

# School based curriculum development through Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry

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## Introduction

The imminent publication of the refreshed narrative for Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (Scottish Government Sept.2019) offers new possibilities to schools in shaping their provision. CfE remains in many schools, in the words of the OECD's Andreas Schleicher, an intended rather than an implemented curriculum, and there remains much work to be done to fully enact its principles. This is especially true of the Broad General Education (BGE) phase, which is under-developed in many schools. The new narrative, along with recent work to produce curricular rationales provides a stimulus to revisit the original principles of CfE. It is structured around why questions, what questions and how questions, providing a process for engaging with CfE that has arguably been missing to date. It acts as a single point of entry to the relevant guidance.

The proposed professional learning programme, to be launched on 29 November is designed to facilitate engagement with CfE via the narrative, utilising a methodology, Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry (CCPE), which has been successfully developed elsewhere in Scotland and in Wales. It will bring together practitioners from schools in Clackmannanshire, and the ASN service, and will build upon a previous project involving small numbers of teachers in the authority. These teachers will act as facilitators, leading critical collaborative professional enquiries to develop the curriculum (including pedagogy and assessment).

The purpose of this short paper is to outline this approach, school based curriculum development through Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry (CCPE)<sup>1</sup>. The first section explores some conceptual issues that need to be addressed as a precursor to undertaking CCPE. The second section sets out a generic process for developing the curriculum from the big ideas and outlines the methodology of CCPE in more fine-grained detail (although we emphasise here that this paper should serve as a brief introduction to – or outline of – CCPE, and should not be seen as a substitute for undertaking the process itself).

## Curriculum development – some conceptual issues

Some thinking about the concept 'curriculum' – what it means, how it functions in different fields of practice, what educational practices relate to it – is necessary as a precursor to undertaking curriculum development. In recent years, a rather narrow conception of curriculum has taken root. This is a view of curriculum as a set of items of content to be taught, often expressed as assessable outcomes and linked to accountability practices. This has been accompanied by the widespread use

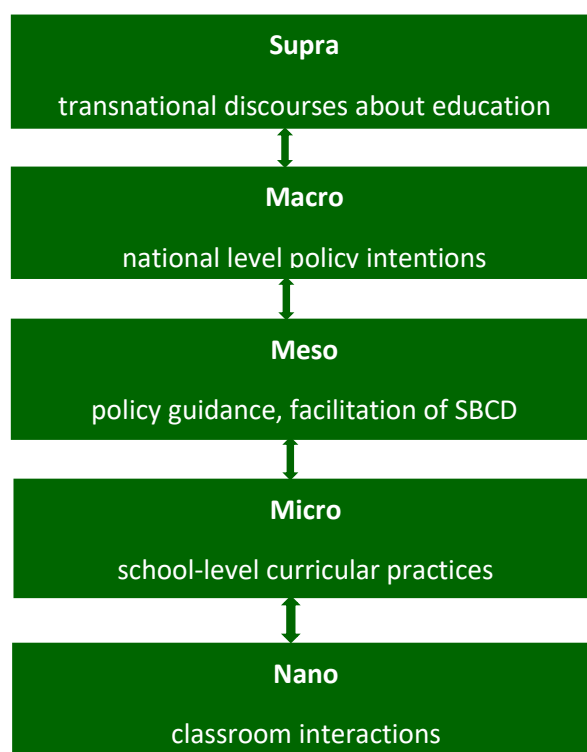
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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of CCPE and the research associated with its development, see: Drew, Priestley & Michael, 2016; Priestley & Drew, 2019.

of the 'delivery' metaphor<sup>2</sup>. In such a view, curriculum becomes little more than a product, developed by policymakers and uncritically delivered by practitioners. Such thinking is inadequate for a number of reasons, not least because it fails to take account of the complex social processes in play as teachers translate policy into practice. These problems are amplified when one is developing a curriculum such as CfE, in that these curricula are set out differently as frameworks to guide educational practice, rather than as prescriptive recipes to be followed to the letter. It is therefore no surprise that teachers in countries such as Scotland, when faced with the new curriculum and when applying old thinking, have routinely called for further detail – the refrain 'just tell us what to teach' has been common<sup>3</sup>. The following conceptual issues are useful to explore in schools.

