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OP-ED

Curriculum change and the post-modern world: is the school curriculum-reform movement an anachronism?

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When visiting friends and watching the activity in their chookhouse,[1] I was reminded of the chaos currently occurring in the light of a proposed curriculum change in Australian schools (Lingard *et al*. 2000). With no disrespect to educators or teachers in the schools, or to the curriculum theorists who informed the innovation, it seemed that this particular curriculum innovation was being lobbed onto schools, whereupon the principal, that is the rooster, and teachers, that is the chickens, went into a flurry of activity. However, like the modernist schooling system in which entrenched knowledge and practices often override the innovative ideal (Eisner 2000), the chookhouse quickly returned to its normal routine. Despite the extensive knowledge and experience that curricularists seemingly have with respect to implementing meaningful curriculum change, the goals and processes of change are narrowly proscribed by existing structures, resources and traditions, with the result that schools always fall short of meeting the needs of young people and their communities.

Furthermore, in response to the 'crisis' in schooling and curriculum reform, recent debates surrounding curriculum studies, theorizing and reform have been highly critical, using such descriptors as 'disarray', 'blind', 'floundering', 'failure' and 'schism' (Reid 1998, Hlebowitsh 1999, McGinn 1999, Westbury 1999). Some (e.g. Wraga 1999) assert that curriculum is fraught with oppositional discourses, the fragmentation of interests and the separation of concerns into theory and practice. A 'solution' for the latter is for curriculum work to be grounded in deliberative knowing and practical action (Hlebowitsh 1999, Henderson 2000). Others see the future as somewhat exciting, given the complex

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competing and conflicting narratives and the opportunities that can arise from the 'search for a more sophisticated, analytical, and perhaps managerial understanding of schooling and of the curriculum ...' (Westbury 1999: 358–359).

I contend that curricularists should look in other directions rather than continue to be occupied with increasingly anachronistic reform projects. With this argument in mind, in the first section of this paper I examine curriculum-reform strategies and theories, drawing specific examples from physical education (PE). I argue that the ways in which curricularists continue to drive curriculum-reform projects take little account of several significant post-modern phenomena. Where, what, how, and which young people learn seems to have been overlooked in the curriculum-reform movement. In the second section, I suggest that any curriculum change with the aim of managed, systemic, school-based and partnership-driven curriculum reform is an anachronism. Cohesive, controlled and shared curriculum changes across, or even within, schools are modernist projects—as are schools themselves—marginal to young people's learning as we move further towards or into post-modernity.

Approaches to curriculum reform

> The design and execution of education reforms ... provide an opportunity for radical breakthroughs in understanding, for giant leaps in learning (McGinn 1999: 7).

The pursuit of education reform has a long history. Reform is normal, widespread, constant, and optimistic. Yet, underpinning curriculum reform is a contest over what is chosen, by what processes, by whom, with what intent, and with what result. Struggles over curriculum and its management are, in a sense, struggles over what education is for, and whose knowledge is of most worth—learners', parents', teachers', or curriculum authorities'? Curriculum reform, sponsored by well-meaning educational authorities, whose views are framed and constrained by modernist schooling structures, often fails to account for the voices of young people (Brooker and Macdonald 1998). The following three models of curriculum change and reform, drawing upon examples from PE, represent differing attempts by powerful groups to impact upon what and how students learn in schools.

Top-down

Attempts at curriculum reform in North America and the UK during the 1960s and early 1970s led to the development of the so-called 'teacher-proof' curriculum package as a central component of reform. As the term 'teacher-proof' suggests, the intent was to minimize the teacher's influence on curriculum reform by developing a tight relationship among educational objectives, curriculum content, and assessment instruments—all packaged

in a set of curriculum materials or texts produced by specialized curriculum writers removed from the school. In this context, the educational purposes of the school, and the teacher, were to play a subsidiary role to those of educational administrators and their discipline-based curriculum writers: the goal was the achievement of high levels of fidelity between the conception and practice of curriculum reform. Questions of curriculum change became focused upon managing the diffusion and uptake process.

The top-down model of curriculum reform continues to be employed in PE. In France, for example, the PE curriculum is shaped by official texts prepared by *Groupe Technique Disciplinaire*, composed of education officials, teachers, academics, and other key stakeholders. The PE syllabus prescribes the range of activities, the time allocation, and the assessment for all French students who are heading towards a common baccalaureate (Amande-Escot 1997). Similarly, the national curriculum exercise in England and Wales has also reflected a somewhat centralized approach to curriculum change with the explicit aim of having a codified curriculum produce a new (and cohesive) social order reflective of dominant groups.[2] Penney and Evans (1999) have documented how the largely centralized production of legally binding, 'official' national texts has resulted in the resurgence of competitive games and sport in the PE curriculum, despite widespread contestation.

