



Putting the Learner into the Curriculum, not the Curriculum into the Learner: A Case for Negotiated Integrated Curriculum

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Abstract: The question “what is good teaching?” leads to further questions about the nature of curriculum and decision-making. This paper explores the need and feasibility of a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) to better empower the voice of teachers and students within their own curriculum. The international neo-liberal agenda that is increasingly encroaching on the nature of curriculum change and development inhibits the voice of learners within their own curriculum. Based on decades of research, and the theoretical foundations of meaningful learning, the NIC progresses the issues of both student and teacher empowerment in the face of this agenda to better allow “good teaching” to happen. Teacher education is significantly placed to enable this process as a review of international educational policies maintain with particular reference to the Irish context.

Keywords: Curriculum; Negotiated Integrated Curriculum; International Neo-Liberal Agenda; Meaningful Learning; Educational Policies

Introduction

“Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence;... to alienate humans from their own decision making is to change them into objects” (Freire, 1970, p.73). This quote challenges us to revisit the question “what is good teaching?” which is intricately related to the question of good education thereby encompassing teaching, learning and the considerations of all those engaged with the educative process. The definition of “good” education is a value-laden consideration and in our neoliberal time is strongly driven by an economic imperative. For example, the Robinson Report (1999, p.5) to the UK government reflected on the framing of education “as a vital investment in ‘human capital’ for the twenty-first century.” It argued that the achievement of this goal depended on the development of cultural and creative education which are not subjects in the curriculum, but instead are general, systemic features that enhance all learning through the freedom to innovate and experiment across a wide range of diverse abilities. Robinson (1999) ascribes a

wide variety of purposes to education to include preparing young people for economic independence; to express tolerance and respect in diverse and rapidly changing societies and above all to build lives that have meaning and purpose in an uncertain future.

The capacity to address this wide variety of purposes depends fundamentally on our ability to question some of the paradigmatic assumptions upon which our education system is based. In so doing we engage in critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995), namely consideration of how power “undergirds and distorts the educational process” (p.8). The influence of power in education has been widely studied (see for example Freire, 1970; Illich, 1971; Ingersoll, 2003; Lynch & Lodge, 2002) and while some features are obvious to all actors, others are often subtle and invisible, structured as they are in hegemonic assumptions which lead us to believe that actions and organisational structures are in the collective best interest.

This paper argues that whatever the purposes of education and “good” teaching, they are made visible



through the decision-making processes in schools, and in particular in relation to curriculum, the what, why and how of learning (Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace 1996). Students are keenly aware of issues of power and their lack of voice in decision-making in their school experiences. Burke and Grosvenor (2003) report on the submissions of school children to an invitation to describe "The School I'd Like" that was issued in 1967 and 2001 by two UK newspapers. They note the transformation in responses from a spirit of optimism and belief in the possibilities of change to one of weary resignation and cynicism. They argue that students are keenly aware of their lack of voice and power in the educational process and that students must be involved in negotiating decisions with adults relating to what is learned and how it is learned. A 14 year old writes:

Instead of an authority structure which destroys decision making and a sense of responsibility and which outside the classroom can prove outright dangerous, priority is given to structuring relationships such that children can talk to adults, can lean on and trust adults, can ask things of adults, can in short feel empowered by the adults they come into daily contact with. At present there is gulf between pupil and student that is not a generation thing but an authority thing (ibid, p.8).

The sense of disempowerment extends to teachers who are rapidly socialised into what Nuthall (2005) describes as "Ritualised Routines." This culture prescribes formulaic and restricted roles in classroom discourse towards a cognitive economy that values rapid answers to lower order questions or the game of "guess what's in the teachers head." This economy is driven by top-down requirements to cover prescribed material and prepare students for high-stake state examinations which results in a form of accountability that deprofessionalizes teachers (Goodson & Hargreaves 1996) or, as Apple (1986) would have it, degrades their labour. Teachers then are also disempowered within a system that limits the potential decisions available to them. These authors do not argue that we should not have a form of evaluation or even accountability of teachers' work. However, they work with the distinction between the popularly applied notion of "narrow accountability" which focuses exclusively on simply counting what is done, in contrast to the much richer notion of moral responsibility to and in one's profession (Biesta, 2009).

Korthagen (2010) reflects on the lack of success that teacher education has in challenging this status quo, particularly with regard to newly qualified teachers' experience a "transition shock" that dilutes the effects of their Initial Teacher Education (ITE). He suggests that for ITE to have impact, it must focus on teacher schema, namely their ways of knowing how to act in the classroom or, if you will, their repertoire of practical approaches. Awareness of schema can be developed through reflection and in the fullness of time can lead to the consideration of the principles and theory underlying them. Korthagen (2010) considers the theory-practice divide in ITE as a serious problem driven by the difficulty for student teachers who have yet to develop awareness of their schema to apply theoretical concepts to their professional practice.

