

The Nature of Professionalism in the Context of Curriculum for Excellence

Introduction

Teaching in Scotland is currently undergoing an upheaval. Having recently adjusted to a new working agreement, Scottish teachers are now facing a period of considerable curriculum reform. The aim of this essay is to critically examine the potential impact of Curriculum for Excellence upon teaching as a profession. However, before proceeding with this examination it is necessary to outline what Curriculum for Excellence is and to justify its importance.

The content of lessons in primary schools and the first two years of secondary school are currently guided by the recommendations of the 5 to 14 National Guidelines on teaching and assessment. These guidelines have been developed by Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) and published as five broad curricular areas, with the science curriculum incorporated into the Environmental Studies area (LTS, 2000). The content and assessment of the curriculum in the remaining secondary years has been primarily directed by the arrangements documents produced by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

A review of the curriculum has been underway since 2004 by LTS in conjunction with the Scottish Government, SQA and HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIe). The product of this review is a new curriculum, which will eventually apply to Scottish pupils from the ages of three to eighteen. This Curriculum for Excellence has a much wider scope than the National Guidelines it replaces and aims to:

- *focus classroom practice upon the child and around the four capacities of education:*
 - *successful learners*
 - *confident individuals*
 - *responsible citizens*
 - *effective contributors*
- *simplify and prioritise the current curriculum*
- *encourage more learning through experiences*
- *create a single framework for the curriculum and assessment 3-18.*

From Curriculum for Excellence Website (LTS, 2008a)

Crucially, this new curriculum is expanding beyond the confines of recommended lesson content and into how Scottish children should be taught. Through this reform, teachers will be expected to deliver less content, however they will be expected to improve the understanding of what is being taught by considering their learning and teaching approaches:

The intention is to alter the balance between a process that is heavily dependent on content, and learning and teaching approaches that improve pupils' understanding of what is being taught. This is not a one-off change but the start of a continuous process of review to ensure that the curriculum remains up to date.

From Curriculum for Excellence Website (LTS, 2008a)

An examination of the suggested learning and teaching approaches outlined in the Curriculum for Excellence documents suggests that the theory driving this initiative is something close to social constructivism. There is an emphasis on active learning, enquiry & thinking skills, relevant contexts, collaborative thinking, discussion and an understanding of the big picture.

Effective learning and teaching in science depends upon the skilful use of varied approaches, including:

- *active learning and planned, purposeful play*
- *development of problem solving skills*
- *development of scientific enquiry and thinking skills*
- *use of relevant contexts, familiar to young people's experiences*
- *appropriate and effective use of technology*
- *building on the principles of Assessment is for Learning*
- *collaborative and independent thinking*
- *more emphasis on children explaining their understanding of concepts, informed discussion and communication.*

LTS, Engagement process: Science experiences and outcomes (2008b)

Many of these approaches correlate with the principles of constructivism. Brooks & Brooks put forward five guiding principles of constructivism. These principles include posing problems of relevance, structuring learning around primary concepts and seeking & valuing students' points of view (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). These similarities suggest to me that the authors of the Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes intend to move teaching in Scotland towards constructivist principles.

I believe that building a national curriculum on sound educational theory is a noble cause. Further to this, my reading on constructivism resonates with me and I therefore have a positive outlook regarding the implementation of this curriculum in my classroom. However, I also believe that such a shift in the nature of the guidance issued by LTS generates a number of issues. It is for this reason that I feel that this piece of curriculum reform deserves attention.

Although there are many issues surrounding Curriculum for Excellence in terms of implementation and its effects on pupil learning, school organisation and resources; the aim of this essay is to examine the potential impact of this curriculum reform on teaching as a profession. It is therefore necessary to consider the literature surrounding the issue of professions and professionalism to understand the key issues as a teaching professional.

Professionalism and Teaching

Considering the nature of teaching in terms of professionalism is an interesting pursuit. One need only ask a teacher if teaching is a profession, and all too often the response will be along the lines of “of course it is”. A little probing is likely to lead the teacher to begin to question their initial assertion and will quickly lead to fairly animated discussion. If we are to proceed effectively with the task of implementing potentially quite far-reaching reform such as Curriculum for Excellence, we must first consider our role in terms of rights and responsibilities.

Hargreaves describes teaching as the “paradoxical profession”. He asserts that “of all the jobs that are, or aspire to be professions, only teaching is expected to create the human skills and capacities that will enable individuals and organizations to survive and succeed” (Hargreaves, 2003). This seems to me to be at the heart of the issue surrounding teaching as a profession. On the one hand we are expected to be, and expect to be treated as, “a profession”. There is some ambiguity regarding the precise definition of the term “profession”, but many make a parallel with other professions which are less difficult to define; in other words, law and medicine. These commonly accepted examples of professions share certain characteristics with each other, and indeed teaching. Carr

suggests that in this view of professionalism, “education and teaching are to be understood...by reference to the elaborative network of public duties, obligations and responsibilities in which teaching as a social role is implicated” (Carr, 1992). He proceeds to raise the commonly held view that teachers need to be equipped “with capacities for autonomous judgement and action” (Carr, 1992). Under these circumstances if teaching is a profession, then teachers should be capable of autonomous judgement and have the freedom to exercise this judgement.

