

Who should decide the curriculum?

Rachel Bolstad

Who should decide what students learn at school? I've grown increasingly interested in this question since becoming an educational researcher, but writing this article also reminded me of something that happened when I was still at secondary school. In January 1991 I was 13 years old and about to enter Form 3 (Year 9). During my summer holidays I'd been watching Operation Desert Storm—the beginning of the Gulf War—unfolding on television. I was learning all kinds of new things: about a group of people called the Kurds, whose own president had attacked them with poison gas; about “sorties” and scud missiles; and about how one country's resources could play a key role in the lives and economies of others. The Gulf War seemed to be the biggest news event of my lifetime; naturally, I assumed we'd be talking and learning a whole lot more about all of this at school.

I was wrong. When school started, it was as if the world I'd been watching on TV didn't exist. As a new third former I quickly adjusted to my new teachers, friends, timetable, and the routines of learning in each class. My older brother told me which topics I could expect to do in each subject each year, and I kept track of whether friends in other classes were doing the same units as mine was. The things we learnt were sometimes fascinating and connected to things I cared about or knew about, and sometimes boring and seemingly irrelevant to me. However, I didn't think explicitly about *who decided* what we should be learning (although I did wonder why we weren't talking about what was going on in the world at that time). Whatever the case, the decisions had clearly been made well before I stepped into the classroom.

The subjects I took at school—mathematics, science, English, and social studies—have been taught in schools for so long that their role in the curriculum is rarely questioned. Indeed, they could be considered to have become “cultural institutions” (Gough & Scott, 2001) in today's schools. Likewise, it seems the organisation of *content* (units, topics, and themes) within each subject, in secondary school at least, tends

to follow familiar patterns that change little from year to year, or from school to school. Without critical scrutiny, however, our taken-for-granted assumptions about schooling and curricula “can divert our attention from important questions we might be asking about the present functions of curricula and how new functions might be envisaged” (Reid, 1990, p. 203). For example, how can a curriculum be responsive to changing local, national, and global events? How responsive *should* it be?

What is the curriculum? Where does it come from?

The word “curriculum” often refers to the document(s) that contain the national curriculum, the official or legal statement of what schools should teach (Baker & Begg, 2003). However, there are a number of additional “levels of curriculum”. The national curriculum must be interpreted and translated into a *school curriculum* and, further, into a department's or teacher's *planned curriculum*. There is also the *assessed curriculum* (the part of students' learning that is assessed or measured), and the *hidden curriculum* (the implicit messages and meanings or values that learners construct about school, themselves, other people, the world, or a society, based on their total experience of schooling). This multidimensional view presents curriculum not as a finished *product*, but as a dynamic and continuous *process* (Begg, 1998), in which the distinction between curriculum and curriculum development has become blurred. Clearly, in this process there are many points at which decisions are made, either explicitly or implicitly, about what any given student will experience as the “curriculum”.

Who should decide?

So who should be making these decisions, and on what grounds? This depends on what we think a curriculum actually is. Traditional models of curriculum development tended to cast the curriculum as an information-transmitting device: a catalogue of

things to be learned. In this model, the key task for curriculum developers is to decide “what knowledge is of most worth” (Reid, 1987), and then to list the topics, themes, aims, and objectives of each subject area or discipline. Certain groups—for example, subject experts—have more status than others in deciding what knowledge is most important. This is an “RDD” approach: the curriculum is Researched and Developed by experts, and Disseminated to schools. The teachers’ job is to find the best possible ways to get the maximum number of students to learn this knowledge, and the students’ job is to learn it (as demonstrated by their performance in the assessed curriculum). As for everyone else, they don’t really have much of a role to play.

Different views of curriculum

A very different way to think about curriculum is to see it as *a vehicle for the shaping of group and individual identity* (Reid, 1987). If it is seen in this way, then important questions for curriculum development are:

- What kind of people do we want to be?
- What kind of community would we like to live in?
- What sort of schooling would help us to be those kinds of people and have that kind of community?

This view has some radical implications for thinking about who should participate in curriculum development. In this approach, many people with many different interests (including parents, teachers, the employment sector, community groups, and even students) could reasonably claim a right to have input into curriculum development, with some equality of status.

Obviously, the most sensible way to approach curriculum involves a marriage of the two views outlined above: namely, to see the curriculum as both a vehicle for *shaping individual and*

group identities and an indicator of *which valuable knowledge* students should develop through schooling. This suggests that both knowledgeable experts *and* a wide range of other people have some role to play in the process of curriculum development. But all these different people are likely to have different interests and priorities! How on earth are these competing interests and priorities to be managed?

Curriculum as a “design solution”

I think a powerful metaphor for curriculum is to think of it as *a design solution*. This concept of curriculum leads immediately to two questions, to be asked before and during its development—what are the needs, issues, or problems for which the curriculum might be a “solution”, and who is best placed to identify and help to address these problems, issues, and needs? These questions offer a way of thinking about how, and when, to incorporate different kinds of expertise into curriculum development (Bolstad, 2004). For example, surely *local* needs, issues, and aspirations can’t be addressed without involving local communities in curriculum design? Surely *students’* personal needs, issues, and aspirations can’t be addressed without their involvement in curriculum design? And surely national and global priorities (for example, economic growth and environmental sustainability) can’t be addressed without the input of the people, groups, and sectors that have expertise in these areas?

The tension inherent in a “design solution” model of curriculum is to achieve a balance between, on the one hand, responsiveness to local, national, and global educational needs and priorities, and on the other, continuity with the existing knowledge, attributes, and values that we, as a nation, agree should underpin education, no matter what in the world or in our society changes (for example, our collective commitments to social justice, excellence in learning, tolerance, sustainability, personal integrity, and so on). This calls for new models of curriculum development that are far more difficult to initiate and manage than the old centralised RDD model.

How might we begin to develop such curricula? I propose that an important first

step is to start involving students in curriculum development. This may seem a fairly radical proposition, given that the curriculum is usually viewed as something that is designed *for* students, not *by* or *with* them. However, there are at least two compelling reasons for involving students in school curriculum decisions (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Firstly, bringing their ideas and experiences into the process of curriculum deliberation offers a potent opportunity for improving teaching, learning, and curriculum practice within schools. Secondly, and equally importantly, participating in decision making reinforces for students the idea that they are co-responsible for what they are learning, and for the kind of people they are becoming. If we can conceive of students as having a role in curriculum development—if we see this as a way of helping to prepare them for their post-school lives as decision makers, problem solvers, and future curriculum designers—it may be less difficult to see how other groups and individuals can also take part in the design process.

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Rachel Bolstad is a researcher with the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
Email: rachel.bolstad@nzcer.org.nz