It is also crucial to note that from our perspective, theory and practice should not exist in isolation from each other. Contrary to the popularly held view about the rigid distinction between theory and practice which is problematic on several counts. First, it privileges theory and theoreticians (including policy makers) over practice and practitioners, and this creates a deficit mentality toward the field. Second, it reduces teaching to a set of skills or best practices that are assumed to apply universally irrespective of differences of context. In other words the traditional mainstream conception of theory and practice reproduces the dangerous view that the role of theory is to dish out quick fix solutions which discourage educators to act critically in their profession. In contrast we propose a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice, that privileges neither and acknowledges the importance of both, and at the same time considers the political, social and cultural aspects of educational contexts.

From the praxis conception of practice and theory as explained above, this paper argues that curriculum reform focused on the effective negotiation of learning experiences between students and teachers and centred on the former's *concerns* affords the opportunity for students to reengage in a creative, meaningful education where they are co-constructors of knowledge with their teachers in a genuine learning organisation. The history and contemporary affordances of Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) are considered in reference to North America and recent developments in lower secondary education in Ireland. This is briefly contrasted with the neo-liberal influences on existing education systems.

We also argue that this represents a reconceptualization of teacher professionalism as

“public intellectuals,” (Smyth, 2011) and towards what Goodson & Hargreaves (1996) describe as a post-modern professionalism that frames education as a collective endeavour which allows for greater discretionary judgement on the part of teachers who construct curricula collaboratively with students and parents that have strong moral and social purposes. This is considered in light of what Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) describe as the “Fourth Way” of educational change. The capacity of teacher education in Ireland to respond to the opportunities presented by an on-going curriculum reform process is considered.

Integrated Curriculum (IC): Definition and Assumptions

The word curriculum derives from the Latin root 'currere' (Pinar, 1995, p.515) "meaning to run the course or the running of the course." Although there has been much deliberation concerning curriculum about who controls the course of learning that people have to follow and what they learn as they follow it, an integrated curriculum specifically aims to put a person's *concerns* at the heart of a course of learning and situates subject-specific knowledge as serving to answer these concerns. Terms such as a "multi-disciplinary curriculum" and "interdisciplinary curriculum" utilise a cross-curricular approach to teach multiple subjects usually through a single-themed project and are sometimes used interchangeably with an "integrated curriculum." However, an "integrated curriculum" is distinctive in that it begins with pupils' concerns. It can be simply defined as education “that is organized in such a way that it cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association to focus upon broad areas of study” (Shoemaker 1989, p.5 cited in Lake 2000, p. 2).

Beginning with these meaningful associations, an integrated curriculum requires teachers and curriculum makers to ask pupils what their concerns are and use these themes to identify subjects and pedagogical strategies to answer these concerns (Beane, 1997). In a wide ranging review of 14 case studies where educational change processes have emphasised the promotion of social justice and democratic citizenship, Wrigley, Lingard, and Thomson (2012, p.197) argue for the crucial importance of focusing on *concerns* rather than simply students' interests to enhance learning and community engagement. Such an integrated conception and practice of curriculum is very similar to the “curriculum of life” (Portelli & Vibert, 2001) that makes the students' individual,

social, cultural, and political contexts and concerns at the heart of the educative learning. While the curriculum of life focuses on students' concerns as it challenges a deficit mentality to learning, it also does not romanticize students' experiences without raising critical challenges to what they bring to learning.

The theory and practice of curriculum integration in a school setting is founded on several assumptions. Four of which are:

- School will be defined as a true learning organization, not simply a must-do societal requirement that considers students from a deficit mentality
- An integrated curriculum will be holistic, not fixed, and will enable collaborative efforts among teachers and students to address multiple themes and issues; among which include local questions and concerns, ones specific to the student, the school and the community
- Students will be empowered through engagement in authentic learning opportunities that are chosen by them to help them answer two universal questions: Who am I? And what's my place in society?
- Teachers will be respected and regarded as professionals who know their subjects, their students and their craft.

An integrated curriculum is not a new idea and these assumptions are not unique to the 21st century.

Development of an Integrated Curriculum

Foremost among the theories that have informed the development and practice of curriculum integration are those of John Dewey. Dewey believed that the child brought a great wealth of personal and experiential knowledge to the learning context (Dewey, 1962). The function of the school was to provide a learning community to address social needs and support activities that fostered intellectual development. The teacher did not fit the child to the curriculum, but rather helped guide the child from one new learning experience to another always mindful of the learning journey and the destination, but never dictating one particular pathway to follow. Students freely moved among the disciplines investigating their questions of interest and concern, either alone or with the help of others. Democratic education was a hallmark of Dewey's approach.



Communication and collaboration are also integral to the theory of Lev Vygotsky, a contemporary of John Dewey. Vygotsky's theory of cognitive socialization fosters the view that children learn in the Zone of Proximal Development, an area that defines what children actually know when they begin the learning process and what they learn with the help of a mentor who is aiding in the scaffolding of that process (Vygotsky, 1978). The *intermental* exchanges between the student and mentor provide the foundation for the formulation of the new knowledge that comes from these exchanges. The exchanges are fitted into the student's pre-existing schema and result in personalized new knowledge made through an *intramental* process.