On the other hand, teaching is also seen to have an element of moral endeavour, analogous to the so-called vocations such as nursing and the clergy. Carr outlines the extent to which these moral responsibilities extend by stating, “that teachers in general would be disinclined to deny that much of what they do in the classroom...is liable to have a broadly moral influence on the attitudes, beliefs and conduct of pupils” (Carr, 2000). He even goes so far as to point out that teaching can be seen to be closer to the vocations in terms of ‘professional detachment’. He suggests that as a good nurse does not detach himself from his patient, so to does a good teacher profess “love and concern” towards their pupils (Carr, 1992).

Clearly, these varied views of the relationship between teachers and professionalism lead us to believe that our role is a complex one which is difficult to define. However, there is no getting away from the notion that we are tasked with the well-being of the pupils in our care and it is our duty to provide them with an appropriate educational experience. I believe that this therefore provides us with the ethical imperative to act upon our judgement in the interest of our learners. How then can we do this in the context of Curriculum for Excellence?

Origins of Curriculum for Excellence

Curriculum for Excellence has its roots in the National Debate. In March 2002 the then Scottish Executive’s Minister for Education and Young People launched the National Debate on Education (Scottish Executive, 2002).

As teachers were welcome to, and encouraged to participate in this debate, they were given their opportunity to express their professional judgement to the policy makers in Edinburgh. Contribution was not restricted to teachers, and it does not seem unreasonable to offer an opportunity for all of the stakeholders in education to have their say. However, what is not clear is how each contribution will be considered. If all contributions are equally valuable, then what does this tell us of the Executive's perception of the teaching profession? Carr describes an 'extended' view of educational professionalism whereby "teachers are to be regarded...as possessors of a socially valued specialist expertise which requires lengthy education and training" (Carr, 2000). He goes on to suggest:

Just as we might well regard it as unacceptable for politicians or the general public – anyone other than those properly educated in complex issues of medicine and health care – to direct the decisions of doctors on important matters of medicinal policy and practice, so it could be considered inappropriate for politicians or employers to dictate to teachers what is or is not worthy of inclusion in the school curriculum.

Carr, 2000

Following from this view of professionalism it could be suggested that, as there has been no National Debate on health care in Scotland resulting in a change in the way doctors are expected to perform their duties, the Scottish Executive does not perceive teaching to be a profession in the same sense as medicine.

This distinction could also be seen as being reinforced by the bodies tasked with setting the standards in these professions. The reform which emerged from the National Debate has been spearheaded by LTS as opposed to the GTCS. LTS is an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Scottish Government, whereas the GTCS is the independent regulatory body for the teaching profession in Scotland. In medicine however, the General Medical Council, the independent regulator for doctors in the UK, is also responsible for ensuring proper standards in the practice of medicine. If medicine and teaching were equivalent professions, surely the GTCS would be the body not only tasked with overseeing any curriculum reform, but also assessing whether curriculum reform is even necessary.

It is interesting to note that in her forward to the briefing pack for the National Debate, the Minister stated:

Times are changing, and I believe that the time is right to take stock and consider what we want from our education system in years to come. I am keen to build on the good practice that already goes on in our schools, and celebrate the success that we find there. The National Debate is intended to create a vision for the future, and a strategy for how to get there. Turning a vision into a reality is not something that will happen overnight. I will not engage in hasty changes as a result of this debate. Rather, this debate will sharpen the focus of what Scotland wants from its schools in the 21st century – and then we will carefully plan how to realise that vision from where we are today.

Scottish Executive (2002) The National Debate on Education Briefing Pack.

In this forward, the Minister seems to suggest that change is necessary prior to the debate taking place. She goes to some lengths to allay any fears the reader may have that drastic changes are afoot, such as by stating that she “will not engage in hasty changes”. However, there are still a number of phrases which imply that change is inevitable, such as “debate is intended to create a vision for the future, and a strategy for how to get there”. To what extent can teachers as professionals engage in this debate, when it is clear that the Minister has already ruled out the status quo?

It is therefore with little surprise that when I look ahead to the Executive’s Response to the National Debate there are a large number of recommended changes for Scottish education. Crucially, the Executive’s vision for the future of Learning and Teaching, includes a statement which indicates the beginnings of Curriculum for Excellence:

Focus in skills and attitudes as well as knowledge. Subject barriers broken down and links developed between different areas of learning. Use different methods to encourage creativity and active learning.

