a 'green field, blue skies' challenge it might be relatively straightforward. Find out what young people most want; what society, the economy and the environment most need and what parents and employers most value. With these insights and free to develop a coherent and exciting age-related response, unhampered by terms and timetables, there might even be room around the edges of a practical and relevant core to build on desirable (or even quirky) learning objectives. But nothing is ever that easy. Certain subjects have populated the curriculum since the 18th century and have grown so much in strength and familiarity over time that their credentials are not even questioned. There is hardly a patch of unoccupied grass in sight and sometimes it is difficult to see any blue sky on the cloudy educational horizon.

For each curriculum authority the constraints on curriculum development will be different and many will be political. In educational terms the biggest constraint is likely to be the sense of threat felt by teachers and those who train, support and inspect them; those whose vested interests have been enshrined and strengthened in the national curriculum (and the Northern Ireland common curriculum) since 1989, and reinforced by the high level of accountability demanded by an over-assessed and highly accountable system. Now there's a challenge!

Curriculum designers should learn from the history of curriculum development over the decades, as surveyed by Alister Ross in his analysis of the history of curriculum change in England.ⁱ They should also be prepared for what

happens when an irresistible force (the desire to make learning more relevant and motivating) meets an immovable object (the views of subject lobbyists, traditionalists, politicians). For this reason designing a curriculum for the 21st century can be tough, but not impossible, if our Northern Ireland experience is anything to go by. But it may be helpful to those with this challenging task for us to describe, step-by-step, how Northern Ireland has addressed curriculum design for the 21st century as a how-to guide for others to adopt or adapt.

Step 1: The views of young people

Our starting point was young people: their perceptions of what school is for and what it should be about. A curriculum cohort study conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)ⁱⁱ garnered the perceptions of 60 young people over seven years (from age 11–18). These insights were supported by questionnaire surveys of almost 3,000 of their peers.

A disturbing picture emerged of a culture of compliance without engagement among even the brightest of our young people. The majority felt that schooling was relevant only for passing exams and jumping hurdles and had little relevance to their lives now or for the future.

Step 2: The views of teachers

Next we asked the professionals how they felt about the appropriateness of the curriculum. The insights provided were symptomatic of the frustrations that teachers were feeling at the time. They were not happy with the curriculum either, but felt that it should not be changed – principally because they had been forced to respond to too much change too quickly. This was a clear warning about the pace at which any significant, never mind radical, future change was likely to be achieved.

Step 3: The views of wider society

The next step was to find out about the wider forces for change beyond schools to establish the major issues that were likely to affect young people in the future. A series of high profile Curriculum 21 conferencesⁱⁱⁱ, were held in Belfast bringing together specialists from across the world and focusing on the main issues facing education from early childhood through to employment. This helped to define the major issues within a revised curriculum and how they should be addressed to have status and impact. Since assessment confers status, this became a central consideration.

Step 4: Establishing a framework

Drawing together the issues highlighted so far we established a framework of curriculum objectives and sub-objectives or 'key elements'.

The aim of the framework was to simplify the objectives of the curriculum – establishing that it was about developing individuals and contributors to society, the economy and the environment. If these framework objectives were accepted, they would become the pillars of the future curriculum.

The framework^{iv} was subjected to widespread consultation and received overwhelming support, largely because it addressed the concerns of all the major lobby groups and their agendas. We had created the Trojan horse that would be the vehicle for effecting significant change.

Step 5: Designing and consulting on the detail

Asking subject specialists to contribute to the framework was the next step. All subjects established how they could contribute, but the problem arose with content. How to relinquish content to make room for subjects such as PSHE,

citizenship and employability? How to translate their aspirations for the framework into tangible, relevant activities that might motivate young people? Also because of the 'non-traditional' status of PSHE, citizenship and employability there was a possibility that these would be sidelined in an overcrowded curriculum.

At this stage the project floundered. A catalyst was needed to identify and defuse the constraints to progression. The chairman and chief executive of CCEA along with a sub-group of the council set up to vet the 'penultimate' proposals, and declared them unsatisfactory. The curriculum was still overcrowded; the purpose of key stage 3 had not been clarified. Something more manageable was required. The council sub-group also demanded that the central purpose of the revised curriculum should be 'preparing young people for life and work' and that the development of the skills and capabilities should become a central thrust of the key stage 3 curriculum and its assessment.

To deliver this a small development group was established to frame up the minimum entitlement proposals across all subject strands, drawing upon the subject working groups' response to the framework. Subject specialists acted as 'consultants' to this process, so subject vested interests were very tightly constrained.

Some subject specialist colleagues were not entirely happy with this process and some may still not be happy with the outcomes. At consultation some subjects embraced the minimum entitlement statements warmly but others expressed concerns that subject integrity and progression may be eroded. The majority of respondents favour flexibility over restriction. The big challenge for the support phase is to demonstrate that curriculum coherence in the form of thematic approaches, as well as skills development, relevance and pupil

motivation can be achieved without compromising the development of subject knowledge and skills.

Step 6: Piloting and implementation

We are now in the process of achieving this by designing and piloting connected thematic approaches that allow single-subject delivery or cross-curricular learning, whichever approach a school decides. We are also working closely with our partner organisations to plan the implementation strategy and train the trainers while at the same time endeavouring to win hearts and minds. The following is an extract from a critique of the Northern Ireland curriculum framework by Dr. John White of the London Institute.^v

The framework imaginatively uses a range of different means to embody the aims in the specifics of curriculum and assessment arrangements. [It also] makes aims and sub-aims statutory and removes statutory status from more detailed items of content.

The traditional subjects are still key building blocks in the whole structure. Art and design, music, English, Irish, geography, history, modern languages, mathematics, science, technology and design and physical education are each separable 'strands' within 'general learning areas' and have their own objectives and learning outcomes. These objectives and outcomes are not defined, as they traditionally are, by intra-subject requirements. They derive from the overall aims – and are, moreover, statutory.

But here the more difficult judgements begin... How acceptable is the proposal when examined in more detail? Has it succeeded in keeping all its elements coherently together? Is it

likely to appeal to the practitioners who have to make it work on the ground?'

The proof of the pudding is on the blue horizon...

Notes

- i Ross, A, *Curriculum construction and critique*, Falmer Press, 2000
- ii Harland, J, et al, *Is the curriculum working?* NFER, 2002
- iii Key messages from the Curriculum 21 conferences and the curriculum monitoring programme, CCEA, Belfast, 1999
- iv See 'Pathways', Proposals for curriculum and assessment at key stage 3, CCEA, Belfast, 2003, www.ccea.org.uk (choose 'Teachers' and select 'Curriculum Review')
- v White, J, et al, A Report on the pathways proposals, unpublished, 2003

Further reading

Bayliss, V, et al; *Opening minds, taking stock*, RSA, 2003.

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