Dewey and Vygotsky shared many of the same views about education. Both valued what the child brought to the learning process, the mentoring that occurred between the child and teacher and the opportunity that enabled students to collaborate and make meaning for themselves.

Theorists have followed and built on the foundation of these two giants of integrated learning. Chief among them is James Beane, a champion for democratic education and teaching and learning through an integrated curriculum (Beane, 2005). A curriculum integration stalwart through difficult education times, such as we are experiencing today with the "test to the death" mentality of teaching and assessment, Beane has remained true to students, teachers and administrators who know that an integrated curriculum must meet the needs of everyone. His four-point approach to teaching provides the foundation for teachers to practice curriculum integration in their classrooms:

1. Students ask the big questions, and either alone or together may examine big issues of interest and are thus motivated to find answers to their own questions.
2. Teachers teach using differentiated instruction, that is, they teach using different approaches, assign work that requires different skill sets to complete, and prepare assessments that recognize actual learning, no matter what form that demonstration of learning takes.
3. Teachers conduct continuous informal assessments so that they can provide guidance for next steps in the learning process.
4. Students engage in a public presentation of their big projects, the result of the answers found regarding research into their big questions/issues. These presentations enable all students to benefit

from the personalized learning in which each student has engaged (Beane, 1997).

Beane's four-point plan gives students and teachers a voice in their own teaching and learning. The collaborative approach supports Dewey's democratic classroom, Vygotsky's intermental/intramental learning, and demonstrates Beane's belief that an integrated curriculum enables students to use the disciplines as tools to address questions to which they seek answers.

Another theory that supports the use of an integrated curriculum is Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011). His belief, that students have many different ways they can learn, means curricula must be differentiated to be effective, and multi-modal in delivery so that teaching and learning approaches can shift to address all students' needs, from reading hard copy texts to technology rich approaches that enable collaborative learning and discovery.

A discussion about the importance of an integrated curriculum would be remiss without the acknowledgement of Carol Gilligan and her belief that relationships matter in learning and in life (Gilligan, 1993). Building social and academic relationships between teacher and students, among the students themselves, and between the school and the community are critical to the success of an integrated curriculum.

Finally, we cite John Arnold, whose strong support for youngsters and their well-being has made him the voice for the development of an empowering curriculum that addresses students' academic and social needs (Arnold, 1993). His five requirements speak to the very nature of our expectations for our children, who we see them to be now and in the future, and how they will achieve their potential. All of Arnold's points are necessary in the successful development and enacting of an integrated curriculum. Arnold's (1993) empowering curriculum states:

1. Adults must have positive views of students and their capabilities.
2. Students must have the opportunity to control their own learning so that they can exercise initiative and responsibility.
3. An empowering curriculum must help students make sense of themselves and their world by allowing them to ask their own questions and seeks answers to those questions. "Hence, [the curriculum] will be rich in meaning, dealing with issues that are worth knowing; exploring values



which are involved; relating these issues to students' lives and extending them into a larger context; and translating all of this into activities geared to their level of understanding" (Arnold, 1993, p.7).

4. An empowering curriculum must enable students to provide for the well-being of others because in so doing they will feel they are needed and contributing to the betterment of humanity.
5. An empowering curriculum must enable students to know their own needs and recognize those forces that seek to exploit them or endanger their personal development.

The concept of an integrated curriculum and the practice of using curriculum integration are complex. The theories of Dewey, Vygotsky, Beane, Gardner, Gilligan and Arnold all provide guidance in helping us understand the value for teachers, the students, the school and the community in implementing an integrated curriculum in our classrooms.

Integrated curriculum is often confused with interdisciplinary curriculum. While both engage in multidisciplinary investigation, only the integrative curriculum is based on the examination of students' big questions and issues. This makes an integrated curriculum democratic, collaborative, student driven, and focused on using the disciplines as tools for research – but not a curriculum where anything goes, or a curriculum that reproduces inequities that students may bring with them.

Beane's and Brodhagen's *Negotiated Integrated Curriculum* (NIC) model has two important curriculum characteristics, it is permeable since it is based on students' questions about themselves and the world and teachers' understanding of how to help students negotiate their ensuing studies, and it is coherent since subjects do not act as boundaries, but rather may be investigated for the natural relationship that exists among them (Beane, 2005). The process for implementing the model involves several stages. Students are asked to individually come up with two lists, one that has questions relating to concerns about themselves (Why can't I get along with certain friends?) and the other that has questions relating to concerns about the world (Why can't some nations get along?). Next, students form small groups to share their world questions and discover if any group members share their same concerns. Within the groups the students then look for ways that personal and world questions might be connected as themes. With their themes in hand, all small groups come together to brainstorm and share ideas for themes to research. A

vote is taken to determine the themes to be studied. All of the students' original questions are sorted to match the chosen themes and each theme is posted on the wall with the appropriate questions. Students move around the classroom considering the themes and questions and write down activities that could be undertaken to answer the questions. These activities and those added by the teacher are used for planning the unit of study. The disciplines blend in the themes and become the tools for the research. Students are highly motivated to learn because their own questions are the ones being addressed. Teachers play a facilitative role in scaffolding these approaches and engage in a process of negotiation with students which requires significant skill and represents a marked departure from the "ritualised routines" described above (Nuthall, 2005).