Bottom-up

Research on curriculum development during the 1970s and early 1980s revealed the difficulty in achieving the goals of top-down teacher-proof curriculum packages. Curriculum innovations were invariably transformed between conception and implementation, and local forces, including the teacher and the school environment, played a key role in the apparent 'slippage' between conception and practice. Innovations failed to account for the temporal, social, economic, and cultural factors that delimit and steer the possibilities for change in specific contexts (Kirk 1988).

To improve the 'fidelity' of innovations, curriculum researchers began to advocate the central role of teachers in curriculum reform and the need for teachers to 'own' aspects of the changes that were sought. In late 1970s and the 1980s, the emergence of new approaches to curriculum reform, such as school-based curriculum development (SBCD) and action research—both particularly influential in Australia—began to consolidate a trend towards locating schools and teachers at the centre of curriculum-reform efforts. For some advocates, SBCD represented a democratization of curriculum development, in which the 'real experts'—teachers—were justly given control of curriculum development (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988).

However, what occurred in many Australian states and in the USA were less demanding, poorly resourced and loosely assessed curricula. The consequences for PE were the loss of systemic attention and support (e.g. Vickers 1992). Where localized programmes in PE have received attention,

many have been concerned with physical activity instruction that falls outside the formal school curriculum, such as those programmes working with 'at risk' young people (e.g. Hellison *et al.* 2000) or strategies to engage specific populations such as girls.

Partnerships

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, research, critique, and re-assessment of school-based strategies for change acted as a corrective to the extreme manifestations of the 'bottom-up' notion of curriculum reform. Critics of school-based curriculum reform drew attention to the problematic nature of the teacher's role as the change agent. Studies of teacher-initiated innovation reported that, even in this context, 'slippage' occurred between the formal doctrine of the innovation and its practice (Fullan 1999). Advocates of action research re-assessed the possibilities for this strategy to change schools (Tinning *et al.* 1996).

Consequently, a new model of curriculum reform involved collaborative relationships between administrators, curriculum developers, professional associations, researchers, teacher educators, teachers, and parents, 'partnerships'. Such partnerships, in Fullan's (1999: 61) terms, involve 'across-boundary collaboration'. Ennis (1999), for example, has described a US peace-education curriculum initiative, 'Sport for peace', jointly led by district education officers, community groups, teachers, academics/researchers, and, notably, students. The features of this change model include collaboration across schools, teacher professional development, community and student input to meet local needs, and systematic data collection, monitoring, and revision. Partnership projects have tried to reform the health and PE curriculum at national and state levels in Australia in a similar way (Kirk and Macdonald 2001).[3]

However, Fullan (1999) and others (McGinn 1999, Adams 2000) offer the 'lessons' that curriculum change is multi-dimensional, messy, and trying, shaped by local contexts, should include classroom teachers, and is most effective when *both* top-down and bottom-up partnerships are employed. When reform fails, critics often blame 'resistance' (most often by teachers), 'incorrect' implementation, bad design and the generation of unanticipated outcomes. They rarely question their own assumptions about schools, schooling, learning, and young people.

Thus, the above-mentioned models and lessons are framed by a fairly rigid set of assumptions grounded in the modernist education system (Miller 2000). In other words, the curriculum-reform problem is set within a vision of schooling that:

- is highly regulated in terms of time and space,
- views knowledge as rational, linear and arranged in separate and distinctive bundles,
- views students as consumers of the official school curriculum, and
- aims for a regulated, democratic and egalitarian social order (Leistyna *et al.* 1996).

Contemporary policies around curriculum change carries assumptions of linearity, control, identifiable outcomes and well-articulated plans, be they at the teacher, subject, school, or systemic level.

Curriculum change and the post-modern world

Modernist curriculum reform, whether it be 'top-down', 'bottom-up', or 'partnership', has been concerned with directed, purposive, systematic, and intentional change. Even where contemporary theoretical frameworks, such as identity theory (Apple 1999) or pedagogic discourse (Bernstein 1996), have been employed to inform curriculum change, they have been employed with a particular view of schooling, learning, and young people that is essentially modernist. However, such understandings fail dramatically to take into account the contemporary conditions of high modernity as defined by Giddens (1991), or indeed those of a post-modern world.