*Scottish Executive (2003) Educating For Excellence:
The Executive’s Response To The National Debate*

Having considered the relationship between the origins of Curriculum for Excellence and teacher professionalism, it is now necessary to examine the implementation of the curriculum reform also.

Implementation of Curriculum for Excellence

The Scottish Executive's Agenda for Action document states that "teachers and other professionals in schools must have the freedom to exercise their professional judgement to deliver excellent learning and teaching. We will act to give them that freedom." (Scottish Executive, 2004). These sentences provide an insight into the Executive's perception of teaching at this time, and how they envisage it changing. Taking the desired change first of all, the Executive expresses a wish to give teachers freedom, this being a necessary component of professional autonomy. This conveniently returns us to Carr's notion of 'occupational autonomy', which he explains "is often held to be a key ingredient of the professional lives of doctors and lawyers" (Carr, 2000). It would therefore appear that the Executive had a desire to empower the teaching profession, promoting an 'extended' view of educational professionalism. On the pages which follow this statement there are a list of action points. It is difficult to decipher which action point will deliver this autonomy. The only point which comes close states that they will "offer new choice, space and time within the curriculum to teachers and schools to design learning to suit the needs of young people." (Scottish Executive, 2004). Is offering the space and time in the curriculum alone enough to encourage professional autonomy? Will teachers naturally assume this new role if offered? Before attempting to answer these questions, I must first return to the statement above, what does it tell us of the Executive's current perception of teaching?

Another telling aspect of the Agenda for Action statement, is that the Executive believes that teachers need to be given freedom. This implies that they currently do not enjoy freedom, and are therefore viewed as members of a 'restricted' profession (Carr, 2000). Carr describes a restricted professional as "almost exclusively defined in terms of technical competence and more or less direct accountability or requirements of external authority" (Carr, 2000). In other words, up until the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, teachers were regarded as professional if they conformed appropriately with the National Guidelines, SQA Arrangements Documents and their school management. Two questions arise from this, firstly how has teaching become a restricted

profession? And secondly, how can the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence allow teachers to gain their occupational autonomy and develop a sense of extended professionalism?

Since the early 1990's Scottish Education has been directed by the 5-14 National Guidelines. These clearly guided teachers on the content of lessons, giving quite specific expected learning outcomes of the 'pupils will be able to...' type. Although not legally binding, these guidelines are quite uniformly applied across the country. There are many reasons for this to have happened, however pressure from school managers in conjunction with the production of exemplar materials would naturally lead teachers to adopt these curricula. In addition, schools were working with the prospect of an Inspection from HMIe. It is interesting to note that in their publication entitled 'Improving Science Education 5-14', they stated that courses which were very good "took account of the advice offered in the national guidelines and the associated Scottish CCC teachers' guides" (HMI, 1999). So, teachers were also under pressure from the Inspectorate to adopt the National Guidelines. This gives us a clue as to why teachers have not been working with autonomy for some time now, particularly when Carr states that "standardisation of educational provision through centrally imposed curricula, have been widely regarded as conducting to the 'de-professionalisation' of teachers, whose opportunities for individual and creative initiative and endeavour seem increasingly curtailed" (Carr, 2000).

So, is Curriculum for Excellence the answer? Can it provide teachers the opportunity for "individual and creative initiative"? Certainly on paper, the stated aims of the proposed new curriculum offers teachers the prospect of developing rich curricula relevant to their pupils, albeit within the context of documents produced by Government and its agencies. However, can we realistically expect teachers to adjust to this new expectation of professionalism with ease? If, as the Executive itself stated, teachers have been working without autonomy up until now how will they react to having this autonomy thrust upon them? I suspect many will see this curriculum reform as a burden, as opposed to an opportunity. In Fullan's study of educational change he draws attention to

the Education Commission of the States efforts to summarise the lessons learnt from implementing whole school reform models. One of these lessons seems relevant here:

Teachers make comprehensive reform possible (professional development is key, union support is vital)

Fullon, 2001

Although there has been professional development surrounding Curriculum for Excellence, and I am sure more is planned, is it addressing the key nature of this curriculum reform? Is it assisting teachers to make the transition from 'restricted' to 'extended' professional?

Conclusion

Curriculum for Excellence is clearly an ambitious piece of curriculum reform driven by a desire to raise the quality of Scottish Education. It does indeed offer the teaching profession in Scotland the chance to engage with the development of their school's curriculum in a very real sense. In my own experience, I have found the publication of the experiences and outcomes to be a revelatory experience and have already begun to change the learning experiences of my pupils. It has surprised me that making simple alterations to lessons, such as encouraging discussion and using relevant contexts, can very quickly lead to a motivated and energetic classroom.

I do however hold concerns that the implementation of the reform may not live up to the magnitude of its aims. As I have attempted to show in this essay, Curriculum for Excellence will involve a shift in the very nature of our profession. Managing this shift will be difficult, but is also essential to the success of this new curriculum.

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