The Wetlands Project conducted by Beal at North Carolina State University in 2002 with a team of eighth graders serves as an example of curriculum integration. The project had its beginning when one student brought an ethical issue to his team. His grandmother lived in a small, low income housing area between a new city-built asphalt highway on the hill above them and the wetlands bordering a stream below them. Heavy rains brought serious flooding, something the area had never experienced before. Residents believed that the hard surface of the road caused run off that flowed downhill to meet the rising waters in the wetlands. Their modest homes were caught in between. Redress to the City Council brought no help, yet in another area of the city a similar situation brought action. Coincidentally, that area had more affluent residents. What could the children do to solve the problem?

Students met in small groups to discuss the problem and each group came up with questions it had about the situation. Questions merged into themes that transcended subject areas. Some queries were very clearly rooted in one discipline or the other, such as, what is a wetland and what are its components? (Science) Who are the residents in the flooded homes and how do they feel about the situation? What are their stories? (Language arts) The wetland had become a dumping ground and cleaning it up led to math related questions. The students prepared sampling sheets that enabled them to sort and quantify the garbage. Letters were proposed for City Council that questioned the fairness of inflicting a city-made problem on citizens and then refusing to correct it. (Social studies) After much discussion about their questions the students came together around issues of fairness and ethics. Themes arose, such as, how can



human beings and nature live together in harmony? What are the rights and responsibilities of citizens? What can middle school students do to bring a problem to the attention of the public and prompt action?

Students sorted their questions under appropriate themes and chose areas in which to work. There were some whole class activities that were generated by the questions, such as, research in the field to quantify items of junk taken from the wetlands, an ecology study that resulted in joining a horticulturist to plant native grasses and trees in the wetland, interviewing residents about their lives in the community before and after the flooding and sharing the results with the local church and city government. And finally, students put all of their work together for a town and gown presentation called *The Spell of the Land*. Their presentation was to last one hour and was one half of an NC State University/City of Raleigh yearly program. It should be noted that a public presentation of a big project is one of the hallmarks of Beane's early work with integrated curriculum (Beane, 1993). The public presentation of big projects enables everyone to learn from the findings, not just those doing the research. Mayors, Deans, and Chancellors sat down to hear a team of eighth graders present their information on the Wetlands Project. Set against an enormous wetlands mural that was painted by a group of the students, these children shared what they had discovered. Their one hour presentation ended with a multi-modal art show of photographs and a video of the wetland set to background music. Handel's Water Music was merged with rap and hip hop and as the music played individual students stood to share their poems about the wetlands. Adults were astounded by the students' knowledge and professionalism. The use of curriculum integration had enabled the students to ask and answer their own questions, and in the process had empowered them to know that building knowledge and understanding is not gathering and storing discrete facts for future use. It's making sense of big questions that you ask about yourself, your own world and the globe on which you live as you take responsibility for your place and your actions. Boomer, Onore, Lester, and Cook (1992) present a series of case studies from teachers implementing NIC in Australia, reporting similar findings in terms of student meaningful engagement and high quality, differentiated student learning. They emphasise that this curricular approach is rigorous and far from a "soft romanticism and *laissez-faire* utopianism" (Boomer et al., 1992, p.276), criticisms which can lazily arise from the fatal cynicism inherent to neo-liberalism.

Interdisciplinary refers to the parallel thematic study of two or more subjects. This usually occurs among a team of teachers representing a variety of disciplines. For example, *Johnny Tremain*, the novel by Ester Forbes about a boy's experiences during the American Revolutionary War might be studied in literature at the same time the history class is discussing the War for American Independence. The math teacher might provide troop and battle numbers to compare and contrast, and the science teacher might ask students to research battle wounds and medical practices prevalent during the American Revolution. Curriculum mapping by the team of teachers who will teach about the theme, the American Revolution establishes the timeline and process for the interdisciplinary study but the theme itself is not built on student input. It does not address, or even ask for the questions and issues that the students wish to examine and answer. Students and their teachers are merely the elements needed to execute an interdisciplinary study. They do not drive the study as they do in curriculum integration. Boomer et al. (1992) are strongly critical of approaches like this which they characterise as "Motivated learning" (p.9) where student interest is bent towards teacher intent as a "technique for charming students to take part willingly in the prefigured curriculum designed by the teacher" (p.278).

By first eliciting big questions/issues from the students, the message is clearly sent that the learner is the key to the process, not simply a pawn in an educational game of stockpiling discrete facts to be taken out for testing. Teaching using an integrated curriculum demands input from those concerned: the teachers, students, the school, the parents and the community. It enables everyone to come together to build a vision for the school and its process for teaching and learning. Unlike a standardized curriculum, an integrated curriculum supports the values and cultures of the school because multiple voices are encouraged and may be heard and validated.

