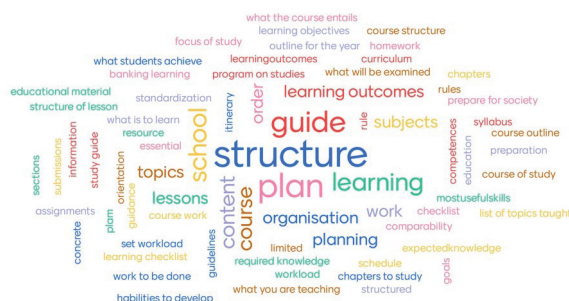


Introduction

When I teach my curriculum studies module with pre-service teachers, I usually begin by asking them to define 'curriculum'. They come up with many definitions, most of which are centred on the concept of subjects, topics, courses – in other words, curriculum as a script, a written document – see Figure 1. But curriculum is more than this. The word comes from Latin curriculum 'course', from *currere* 'run'; so curriculum 'is experienced and enacted' (Pinar, 2015, p. 11).



Word cloud representing student responses in September 2021 to the question, What is meant by the term 'curriculum'?

There are multiple actors involved in curriculum enactment. The primary encounters happen between teachers and their students and other teachers. Other encounters also occur, such as between school leaders and teachers, parents and students, policymakers and teachers, professional development providers, and so on.

Curriculum is made in multiple sites: at the policy table, in the school, and at classroom and individual levels, among others; it is political and involves power (Priestley et al., 2021). The written curriculum text is just one part of this picture. How this document supports and enables teachers to make curriculum in their classes is the topic of this short piece.



Majella Dempsey
Associate Professor
and EdD Strand Leader
for Curriculum Studies

Curriculum specification in Ireland

In recent years there has been some critique of how we present our written curriculum in Ireland (Hyland, 2014). This is predicated, in my opinion, on a historical dependence on 'scripted curriculum' with an emphasis on clearly specified content (Gleeson, 2021, p. 15). In 1991 the OECD was critical of the traditional pedagogical style in Irish education and called for more student-centred approaches to be adopted (OECD, 1991, p. 74). This move away from didactic, transmission-style teaching led to more focus being put on the development of skills (NCCA, 2004).

Since Lisbon in 2000 (European Council, 2000) and the subsequent European Framework of Key Competences (European Commission, 2007, revised in 2017), there has been a move in Ireland and elsewhere towards an outcomes-based approach to curriculum development, with learning being defined in terms of what students should be able to know and do at the end of a course. Learning outcomes were first used in the rebalanced Junior Certificate subject syllabi in the early 2000s (NCCA, 2019). This, coupled with the inclusion of key skills in specifications, seeks to move students from being passive receivers and consumers of knowledge to being agile, creative, and innovative and taking on a more critical and engaged role in learning.

For example, learning in specifications is linked to overall skills development and guiding principles in the Framework for Junior Cycle, which is different from how subjects were described in individual syllabi in the past. Shifts such as this can be very challenging, especially for teachers who have been deemed to be 'successful' with previous approaches. The need for all actors to appreciate the rationale for the changes is vital.

“ There has been a move in Ireland towards an outcomes-based approach to curriculum development, with learning being defined in terms of what students should be able to know and do at the end of a course.

It is important to set the context for this discussion on specifications, which is too often narrowed to comparative analysis of the technical form of the curriculum specification, to previous syllabi, or to examples from other jurisdictions. This conveniently underplays the complexities of curriculum in the context of the prevailing national policy imperatives and the dynamic nature of curriculum as a process and not a product.

In essence, in Ireland since 2000 we had three parallel message systems: that our teaching needed to be more learner-centred (Smyth & McCoy, 2011), that competence or skill development needed to be embedded in learning (NCCA, 2004, 2005), and that teachers were to be given more scope in curriculum planning (NCCA, 2015). To this end, the current specification structure, promoted by public policy in Ireland (DES, 2011), has been described as a learner-centred, constructivist-influenced curriculum (Gleeson et al., 2020).

This move to focusing the curriculum on the students' experience puts more emphasis on how teachers plan for enactment and how they make pedagogical decisions. To do this kind of curriculum-making, teachers need to develop curriculum thinking (Deng, 2020), to develop the capacity to be curriculum makers (Deng, 2020; Priestley et al., 2021), and to be given the agency to negotiate spaces within sites for curriculum making (Priestley et al., 2015, 2021). Professional judgement is an essential part of this, of the kind

that we witnessed in the move to distance learning during the pandemic (Dempsey & Burke, 2021).

To facilitate this move to providing more curriculum-making space, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) moved to developing curriculum specifications that allowed scope for local interpretation in learning outcomes, not unlike what we have had in Transition Year since 1993 (Department of Education, 1993). This curriculum space aimed to give teachers more agency in making pedagogical decisions. The important word in every learning outcome is the action verb, as this indicates the pedagogical decisions the teacher can make, the learning experience the student will have, and how the learning will be assessed.

“ Key skills move away from rote learning to emphasise the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, self- and peer assessment, agency, and skills for living rich lives.

Underpinning their importance, all subject specifications contain a glossary of these action verbs. For example, if the learning outcome begins with the word ‘explain’, this means ‘give a detailed account, including reasons and causes’ (DES, 2015, p. 25). Teachers must think about how they can set up a learning opportunity for their students that will allow them the space to learn about a topic in sufficient depth to be able to give a detailed account that includes reasons and causes. Teachers must also think about how they will assess this learning and the various potential purposes for assessment.

