

Curriculum regulation in England – giving with one hand and taking away with the other

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Abstract

England has had a National Curriculum since 1988. Its first manifestation was highly prescriptive and there have been a number of reviews which have gradually reduced the degree of content specification. The recent political rhetoric has been about giving schools and teachers freedom to innovate. Indeed new categories of schools – ‘academies’ and ‘free schools’ – do not have to follow the National Curriculum at all. However while input regulation has been decreasing, output regulation has been increasing, so that schools in England are increasingly saturated by a performativity culture related to examination targets and school inspection frameworks. The paper will argue that a strong reason for this trend is the political desire to commodify education so that schools are subject to the market forces, which is only really practicable when educational outcomes remain relatively visible and readily quantified. The resultant dominant discourse in schools has similar effects as in Scotland on individual teachers and schools, reducing teacher agency and introverting curriculum making processes with secondary schools in particular rarely looking outwards for stimulus or resources. The conclusion will offer some discussion of regional efforts in North England to construct networks and an alternative discourse/ecology to encourage more responsive curriculum processes.

Keywords: Input regulation, output regulation, performativity, marketization, curriculum innovation networks.

Introduction

England first introduced a National Curriculum in 1988. The barrage of early objections was focused on the highly detailed specification of content, termed programmes of study, for each subject. It was also criticised by academic writers because of its uncritical stance over questions of subject content and epistemology, representing outdated versions of subject matter and its lack of coherence (see, for example: Kelly, 1990). Since then there has been a general trend towards less prescription, with reviews of the National Curriculum leading to a reduction of content in 1995, 1999 and 2008. Indeed the current coalition government (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) now argue that they are giving schools far greater freedom as new categories of school (academies and free schools), which already account for over 50% of secondary schools, do not even have to follow the National Curriculum. Why then, if the current government is giving greater curricular freedom, do teachers feel more than ever, that they are under close scrutiny and intense pressure?

1. New measures of control through output regulation and surveillance

The simple answer as to the continued experience of pressure is that while the government has been reducing control of curriculum content, or input regulation, it has been increasing output regulation, via public examination targets, particularly at ages 11 and 16. Although there is a traditional Conservative party philosophy which favours freedom, it has lost out to a neo-liberal free market philosophy, which believes that competition can improve educational outcomes. To make such a philosophy operational there must be information for educational consumers (parents) to make market choices about which schools to send their children to. The chosen metric is examination results, particularly in English and mathematics. This is a very simple measure but successive governments have been unwilling to move away from performance in timed examinations. The objectification of educational outcomes has been accompanied by the proliferation of league tables. Most recently, the Secretary of State for Education has largely eliminated course or project work for inclusion in examination assessment. This approach is allied to a wider doctrine of 'new public management' which has been embraced by all governments in the last 25 years, which has seen public services increasingly managed through the setting of numerical targets. In education, performance in examination is repeatedly referred to as *standards*, and all parties talk of 'driving up standards'. There is a very particular discourse surrounding this commodification of education – and words such as standards, targets, progress, predicted grades, underperforming, monitoring, intervention and Ofsted have come to dominate agendas, policies, conversations and meetings. Ball (2003) adapted the term 'performativity' from Lyotard (1984) and more recently Ball *et al.* (2012, p.514) have explained the term 'performance culture' as follows:

As a policy, *standards* 'works' through a very simple but effective and very public technology of performance – made up of league tables, national averages, comparative and progress indicators, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) assessments and benchmarks. These together are intended to instil into schools what is called a 'performance culture'.