History of an Integrated Curriculum

Curriculum integration had its genesis in the European schools of architecture in the 16th and 17th century. These schools were known for their use of the project method; a holistic, team oriented, problem solving approach to teaching and learning. The project method was adopted in the United States and widely used at the turn of the 20th century. Its hands on, problem based focus addressed the needs of new kinds of learners, those who had immigrated and needed basic life and citizenship skills as well as others who



had moved from the farm to the city to work in newly developed industries. Both required a holistic approach to teaching. They needed practical skills to understand and solve everyday problems. Mixed in was a healthy dose of information to promote responsibility and citizenship building. This integration of knowledge was the schooling formula that spelled success for immigrants and farm children alike. The success seen in the use of an integrated curriculum approach through a problem based project method of learning became the hallmark of Progressive Education (Arnold, 1993; Cuban, 1984; Spring, 2008).

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Progressive education flourished alongside the traditional discipline/fact heavy approach to teaching and learning. In fact, studies indicated that those who learned in a curriculum integrated schooling environment did as well or better than those whose schooling followed the traditional approach (Aikin 1942). The problem based/project method curriculum using a democratic approach of student and teacher collaborative planning represented solid proof of the responsiveness and effectiveness of the integrated curriculum (Beane, 1997).

With positive teaching and learning results it is curious that we must now fight to re-examine, reclaim, and reinstate curriculum integration, a teaching and learning approach that was so successful. What happened?

The ascension of educational practices such as those used today by GERM (Global Educational Reform Movement) nations around the world were not an overnight phenomenon, but rather gradually came to dominate the educational systems of most nations around the world (Sahlberg, 2012). These debilitating educational practices used by GERM nations include:

1. adopting the concept of schools of choice, i.e., insuring inequity in educational opportunities due to the failure to guarantee that all schools are equally funded and supported,
2. reliance solely on standardized testing to show growth, i.e., failure to value anything other than discrete fact retention with no regard for application of those facts,
3. disempowerment of teachers/use of teacher proof materials, i.e., top down reforms and directives that fail to acknowledge teachers' professional training, and
4. fluctuating educational policies dependent on whichever political administration is in power, i.e.,

inability to determine and administer a consistent research based educational policy that meets the needs of the teachers, students, community and state.

In the United States one can point to 1957 and the Russian's launch of Sputnik as the catalyst that moved America away from the success of curriculum integration to an educational course that mandated discipline driven curricula, teacher-proof materials, and ultimately, resulted in a standardized curriculum driven by standardized testing. America's change of course is not unique. GERM countries around the world have adopted the "test to the death" teaching and assessment approach as the foundation of their educational policy and program.

Since the early 1980s the major deterrent for the practice of a meaningful integrated curriculum approach has been the popularity of neoliberalism on educational policy (Peters, 2011). Neoliberalism, which is a new form of liberalism, is based on the misinterpretation of two major liberal beliefs: freedom and individual rights. While it is true that the liberal tradition privileges "negative freedom" that is it focuses on removing obstacles for the individual to exercise his or her freedom, the neoliberal tradition has taken this principle to an extreme. As such it has led to the so-called "free market" with almost no state intervention. The principle of individual rights which was partially a response to the social inequities people experienced in the 19th century, within the neoliberal context has led to an extreme form of individualism which has manifested itself in egotism.

As part of the neoliberal project, democracy becomes interpreted solely as free choice within a competitive, free market, capitalist context. As Davis (2012, p.169) noted, "democracy emerges as a synonym for capitalism." Given this narrow understanding of democracy (and many argue in fact this form of democracy goes against the very spirit of democracy, Duggan, 2003, and Carr, 2011) the role of education through schooling has been transformed. Schools are expected to prepare future citizens to be competitive in a globalized world; good preparation is deemed to be one that leads to success interpreted as passing tests based on common standards and "objective norms." As a result, in the western world and increasingly also in other parts of the world due to the influence of organizations like the world bank, education has been almost exclusively reduced to separate blocks of learning aimed to prepare students for a narrow utilitarian world which is dominated, if not controlled,



by what is deemed to be measurable. Although such emphases and the increase in the privatization of education are formally justified by policy makers as contributing to quality and efficiency, in fact “such changes aim to subordinate education to commercial values and vocational skills” (Levidow, 2005, p.156). Notwithstanding insights from world class scientists, such as Einstein, that not all that counts can be measured, accountability has been reduced simply to measurable results. Hence the lack of emphasis on areas such as the artistic and the spiritual which have always been considered to be central to what distinguishes the human perspective. Narrow accountability has also side-lined the importance of moral responsibility and the democratic virtues, dispositions and actions based on critical thinking, creativity, the needs of all (rather than some), robust social justice and equity (rather than one size fits all and equality of opportunity without the proper support). In contrast, the focus in schools has been on the mechanical, the material, performativity, blindly following rules, the competitive, the measurable, and what works for achieving neoliberal aims. Thus, it has been argued that “under neoliberalism dominant public pedagogy with its narrow and imposed schemes of classification and limited modes of identification use the educational force of the culture to negate the basic conditions for critical agency” (Giroux, 2004, p.106).