### Curricular strata

Curriculum is a multi-layered set of practices, and these practices operate differently at different layers of the system. The following conceptual map<sup>4</sup> is helpful here.



This sort of thinking is helpful, because it enables us to see that there are different practices and different functions within each layer, and because it ultimately helps us to develop clarity about what is involved in developing the curriculum in schools. Thus, the present function of the macro-level is to set out in broad terms the vision for the curriculum, its big ideas (principles, purposes and values) and to outline the sorts of resources and processes available to schools to develop these into practice. This means that CfE is not a set of instructions to be implemented, but instead it is a set of resources and ideas to be realised (to quote Graham Donaldson in relation to the new Welsh

<sup>2</sup> For further comment on this issue, see: <https://mripriestley.wordpress.com/2013/04/15/milkmen-or-educators-cfe-and-the-language-of-delivery/>

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the experiences of Scotland's teachers and the development of Curriculum for Excellence, see: Priestley & Minty, 2013

<sup>4</sup> The Dutch publication, *Curriculum in Development*, provides an accessible introduction to curriculum theory. See Thijs & van den Akker, 2009.

curriculum) or enacted in practice. The clear implication here is that it should not be the role of government to micro-manage curriculum development, and schools should not expect increasingly specified instructions for practice.

This raises important questions about support for curriculum development. The meso-level is important here, as schools do not necessarily have the resources or capacity to develop the curriculum; nor is it reasonable to expect each school to reinvent the wheel. Meso-level support may be available in various forms, for example:

- The production of additional guidance for curriculum development.
- The promulgation of curriculum development projects, where resources are pooled and course materials developed for use in schools.
- Leadership of practitioner enquiry and curriculum development in schools.

The new Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) have potential to provide meso-level structures that fulfil these and other support functions.

Finally, this stratified view of curriculum emphasises the importance of viewing curriculum as something that is developed in schools by teachers. A curriculum does not happen until it is translated from the principles outlined in policy into practice, and this can only be achieved in schools. This requires teachers to understand the principles set out in policy, and it requires teachers to develop practices that are fit for purposes; otherwise, the danger of superficial enactment of the new curriculum is very real. We shall say more about this later in the paper.

### A holistic view of curriculum

A further implication of the directions outlined is that we need to take a holistic view of the curriculum practices developed in schools. Curriculum has traditionally been seen as comprising three message systems: curriculum (content), assessment and pedagogy. We add a fourth dimension to this, namely provision.

- **Content.** Modern curricula such as CfE have been criticised for privileging skills and downgrading knowledge<sup>5</sup>. The policies have been criticised for failing to make explicit the importance of knowledge/content. The framing of many of these curricula around detailed lists of learning outcomes (often merely audited and ticked off in schools) has led to a narrowing of curricular content in many cases<sup>6</sup>. School-based curriculum development should account for questions around knowledge. What knowledge is valuable or powerful for young people if they are to become critically engaged citizens in a modern democracy? What knowledge should be acquired by an educated person? How do we determine what knowledge is relevant (and not just interesting and motivating)?
- **Pedagogy.** As well as addressing questions around knowledge, school-based curriculum development should also address questions about method. If part of becoming educated is to develop skills and dispositions, then it is important that teachers give due consideration to how pedagogy is fit for purpose, and how they structure classroom experiences to

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of these arguments, see Priestley & Sinnema, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Work by Barbara Ormond in New Zealand highlights how some schools are teaching the Vietnam War without mentioning the role of the USA. This is possible because the generic learning outcome in question simply specifies that students should understand cause and consequence around a significant event – typically selected from the early part of the war before the American involvement. This curriculum is thus an ‘inch wide and a mile deep’. There are clearly questions here about what knowledge is of most worth, and how we ensure that the curriculum remains balanced and broad.

provide a rich and purposeful learning environment. One-size-fits-all solutions and off the shelf packages can be unhelpful. Effective pedagogy will be varied and fit-for-purpose, and will invariably include progressive student centred approaches as well as more traditional didactic methods.