Because of this performance culture, it is argued that teachers in England are the most accountable in the world. There is a specific accountability for pupil performance in public examinations, which is periodically increased. For example in 2012, primary schools were expected to get 60% of their pupils to the 'expected level' in English and mathematics at age 11. In 2014 this will be raised to 65%. If schools consistently fail, regardless of the social background of pupils, they will be forced to become 'academies', a significant change of governance. In secondary schools, in 2012, a basic target was that 40% of students should gain five GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) passes (including English and mathematics) at Grade C or above (the grades run from A*, A, B etc. through to G). In the face of previous targets (which did not include English and mathematics) many schools developed ingenious means for reaching targets, including searching for the exam boards and subjects that seemed to have the best pass rates and using particular vocational courses which provided four GCSE passes. Grades in all GCSE subjects are predicted from pupil scores in tests at age 11 and it is common for pupils to have a test in most subjects every

six weeks, from age 11, to see if they are maintaining progress. If pupils' grades are seen to be dropping, some form of support or intervention is likely to be implemented.

Schools are periodically inspected by Ofsted. There is strong pressure for observed lessons to be graded as *Good* or *Outstanding*. There are very significant rewards for schools if they are judged outstanding in all categories of inspection, including going onto a longer cycle of re-inspection. The criteria for *Outstanding* lessons are used for internal school monitoring and often for departmental and individual teacher self-evaluation. Foucault's (1977) writings on disciplining, surveillance and the development of the technology of the self might indeed have been inspired by the English education system. This is high stakes accountability, as teachers whose students do not meet targets or whose lessons only reach satisfactory grades are likely to be given *support*, which can ultimately lead to dismissal if improvement is not forthcoming. Output regulation is thus an effective, albeit contentious, means of curriculum control in England.

2. Unintended consequences

In such circumstances, the new 'managers' of schools strive to meet their targets and move up the league tables. Increasingly they 'game' the system, expending much energy on focused efforts to improve the key performance indicators and occasionally going so far as cheating in the conduct of public examinations. Certainly there is an epidemic of 'teaching to the test' and considerable narrowing of the curriculum, which has been well documented in the independent Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander et al., 2009). Such approach to public services has been part of an assault on professionals who are seen to want to preserve 'selfish' producer interests.

There are considerable signs of teacher stress. A recent teacher union survey indicated that more than half of teachers described their morale as low or very low. More than 75% of those polled thought that the current government will have a negative effect on education. As the union president explained, teachers don't feel trusted and that government interferes too much. Newly qualified teachers from our own institution are indicating that they are frightened as they go into their first jobs, as they fear that they will not meet the examination targets for their 16 year old pupils in their GCSEs.

In a recent round of interviews, one Modern Foreign Languages teacher told us:

I often feel I am merely teaching to an exam, and there is no time, means or energy left for innovative teaching that engages students in a way other than is assessment-driven.

For many teachers this is experienced as anxiety-inducing pressure, which pervades the school culture. As one primary teacher interviewee in Webb *et al.* (2009, p.417) expressed it:

The head is under pressure to perform, she puts pressure on us, we put pressure on the children and then everyone is just under immense pressure and stress.

However as this extract indicates, teachers are not alone in internalising expectations of performance, it is also evident in students, many of whom

become very instrumental in their approach to education, as shown by this 15 year old pupil who exhibits no desire to continue with a more enquiry based approach to the curriculum:

We're still all in the middle of our GCSEs and we just want you to give us the right answers so we can learn it and I think that's what is stressful for a lot of people. We just want the correct answers so we can go and learn them instead of having to go and find it. (Leat, Thomas & Reid, 2012, p.408).

A Geography teacher, working in a very high achieving secondary school described how even at Year 7 (11 years old) she had actively to encourage many students to “go beyond the basic requirements”, reporting a typical response of “I’ve found this out now, is that it, am I going to get a good grade?”. She was not convinced that their subsequent years at school changed this, suggesting that many sixth formers “just want to pass exams and go to uni”, and as such did not like questions posed which required them to apply rather than “regurgitate” knowledge. This cultural expectation was perhaps reinforced by her line managers’ level of permission for her use of enquiry-based learning (EBL). This teacher stated that although EBL seemed to be supported it was only permissible if it “did not impede the end of unit test” (even at Year 7), as these tests were used to determine target grades and these grades determined ability sets for teaching, and these sets determined GCSE options.