All of this is completed in reference to content knowledge of the discipline. To some, this may seem prescriptive in itself, but to others there is a call for ‘depth of treatment’ for learning outcomes. This concept is problematic, as it is not to be found in other jurisdictions and is, in my opinion, linked to an overemphasis on assessment. Research has consistently linked specificity in syllabus documentation to the predictability of terminal assessments, and to excessive focus on those assessments to the detriment of educational experience (Baird et al., 2016). This conflicts with the essential purpose of assessment and reporting at Junior Cycle, which is to support learning (DES, 2015, p. 21).

The role of key skills is an important point that is often overlooked when the focus is on content and its relationship with summative assessment. At the same time, very few will challenge the value and importance of students developing these skills during their time in school. The student-centred nature of learning outcomes allows for the flexibility in approaches to teaching and learning to support the development of these key skills. Key skills embedded in all specifications move away from rote learning to emphasise the development of, for example, critical thinking, problem-solving, self- and peer assessment, agency, and skills for living rich lives in a world threatened by extinction.

Conclusion

In the classroom, curriculum and teaching ‘become inextricably merged and integrated’; to understand one, you must understand the other (Deng, 2017, p. 13). However, this is only part of the story, as both are part of a

larger system that includes accountability structures, assessment regimes, university and further education routes, teacher professional structures, government funding, and so on. All of these impact on how curriculum is enacted.

The specification and its enactment are a significant part of the curriculum story, but they can only have the impact envisaged if other structures support and work alongside this process. While acknowledging the challenges involved in writing learning outcomes, the complexity for teachers of working with them, and the need to have clarity on their assessment, the specifications in Ireland are responding to the need for more learner-centred teaching and are giving teachers space to be professionals in curriculum making.

The curriculum must be fit for purpose, but there is no single fit-for-all solution. The three decades of curriculum conversations have helped us develop a richer understanding of this school space, described by Priestley (2019, p. 8) as ‘the multi-layered social practices, including infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated’. This concept of curriculum as an encounter challenges us to identify how all stakeholders can work together to ensure that the enacted curriculum reflects the intended curriculum.

REFERENCES

- Baird, J.A., Caro, D., and Hopfenbeck, T.D. (2016) ‘Student perceptions of predictability of examination requirements and relationship with outcomes in high-stakes tests in Ireland’, *Irish Educational Studies*, 35(4), 361–379. DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2016.1227719.
- Dempsey, M. and Burke, J. (2021) *Lessons Learned: The Experiences of Teachers in Ireland during the 2020 Pandemic*. Maynooth: Maynooth University.
- Deng, Z. (2017) ‘Rethinking curriculum and teaching’. In: G.W. Noblit (ed.) *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Education*, pp. 1–25. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deng, Z. (2020) *Knowledge, Content, Curriculum and Didaktik: Beyond Social Realism*. London: Routledge.
- Department of Education (1993) *Transition Year Programme: Guidelines for Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2011) *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*. Dublin: DES.
- Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2015) *Junior Cycle Science: Curriculum Specification*. Dublin: DES.
- European Commission (2007) *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning: European Reference Framework*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- European Commission (2017) *Review of the 2006 Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning: Consultation Strategy*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- European Council (2000) *Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000: Presidency Conclusions*. Lisbon: Council of European Union.
- Gleeson, J. (2021) ‘Evolution of Irish curriculum culture: Understandings, policy, reform and change’, *Irish Educational Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2021.1899028.
- Gleeson, J., Klenowski, V., and Looney, A. (2020) ‘Curriculum change in Australia and Ireland: A comparative study of recent reforms’, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(4), 478–497. DOI: 10.1080/00220272.2019.1704064.

Hyland, A. (2014) *The Design of Leaving Certificate Science Syllabi in Ireland: An International Comparison*. Dublin: Irish Science Teachers' Association. www.ista.ie/the-hyland-report-2/.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2004) *Proposals for the Future of Senior Cycle Education in Ireland: Overview Advice issued to the Minister in June 2004*. Dublin: NCCA.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2005) *Proposals for the Future Development of Senior Cycle Education in Ireland*. Dublin: NCCA.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2015) *A Framework for Junior Cycle*. Dublin: NCCA and DES.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2019) *Learning Outcomes: An International Perspective*. Dublin: NCCA.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1991) *Review of Irish Education*. Paris: OECD.

Pinar, W. (2015) *Educational Experience as Lived: Knowledge, History, Alterity: The Selected Works of William F. Pinar*. New York: Routledge.

Priestley, M. (2019) 'Curriculum: Concepts and approaches', *Impact*, 6. <https://impact.chartered.college/article/curriculum-concepts-approaches/>.

Priestley, M., Alvunger, D., Philippou, S., and Soini, T. (eds.) (2021) *Curriculum Making in Europe: Policy, Practice Within and Across Diverse Contexts*. London: Emerald Publishing.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G., and Robinson, S. (2015) *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. London: Bloomsbury.

Smyth, E. and McCoy, S. (2011) *Improving Second-Level Education: Using Evidence for Policy Development*. Renewal Series Paper 5. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.

Demand for urgent action on Climate Change



The 'Fridays for Future' school strike, demanding urgent action on Climate Change, took place outside the Department of An Taoiseach, Merrion Square, Dublin in September 2021.

Pictured here are members of the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU), from left:

Denis, ISSU Welfare Officer;

Shari, newly elected Regional Officer for Dublin Fingal;

Racheal, from the ISSU's Pool of Trainers;

Courtney, Regional Officer for the Laois-Offaly region.