Here, post-modernity is understood to focus on difference and diversity, recognize shifts in time, space and boundaries, and position the self as socially and historically constructed. I understand that educators should be circumspect in engaging wholeheartedly with post-modern discourses. McLaren and Farahmandpur (2000), for example, argue that post-modernist position is 'hyper-individualistic', with an overemphasis on identity politics, consumerism, pluralism, and choice, and has lost sight of the reproductive power/constraints of capitalism. However, in arguing that post-modernism may be not much more than 'an obfuscating label' (Barrow 1999: 415) or 'theoretical chic' (McLaren and Farahmandpur 2000: 28), McLaren and Farahmandpur go on to acknowledge that post-modernists have drawn attention to circuits of power, the globalization of knowledge and culture, and how schooling is cultural work that, until recently, has been understood through universal narratives that have tended to be masculinist and heteronormative.

Following this position, a post-modern curriculum may be viewed as:

- moving towards an open system with constant flux and complex interactions;
- requiring interactive and holistic frameworks for learning, with students becoming knowledge-producers rather than knowledge-consumers. As Doll (1989: 250) writes, 'A post-modern curriculum will accept the student's ability to organize, construct and structure, and will emphasize this ability as a focal point in the curriculum'; and
- transformative rather than incremental with respect to change. Such change requires errors, chaos and uncertainty through the actions of the learners, and should bypass bureaucratic control that operates in oppressive ways.

What follows are four inter-related commentaries that further develop the notion of a post-modern curriculum and, thereby, critique the curriculum-reform movement. My specific claim is that current PE

curriculum reform, although structured around genuine partnerships, is marginal to young people's future learning.

Death of the subject

It is an interesting time for disciplinary knowledge and its representations in school subjects. What are the boundaries/limits of a discipline? How can the disciplinary knowledge be applied for greater relevance? The structure of the disciplines in universities and their translation into school subjects 'triumphed' in the 1960s. Educational philosophers suggested that valid forms and fields of knowledge arise from intellectual disciplines created and systematically defined by scholars in the primary field, often scholars working in universities, and then translated for use as school subjects. However, as Goodson (1988: 177) suggests, contemporary curriculum documents are no longer stories of 'the translation of an academic discipline, devised by (''dominant'') groups of scholars in universities, into a pedagogic version to be used as a school subject'. Bernstein (1996) suggests that the reconfigurations of disciplinary knowledge have occurred recently, and continue to occur, in line with rapid growth in new and varied *applications* of knowledge. Worldwide, educators are seeing the clustering of subject matter into learning areas that extend beyond subjects. In Australia and New Zealand, this clustering has tended to extend as far as the creation of 'key learning areas'—where PE sits alongside health education, outdoor education, home economics, and religious education, under the umbrella of health and PE (Macdonald and Glover 1997).

As a result, debate has shifted to the value of traditional disciplines, the ways in which disciplines shape school subjects and the value of having school subjects at all. The middle-school literature exploring the needs of 9–15-year-olds has also challenged the extent to which disciplinary knowledge meets the needs of young people. Yet, most PE curriculum-reform projects have retained a strong subject, if not learning area, focus. The institutionalization of knowledge via disciplines and subjects limits the possibilities for freedom or autonomy for teachers and students and the possibility of making meaningful connections across schooling. For example, in the Australian state of Queensland there is currently the trial of 'new basics', new ways of prioritizing and organizing interdisciplinary learning that move beyond the subject. These new basics are 'life-pathways and social futures', 'multiliteracies and communications media', 'active citizenship', and 'environments and technology' (Education Queensland 2000). These are akin to the knowledge and skills Young (1998) refers to as a curriculum of the future that requires connectivity across subject matter in order to produce well-rounded and technologically literate learners with economic, political, cultural, and sociological understandings. Where does subject-based reform fit within such new ways of thinking about the organization of knowledge?

Taking equity seriously

If the role of a school as a modernist project is to assist *all* students to reach their individual potentials, it has patently failed. Curriculum reforms directed towards schools and teachers have failed to override the influences of what students bring to the school—their neighbourhood, socio-economic status, gender, and ethnicity. Schooling, and, thereby, the school curriculum, is generally reproductive. It is active in reproducing the economic and cultural imbalances upon which a society is built (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 1977). Although having points of disagreement, both Bourdieu (1974) and Bernstein (1996) have analysed cultural reproduction and the ways in which particular cultural capitals based upon language, values, comportment, etc. 'combine to determine behaviour in school and the attitude to school which make up the differential principle of elimination operating for children of different social classes' (Bourdieu 1974: 35).

With the school as a bounded sphere of learning failing so many children, educators need to recruit and recognize new spaces and places for learning that are effective and engaging, but are beyond formal curriculum planning and reform projects.