- **Assessment.** Assessment has had a bad press in recent years, as it has come to drive learning, often in quite instrumental ways. Nevertheless, assessment is a vital part of classroom practice. Good assessment should be embedded in classroom teaching, fulfilling multiple functions – summative, formative and evaluative – and more often than not is informal, occurring through classroom dialogue. Curriculum development should take account of assessment by building in assessment opportunities at the planning stage.
- **Provision.** This is the area often neglected during school-based curriculum development. There are several issues to account for, particularly in secondary schools, notably timetabling and the organisation of subjects. Experience in Scotland suggests that many secondary schools have struggled with the pedagogy for the new curriculum because they have not addressed these issues<sup>7</sup>. The standard secondary school timetable is problematic because it does not easily allow for approaches such as cooperative learning and other active approaches (e.g. field trips). Related to this are questions about how we structure the division of the corpus of knowledge into teachable chunks. The traditional subjects taught in schools in the UK tend to encourage a fragmented school week, and do not easily allow for content to be updated. Where for example is the space to teaching sociological knowledge about society, or knowledge about the political system? The UK tends to be out of step with the rest of the world in this respect; elsewhere integrated subjects (e.g. social studies) are more common, as well as creative inter-disciplinary approaches such as Queensland's rich task model<sup>8</sup>.

## A process for curriculum development

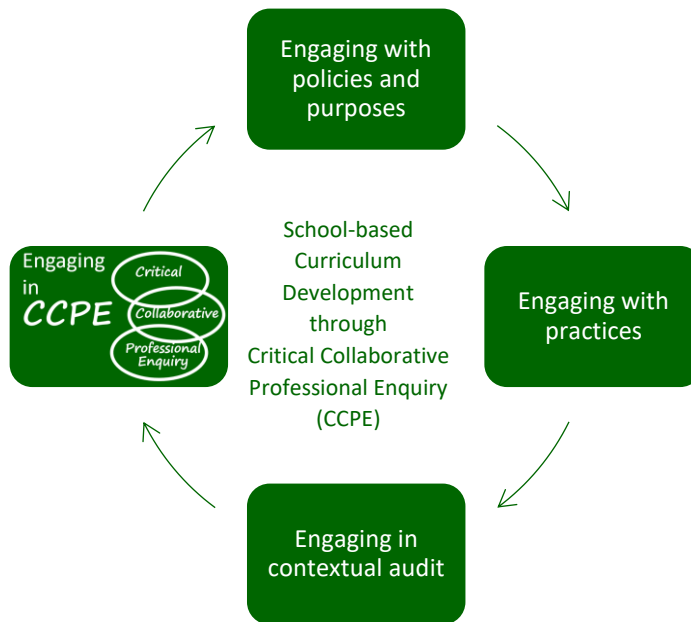
An important part of curriculum development is making sense of the curriculum – a step that is often neglected. This is an important phase, as the new curriculum is qualitatively different to its predecessor – different terminology, different concepts, and different principles. Clarity of purpose is vital as a precursor to purposeful curriculum development. School-based curriculum development through CCPE takes teachers and leaders through a process of making sense of the new ideas, and developing fit for purpose practices, before then undertaking school-based enquiries with colleagues. This methodology<sup>9</sup> undertakes the following process.

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<sup>7</sup> Very few schools in Scotland changed timetables in response to CfE. One school moved to a 20 period week. The long periods allowed field trips to be undertaken locally, with pupils back in time for the next lesson

<sup>8</sup> See [www.acsa.edu.au/pages/images/2001\\_new\\_basics\\_qld\\_trials\\_a\\_curriculum.rtf.doc](http://www.acsa.edu.au/pages/images/2001_new_basics_qld_trials_a_curriculum.rtf.doc)

<sup>9</sup> Further detail, including results of empirical research about the programme, can be found in the following publications: Drew, Priestley & Michael, 2019; Priestley & Drew, 2016.