3. Finding compromises and holes to work in

So schools and teachers find themselves in a confusing situation – between a rock and a hard place. On one hand there is increasing curriculum freedom and rhetorical permission to experiment. On the other they are under intense pressure to meet targets. They are trying to sustain a non-dominant activity in the face of a dominant activity (Sannino, 2008). Many, of course, take the line of least resistance and conform to daily school expectation of performativity. Others are driven by a set of values which privileges student curiosity, autonomy, creativity and inter-dependence and they want to offer a more divergent pedagogy. They find ways to deal with these conflicts. Some schools reserve parts of the year for enquiry approaches, others give it prominence until exam pressures demand a different approach, and individual teachers develop novel solutions. In one school if students are meeting targets, then they adopt more divergent approaches.

One teacher described her approach as *mish-mashing*. She wanted to get a good grade from a lesson observation to tick the ‘16 boxes to get outstanding’. So there were objectives on the board and pupils were assessing their own progress and she determined what they were doing, but she set a relatively open task, gave them as much responsibility as possible to work collaborative groups and assign their own roles. This is how she currently manages what she describes as her internal conflict.

Conclusion: Building a Dialogic Web

Since 2009 the author and colleagues, building on previous projects focused on thinking skills, metacognition (Leat & Lin, 2006) and learning to learn (Wall et al., 2010) have been supporting teachers and schools in developing elements of enquiry or project based curriculum (EBC). Such approaches have

diverse roots which include Philosophy for Children (Lipman et al., 1980) Mantle of the Expert (a drama based enquiry model), subject based enquiry (as in science or geography) and project based learning models developed at High Tech High in San Diego, California. Our general goal is to encourage schools to embed their innovation as a sustained curriculum manifestation. This is in line with an ecological understanding of teacher agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, Priestley et al., 2012). We can evidence our commitment through activities such as:

- Publication of the 10 issue a year Learning and Teaching Update featuring many EBL articles;
- Conferences on EBC in 2012 and 2013;
- An email list distributing EBL contacts, news and resources (e.g. updates on research funding, a Royal Society of the Arts publication on Area Based Curriculum);
- A Post Graduate Certificate in Innovative Pedagogy and Curriculum featuring EBL;
- A pilot project to explore how Skype mediators (grannies) can support EBL;
- A pilot project exploring the use of Self Organised Learning Environments for student enquiry;
- Supporting other university outreach personnel to adopt EBL approaches and aim for sustained curriculum change (the approach now adopted by the university's *Dove Marine Laboratory*);
- Working in partnership with local archive and museum service in support of their development of a student-led enquiry based approach in schools' use of local galleries and archives;
- A publication of short accounts of EBL exemplars from schools and enrichment providers;
- Working with Schools North East, the local headteachers' organization to harmonise our respective innovations in terms of local curriculum making;
- Recruiting schools to funded research projects with a focus on community curriculum making.

The long term purpose in this activity is to build a dialogic web. In such an entity some schools and teachers, at least, will hear an alternative curriculum discourse. They will hear voices describing, explaining and justifying a curriculum which is derived, in part from students' questions, interests and curiosity and which taps into the community's funds of knowledge, as a counterweight to the dominant curriculum discourse. In dialogic theory the internalization of those voices, even when they are competing and the very existence of *multi-voicedness* is vital for creativity, identity development and healthy social functioning (Sidorkin, 1999).

Such a conceptualization has interesting overlaps with Hodgson and Spours (2013) argument for the significance of local eco-systems which offer meaningful progression for young people in relation to employment and training. The next steps in the region are to build a stronger coalition with employers'

organizations and to secure wider awareness within the university of the potential benefits of EBC to widening participation. English universities now have targets to reach in relation to the % of students recruited and retained from poorer backgrounds and there are encouraging signs that EBL does foster positive learner identities. We have a number of valuable allies who understand the transition from EBL to understanding a research paradigm, but much remains to be done. What will be intriguing is how the advocates of EBC manage the role of subjects, given the strong advocacy for powerful subject knowledge and disciplinarity (Young & Muller, 2010).

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