> If the school curriculum is to become an emancipatory experience for a much larger section of each cohort of students, this is going to require much greater involvement of many people who currently have no direct links with school, including parents and employers, and many activities by teachers and pupils which are not confined to the school nor, in conventional terms, are usually defined as 'educational' at all (Young 1998: 32).

This sentiment has also been expressed in much of the recent work of Lawson (e.g. 1998), who is arguing for attention to shift from the formal curriculum delivered by specialist teachers to how coalitions of professionals and community members can become available to young people to enhance their learning. Curriculum-reform projects must broaden their sights with respect to who might constitute a partner, and must look to where and how new spaces and places for learning might be created.

Young people, identity and the consumer curriculum

There are many cultural identities in any one space, such as a school system or school. This has profound implications when curriculum-builders are asked to select a set of cultural attributes, knowledge, meanings, values, and skills for conscious transmission through the planned curriculum. At times, this selection reflects cost-effectiveness, they buy in 'pre-packaged American software' (Gough 2000: 235). At others, selection becomes simply privatization, with profit-making companies taking over school districts (Reid 1998). Although making a selection and shaping it into a curriculum that suits the heterogeneity of young people is highly contentious, if not impossible, curriculum-makers continue to do so, as seen with PE in the UK (Penney and Evans 1999).

Furthermore, what it means to be a school student is being reinvented through the interests of corporate capital. 'As culture becomes increasingly commercialized, the only type of citizenship that adult society offers to children is that of consumerism' (Giroux 2000: 19). Young people's interaction with the curriculum is becoming like that of a consumer and a product (Wright and Macdonald in press). For many young people their preferred engagement with physical activity outside school is at odds with what the formal school curriculum offers. As they become increasingly impatient of curricula that are deemed irrelevant, and aware of varied pathways and places for learning, as critical consumers they can bypass pre-selected, given, and inert curriculum and seek alternatives. In doing so, curriculum artifacts of synthetic states or nation-states 'that seek to construct uniform social identities' are redundant (Ross 2000: 89).

Global technology and free-range learning

As I have already suggested, young people have a lifestyle and mindset that enables them to access much of their learning outside school. The information revolution and the public pedagogies that this entails 'must be engaged seriously as knowledge-producing technologies and spheres that demand new types of learning and critical skills from both young people and adults' (Giroux 2000: 30). In cyberspace, the learner is 'free' within the constraints of corporatized technologies to explore haphazardly without boundaries and prescribed directions, and take on many and varied identities. Global media and technologies give many young people access to ideas and opportunities for engaging forms of physical activity outside their substantive culture. Reid (1998: 501) suggests that 'materials and means to construct personal projects of education and communication will be available ... to all of us'; yet, much curriculum reform narrowly focuses upon the school as the only site of meaningful learning.

Kurzweil (1999), who has been employed as a consultant to some of the world's largest technology companies, has plotted the shifts in education he sees running parallel with shifts in technology. By the year 2030, he predicts that human learning will be 'primarily accomplished using virtual teachers and ... enhanced by widely available neural implants' (p. 221). Although neural implants may seem far-fetched, Kurzweil's work underscores the rapid and inexorable expansion of learning technologies that must be accounted for when considering curriculum futures. More specifically, given the focus on the body and embodiment in modernist PE, the potential attraction of students to the 'body-less' world of learning in cyberspace should be central to how physical educators think about their subject's content and pedagogy, and what it means to be physically educated.

Conclusion

'To talk about the future of curriculum is risky' (Morris 2000: 5), but such talk is necessary if curriculum workers are to attend to questions of relevance, inclusion, and choice with respect to young people's learning. While the literature in the curriculum field recognizes the difficulty in creating meaningful curriculum change within current school structures, the majority of innovations and analyses are blind to the bigger and more significant questions surrounding change: Who are the young people in schools? and What, where and how do they learn? If curriculum reform continues to focus upon subjects, teachers, school-based lessons, and other modernist structures of schools that obfuscate difference, meaningful learning and the impact of technology, the reform movement will become more irrelevant to the lives of young people. 'Blind', 'floundering', and 'failure' will be apt.

Notes

1. A 'chookhouse' is an Australian expression for a poultry shed or chicken run, typically a crude structure of tin sheeting and wire.
2. The Chief Executive of the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority for England and Wales declared that 'the culture and traditions of Britain should be at the core [of the National Curriculum]. Seen in this light, the central role of British history, Christianity, and the English literary heritage are axiomatic' (Tate, in Ross 2000: 11).
3. Although extensive and genuine partnerships may be successful through bringing together a range of stakeholders who each have an interest in the nature of change in schools, few partnerships seem to account for the cultures and perspectives of young people.

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