#### A conceptual phase

- Engaging with purposes
  - **Exploration of the big ideas of the curriculum:** the four capacities and principles of CfE; educational values, the big question ‘what are schools for?’
- Engaging with practices
  - **Identification of fit for purpose practices:** what will such practices look like in terms of knowledge/content, pedagogy, assessment and provision.
- Engaging in contextual audit
  - **Consideration of current practices and of barriers to and drivers of change:** what are barriers and drivers to what we wish to do, and how do we address them?

#### A conceptual/practice-based phase

- Engaging in practice
  - **Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry:** the systematic development and evaluation of an interruption to existing practices.

The practice-based phase engages participants in a systematic process of Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry (CCPE). This methodology embraces a number of distinctive elements:

1. criticality, which encompasses attention to critical questions that promote social justice and equity as well as critical engagement with policies, research and practices;
2. collaboration, which denotes the collective nature of the endeavour; the importance of professional judgment in challenging assumptions;
3. and, the use of the term ‘enquiry’ rather than ‘research’, to avoid conflation with the role of the professional researcher, whose prime responsibility may be considered to be predominantly focused on reporting the outcomes of research, whereas a ‘practitioner’ researcher’s key responsibility is on improving outcomes for their student and colleagues..

The Stirling model of CCPE comprises three phases: focusing, interrupting and sense-making. During the first phase participants identify an area of interest, intrigue or concern drawn from the overlapping elements of content, pedagogy, assessment and provision to develop as the focus of their enquiry. This involves engaging critically with ideas in academic reading and research to devise a conceptual framework to inform the enquiry and develop a plan to interrupt and change existing practices.

In the second phase of CCPE participants work collaboratively to interrupt existing practices though enacting the plan devised in phase one. During this period the participants engage in systematic generation of empirical data to evidence potential impact on process and outcomes.

The CCPE culminates in the sense-making phase as participants work together to critically analyse data and interpret evidence to evaluate the impact of their work on outcomes for children, young people and those involved in carrying out the enquiry. At this stage the participants may modify their conceptual framework in light of their analysis as they prepare to disseminate their findings to others across the education community.

## Outcomes

Research in Scotland indicates that this approach has exerted a powerful effect on participating teachers and schools (Drew, Priestley and Michael, 2016). In turn, this opened up new ways of working in school, through CCPE with the potential for enhanced practice and outcomes for children. We found significant evidence of enhanced understandings of the new curriculum. Enhanced understandings were seen in relation to three main areas: first, participating teachers appeared to have a better grasp than previously of the core aims and principles of the new curriculum; second, participants developed better understanding of the potential links between purposes and practices; third, there was an increased familiarity with related and relevant concepts such as metacognition. Enhanced understandings of the substantive conceptual issues, related to the curriculum and its development, were manifestly accompanied by enhanced understandings of processes for school-based curriculum development; this includes a deeper familiarity with the principles and practices of CCPE and its potential contribution to school-based curriculum development, as well as new knowledge of appropriate models for curriculum development. Accompanying this better knowledge and understanding of professional principles and processes has been increased confidence exhibited by many of the participants.

Enhanced understanding and increased confidence have led to the emergence of more tangible outcomes. The project has stimulated the development of new and innovative pedagogical practices (in response to the demands of the new curriculum) which had not previously been considered. There is emerging evidence that this programme has improved the sustainability of innovation in some of the schools, and also that participating teachers have affected the cultures of their schools, introducing more democratic practices than previously. The programme facilitated collaborative working for all involved –teachers, leaders and researchers – and emphasised the importance of professional dialogue. This in turn has provided opportunities for developing leadership skills, and affected working practices across the participating schools.

Finally, the research illuminates how developing criticality and engaging in academic reading challenge and interrupt current perspectives; how they open up new ways of thinking, generating the ability to more readily consider multiple possibilities; and how they help to develop new conceptual frameworks to inform new ways of working.

## Further reading

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