Impact of the Neo-Liberal Agenda

Internationally, a neo-liberal agenda has become more prevalent in educational policy. For example in America, Apple (2007, p.110) discusses the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) act describing the noted progressive language contained within it, yet it “also continues an established tradition of the conservative production of discourse that incorporates progressive language while advancing key elements of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative agendas.” Success and failure are defined for educators in a manner within the NCLB that “the shaming practices associated with these processes, has caused numerous complaints and even rebellions in some states and districts that are continuing to this day” (Ibid.). In addition, Cuban’s (2009) analysis of accountability and testing in America outline the tension placed on teachers to subscribe to top-down educational policy to satisfy parents and policy makers. Cuban (2009, p.14) argues that the rewards and sanctions for schools implicitly convey the view that “less trust and more fear will jog practitioners to do what they are supposed to do [and that] promoters of standards-based reform believe that this swapping of state regulation for local freedom will

spread a **tougher** version of equity to largely poor and minority districts” (emphasis added).

However, the dominance of a neo-liberal agenda is not restricted to American educational policy. For example, in Australia McMaugh et al. (2009, p.1) comment on the Draft National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) that are being framed in a manner that “closely reflects an individualistic perspective, which can be seen to reflect neo-liberal interests in promoting competition between individuals rather than a sense of common good.” Smyth (2006, p. 312) also argues that a phoney war is being waged in Australia in the name of standards and combatting illiteracy where parents are treated as “savvy educational consumers skilled at working out what’s best for them individually and where to go to get the best deal for their offspring... [where] the terrain being presented to them by neo-liberal governments is one of fearful insecurity.” The case is similar in Europe and is illustrated by Ahl and Nilsson (2000, p.120) as they argue that in Sweden

teachers are no longer civil servants, but are hired and fired locally, with individual salaries. General guidelines for school policy are formed in a neo-liberal context, where individual freedom rules, where parents’ choice and diversity have been a legal norm and where pupils’ academic excellence is the ultimate goal.

An equally worrying phenomenon has been identified in the UK by Perryman (2007, p.176) as ‘panoptic performativity’. This is derived from Foucault’s (1979) application of Bentham’s (1791) ‘panopticon’ whereby a prison is arranged in a cylindrical building and prisoners would not know whether or not they are being observed. Perryman (2007, pp.177-9) applies this analogy to the nature of the inspectorate in the UK where she argues “inspection regimes engender an environment in which teachers behave as if they are under constant surveillance, which further creates a gap between teachers’ sense of professional control ... [and where] [p]erformativity in education can lead to a sense of deprofessionalization.” Under the guise of parental choice and value for money, the increasing imposition of a neo-liberal agenda internationally has diminished the teacher’s capacity for professional autonomy.

Contemporary Context of Integrated Curriculum



For the most part the shift in education focus and practice has been based on political and economic concerns. Leaders watch their bottom lines mindful of the questions:

- Is the governing party and country able to flourish in the global marketplace?
- Are our concerns for the GNP and balance of trade ultimately based on the education of our citizens and if so does the current system graduate workers and citizens who will push the nation forward?

Those whose concern is first and foremost for the welfare and development of the child wonder about the questions we are asking and how answers to questions that clearly demonstrate a national/global self-interest might influence our educational practice. Are we simply interested in how to improve national standing politically, economically and socially or do the questions address a much more basic concern, that of exercising a collective responsibility for meeting the needs of those who are our future? Certainly, a strong economy is paramount to the thoughts about the legacy we pass on, but how do we best insure economic prosperity? Our current approach of teaching isolated disciplines grounded in a fact heavy curriculum that is measured by a “test to the death” standardized assessment process is not working (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009).

Indeed, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) conceive of the steady progression of educational programs and policy into four distinct phases: the First Way (an over-dependency on the state for support); the Second Way (an over-reliance on increased regulation and educational standardization); the Third Way (high stakes testing and inflexible government mandates); and the Fourth Way (a new educational vision that is grounded in the very elements that are achieved through the use of an integrated curriculum approach to teaching and learning). The democratic processes underpin this Fourth Way in such a manner that it:

- values the democratic partnership among teacher, learner, and community,
- offers flexibility responsive to differentiated instruction,
- enables the teacher, whose professional educational judgment is valued, to meet the social and academic needs of the child, and
- embraces the community in a vision that excites and inspires.

Increased investment, shared responsibility, and encouraged public engagement will reconnect us to what grounds an educational policy and practice that seeks to meet the needs of all students.

The Irish Context

Yet the international context so far described only gives a flavour of the impact of neo-liberal policies. A more in-depth illustration of one country undergoing more radical changes would best illustrate this argument and so the Irish context is now explored.

