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Primary Teachers and the Primary Curriculum

Introduction

Following the Plowden Report (1967), particular ways of thinking about the primary curriculum became established in Britain. As a result, in the minds of some conservative politicians at least, there remains a continuing view of the British primary curriculum as essentially and ideologically child-centred. But is it? The perception of child-centredness is rarely confirmed by empirical data. On the contrary, much research (eg HMI 1978, Galton et al 1980, Alexander 1992, Webb 1993) indicates that the primary curriculum in practice, in Britain, differs significantly from its conventional characterisation as child-centred. Nevertheless, the British primary curriculum continues to be perceived as child-centred, having particular characteristics such as prioritising individualised teaching, the child as learner, children's needs, learning through experience, an integrated curriculum, choice and freedom for pupils and democratic relations between pupils and teachers. Its practice has also been likened to mothering (Plowden 1967, Bernstein 1975, Walkerdine 1984/6, Steedman 1985).

If educational principles, such as educating the whole child in a mutually supportive school environment, are to be furthered, it is important that current curriculum practice and the reasons for it are clearly understood. The research on which this article is based suggests that the primary curriculum in Britain is, in practice, a mixture of different organisational features and teaching strategies that do not conform to any particular theoretical model of the curriculum (child-centred or otherwise) but which does follow a fairly clear pattern. It will be argued that the curriculum as practiced results from the external constraints under which primary schools and their teachers operate, and that this is reflected in the low status accorded to primary teachers specialist expertise in the teaching and learning of young children and breadth of curriculum coverage.

Research Strategy

A small-scale empirical study of the primary curriculum at the level of school/classroom practice, was undertaken in twenty-two primary schools in one education division in S W Hertfordshire. The research had the support of a newly appointed local primary adviser who shared the researchers interest in determining the nature of curriculum practice in schools in this division, which borders outer London Local

Education Authorities and has predominantly urban and suburban catchment areas.

The data gathered indicates patterns and characteristics of the primary curriculum that diverge significantly from those suggested by theories of child-centredness but which may more readily typify it. The research was undertaken between 1988 and 1990, as the implementation of the National Curriculum began. While schools at this time were clearly facing dramatic changes in the amount of direction about curriculum content received from central government, and had begun to include a greater emphasis on National Curriculum subjects such as science, they had yet to significantly alter the manner in which they organised and delivered the primary curriculum.

The research sought to develop an understanding of the curriculum as organised in primary schools, and as practiced in individual classrooms; of practitioners' definitions of primary curriculum specialisation; of their own specialist roles within their schools; and their relations with other curriculum specialists. It sought to do this in three ways:

- through an examination of the curriculum organisation of twenty two primary schools
- through an examination of the curriculum as structured, planned and delivered, by sixty-three teachers in their primary classrooms, across the infant and junior age-range;

- and through an examination of the Head Teachers and classroom teachers' observed and expressed curriculum roles and identities.

Interviews were conducted with all head teachers and class teachers in the sample (a total of 85), and the teachers' classrooms observed in action. An equal number of Reception, Year 2, Year 3 and Year 6 classes were studied (see Footnote 1) in order to gauge any differences between curriculum organisation and practice in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Interviews and observation as research tools, together with examination of school/class curriculum documents, were used in preference to questionnaires because of the frequently cited gap between teachers' stated views of their curriculum practice and their actual practice. Interviews took the form of fairly open headteacher and teacher commentaries around their views on the primary curriculum and their practice of it. Teachers and headteachers were encouraged to describe in detail their classroom/school curriculum practice and to offer reasons or explanations of 'why they did what they did'. This approach enabled teachers and headteachers to introduce ideas, thoughts or areas that were not pre-determined by the writer. Hence, it was left to them to specify what they meant by the primary curriculum, curriculum responsibility, and curriculum specialisation. The approach adopted for classroom observation was that of a non-participant observer.

Initial Findings

Simplistic characterisations of the primary curriculum as child-centred were found to be erroneous. The research data indicated a far more complex primary curriculum in practice than that suggested by the characterisation of it as child-centred. The school-based organisational features of the curriculum, and these teachers' daily curriculum practice did not fit commonly understood features of child-centredness. It had different features and guiding principles for different areas of the curriculum, different curriculum aims, clientele, and even time of day for the teaching of different subjects. No singular underlying and overriding educational code, principle, or ideology (eg as suggested by Bernstein 1975, Walkerdine 1984/6, Alexander 1991) was found which guided or determined the curriculum practice of these teachers, as individuals or as school-based groups. Rather there emerged a fairly distinctive alternative pattern that involved different clusters of characteristics associated with both child-centredness and other models of the curriculum. This alternative pattern was consistent across both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 regardless of whether children were taught in Infant or Junior only schools or in Junior Mixed Infants (combined) schools.