Historically, Irish school cultures were commonly described as “traditional and authoritarian” (Schmitt 1973, p.50) where “deference to authority, obedience to regulations, and veneration of age and religion [were] the principal values and themes in Irish education.” For students in Irish schools they were largely “a brutal and terrifying place to be” (Tittley 1983, p. 140). There existed a dominant culture in Irish schools of resistance to change beyond the hegemonic Catholic and authoritarian system until the 1970s when “progressive or child-centred education received even token acceptance” (Tittley 1983, p.140). Indeed, Akenson (1975, p.76) states that the curricular pattern of Irish schooling “into which secondary school pupils were pressed was remarkable, chiefly as an indication of modern Ireland's rejection of the twentieth century's dominant intellectual trends.” Although somewhat diminished, the potency of authoritarianism in Irish schools is still evident and as expressed by Downes and Gilligan (2007, p.16) children in Irish schools are accepting of authoritarian arrangements as they feel that it is “the only way in which order within the learning environment could be secured for all.”

It is widely recognised now that second level education in Ireland is in need of significant reform. The dominance of economic considerations in Irish educational policy is also well-documented (Gleeson, 2010). Indeed Gleeson (2010) argues that curriculum as “the story we tell our children about the good life” (p.133) has been distorted, in large part, by an economic agenda. Both external and internal evaluations of teaching in Ireland highlight decreases in standards (OECD, 2009, 2010) but also the lack of meaning experienced by students in a curriculum that seems designed to prepare them for a university entrance exam. This has shaken the long held belief that Ireland has a high quality education system and has provoked questions as to the purpose of schooling in Ireland and how it might be changed to better meet the needs of learners and the “knowledge economy.”



The Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2012a) has recently published a Junior Cycle Framework which is the conclusion of a consultation process that suggested radical changes to lower secondary school, focusing on changing the very culture of schooling, the roles of teachers and students and redefining the purpose of the junior cycle away from a “dry run” at the Leaving Certificate examination (Irish students’ final post-primary examination). Schools are identified as the “sites of innovation” (NCCA, 2012b, p.3) with professional teachers identified as “agents of change.” While subjects are retained within the new framework, there is also significant provision for so called “short courses” which are designed specifically to allow schools opportunities to “connect with their communities” (NCCA, 2012a, p.16). Some will be suggested by the NCCA but there is also opportunity for schools to design their own short courses which will be assessed in house. There is extraordinary flexibility proposed to allow learning to answer to community concerns with the only mandated requirements being that they incorporate “key skills” and some “statements of learning” defined by the Framework.

This represents a radical departure from the traditional role of teachers in Irish schools who are now in a position to involve students in decision-making in a manner hitherto unthinkable. To do so they must become curriculum makers and assess the output of student work that will count towards a national certificate. It is likely that this will cause significant concern given that these were typically roles fulfilled by the Department of Education and Skills and the State Exams Commission respectively. Following Korthagen (2010) we suggest that NIC can provide the opportunity to develop teacher schema that are coherent with the principles of learning suggested by the short courses.

But how do you promote changes in roles where practices are so embedded? In addition Gleeson (2010, p.374) argues that the curriculum should move beyond the narrow focus of *techné* and “work towards praxis” which would, in part, “require the development of knowledge **in** practice, constructed by teachers in specific contexts, and knowledge **of** practice where educational knowledge is seen as problematic and contested.”

Criticisms of an Integrated Curriculum and Supporting Teachers with its Implementation

In addition to the resistance from those within the education system internationally and in Ireland, a negotiated integrated curriculum has been subject to valid criticisms from others. For example, Contardi, Fall, Flora, Gandee, and Treadway, (2000) discuss the criticisms of an integrated curriculum and cite the misconceptions that may exist for pupils when subjects are combined. Students may mistakenly assume that teachers may not have the knowledge, or pedagogical content knowledge, of the other disciplines to successfully integrate the curriculum. Also, Lederman and Niess (1998) state that there are epistemological differences between subjects that need to be carefully reconciled. This is particularly salient when the higher order nature of a subject is being taught (Lederman & Niess, 1998). At issue is the question of whether an integrated curriculum can demean, to an extent, a subject discipline or a teacher's pedagogical content knowledge. Although it has the capacity to do so, it is appropriate implementation of an integrated curriculum that can best offset this criticism. Indeed, McBride and Silverman (1991) argue that a teacher explicitly addressing these possible misconceptions can deepen pupils’ respective knowledge of the subjects taught. In addition, Venville, Wallace, Rennie, and Malone (2001) cite the valid criticism that many studies of an integrated curriculum do not occur over sustained periods of time and its efficacy depends on a few teachers’ commitment to it. They note that without committed people, and not the particular innovation itself, an integrated curriculum will eventually lose its impact on the school and the students (Ibid.). Venville et al. (2001) advocate for a pragmatic approach to curriculum integration, in line with that of Black and Atkin (1996), who believe that the primary focus of an integrated curriculum should be local in context so as to best meet the needs of those stakeholders who participate, specifically in the local community.

It is from this pragmatic approach advocated by Venville et al. (2001) that this paper argues that the teachers, as curriculum makers, should have the most belief and commitment to an integrated curriculum. But why should teachers have a commitment to an integrated curriculum and how could their concerns about its implementation be addressed? It is assumed that teachers adopt a “teacher as learner” attitude to this approach to the curriculum. This belief enables teachers to better adapt to the concerns of their pupils and mediate the tension between students’ concerns



and the body of knowledge the teachers believe should be taught.

This paper argues that a negotiated integrated curriculum should not be restricted to primary and secondary education alone, but extend to a teacher education model which views teachers, themselves, as learners. Addressing practicing teachers' concerns about their professional practice using a collaborative, problem-based teaching and learning model can actively demonstrate the efficacy of an integrated curriculum. For example, instead of an in-service day given to conveying a discrete body of knowledge, or even promoting the transmission of *techne*, it could be organised by asking teachers what are their concerns about their professional practice. This would allow the teacher educators in this example to facilitate a session that both addresses these teachers' concerns and also exalt the professional, contested knowledge base that should be at the heart of teachers' practice. This example could easily extend to newly qualified and pre-service teachers who are at the most delicate stage in their teaching career (Huberman, 1993) and most susceptible to relying on their lay theories (Sugrue, 1997). Curriculum integration can better succeed if it is effective in addressing teachers' educational concerns so that it can create more meaningful learning, both for them and for their students. It is the modelling of the effectiveness of an integrated curriculum that would reinforce its use by teachers within a whole school approach or promote its use to those teachers in schools that are not enacting it.

Conclusion

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argue that resilience is key to educational change which itself depends on a shared sense of purpose and a partnership approach to involve students and community working with teachers. We believe that NIC provides the democratic approach to realize this and that the proposed short courses within the revised Irish junior cycle allow the space for a redefinition of professionalism in Irish teaching. Teacher Education in Ireland must rise to the challenge of preparing teachers for this to allow them to become inquirers into their own professional practice. This can then develop what Whitehead (1989) terms a "Living Educational Theory" where teachers no longer experience the negation of their own professional values. Key to this is the ability to question hegemonic assumptions and for teachers to adopt a radical position as "robust innovators" (Boomer et al., 1992, p.286). The opportunity exists in Ireland to place the "learner" (teacher, student, parent,

community) into the curriculum in a meaningful way but teacher education must provide the scaffolds to do so.

In this paper we have attempted to make a case for the revival of a negotiated integrated curriculum to progress Hargreaves and Shirley's (2009) "Fourth Way" to empower both students and teachers. Curriculum, however it is conceived, is not unrelated to conceptions and practice of education, as well as the purposes of education. In the last 35 years as a result of the impact of neoliberalism, the dominant views about education and its purposes have been greatly influenced by a mechanistic, narrow utilitarian world view that marginalizes holistic education, genuine student engagement and participation, teachers' involvement in the co-construction of knowledge, and democratic education. Many scholars and educators have challenged the anti-democratic world view that has dominated education policy and practices (McMahon & Portelli, 2012; Portelli, 2012; Mayo, 2012). Nussbaum (2010), for example has argued that we are:

In the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. ... I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a worldwide crisis in education. Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance (pp.1-2).

While her argument is clear and strong, some may think that she is exaggerating the negative impact of the narrow utilitarianism and technicism we are experiencing. However, Brown (2011) another internationally renowned scholar echoes Nussbaum's warnings. She writes: "The dramatic thinning of key democratic values coupled with this intensification of nondemocratic forces and conditions threatens to replace self-rule with a polity in which the *demos* are pawns rather than governors of every kind of modern power" (Brown, 2011, p.21). And she adds: "The



survival of democracy depends upon a broadly and deeply educated people resisting the neoliberalization of everything, including themselves. There is not much hope and not much time” (Brown, 2011, p.36).

While we recognize the urgency of the matter that both Nussbaum and Brown identify, we do have hope. We believe that the possibilities of an integrated curriculum as we have outlined it in this paper can greatly assist in the re-birth of the critical agency needed to rejuvenate the democratic values and dispositions consistent with a meaningfully engaged citizenry and student population. We have identified the possibilities in the recent educational policy documents in Ireland. Of course, the next step is now to move from the rhetoric of policy to the hard work of educators in schools and for teacher educators. In this paper we have not only outlined the qualities and justification of an integrated curriculum approach, we have also provided the basis of a reconstruction of education and its purposes that are consistent with the approach that we have outlined – an approach that is solidly built on a genuine democratic tradition. Down and Smyth (2012, p.7) note that “teacher education is a site of ideological struggle over the nature, purpose and processes of education.” We believe that as teacher educators we can contribute to the change needed to re-establish the democratic ethos in our schools. The potential for change is there and the opportunity is to re-cast teachers and students as learners in a meaningful educational experience. NIC provides the structure for this and teacher education must provide this schema. We do not deny that the process of change is a continuous struggle and at times creates tensions. But it is exactly from these struggles and tensions that new possibilities are created:

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 2000, p.72).

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