The School and Classroom Contexts

As with school-based curriculum planning, classroom-based planning prioritised 'basics' over the rest of the curriculum. This was evident in curriculum forecasts, timetables and routines, and in observed and claimed modes of curriculum delivery and children's activities.

Teachers called it by a variety of names - 'nitty gritties', '3Rs', 'basics' or 'bread and butter', but whatever its name, it was very much these teachers' curriculum priority, from Reception through to Year 6. 'Basics' were stated to be covered every day by almost three quarters of the teachers. They were such a priority that they were claimed, documented, and observed to take place every morning, in well over half these teachers' classrooms, with no significant difference between the two key stages of primary education. Teacher statements regarding the separation of 'basics' and the 'rest', for teaching 'basics' every day, and preferably first thing in the morning, were clearly supported by classroom observations. They were treated as separate subjects in most classrooms, and prioritised in terms of time allowed and the requirements made of pupils.

Less than a quarter of these teachers planned their teaching on the basis of doing different subjects at the same

time (ie an integrated day) although there was some variety and group work.

"I nearly always have them working, perhaps in different groups, on different aspects of the same subjects. But nearly always the same subject at the same time.. I found it better for my own organisation." (Year 6, 10- llyrs, JMI)

Pupil choice of activity was a rare and minor feature of teachers' curriculum delivery in these schools. The curriculum was very much teacher-structured and teacher-directed, and therefore not subject to significant areas of pupil choice. This was confirmed by observation, and was consistent across both key stages:

"If I feel they have worked sufficiently they do get what we call a choosing time, when they can choose the play house, and the large bricks. I tend to sort of dangle it in front of them I suppose. I mean they can choose from those activities once they've got their basic work done. But I'm afraid that does come first." (Reception, 4-5yrs, JMI)

"They haven't had any choices to make as regards project or topic work. It's all very structured... I think they're too young ...

We have choice in art. They can choose what they want to do in the picture." (Year 3, 7-8yrs, Junior)

Whilst the atmosphere of most classrooms observed was pleasant and industrious, teacher power, direction, and authority regarding curriculum delivery, including its content, was in most cases overtly visible to both children and observer; it was not based upon democratic relations between teacher and taught, even in a notional sense. Nor was it claimed to be so by class teachers.

"I'm inclined to lead the horse to water and pour the water down its throat. I'm less inclined but I know I should, to let them do the thinking. And I'm unsure how to set up situations where they're not wasting an awful lot of time going down wrong alleys. I know people say that time is valuable but I think not, because given the amount of time available to us, and the things we've got to do, we want to cut down going down dead alleys as much as possible." (Year 3, JMI)

When talking about choice, these teachers emphasised that, where it existed at all, it was structured rather than free choice, and then predominantly only when teacher-directed work has been satisfactorily completed:

"We don't give them complete free choice. They're not free to do as they please. They are required to do what we tell them to do a large percentage of the time." (Reception, 4-5yrs, JMI)

Regarding developmental psychology, the data suggested that these heads and teachers were not particularly supportive of the idea that children's learning occurs naturally, developmentally. Even where some teachers agreed that it might, in ideal terms, no teacher suggested that as a classroom strategy.

"I only go along with Piaget so far. I don't agree with all this readiness business. I think I'm more a Bruner person. You know, you can teach anything to a child as long as it's at their level."
(Year 2, 6-7yrs, Infant)

"I think they would learn anyway. But I think they learn an awful lot more with direction." (Year 6, 10-11yrs, JMI)

An illustrative cameo

The head of a junior school claimed he sought to influence and change classroom practice in his school through the use of highly structured curriculum guidelines and other formal organisational features, towards what could be described

as a 'Mixed Model' approach to curriculum practice, and away from traditional separate subject teaching (streaming by ability was practiced in his school until 1983). His school's curriculum guidelines were in two parts: 'basics', which meant structured schemes of work for mathematics and language/English, and 'the rest', under the heading of environmental education. The latter covered the other traditional subject areas of the curriculum (e.g. science, geography, history, RE, PSE), through the progressive in-depth study, over four years, of the topic 'Our Town'. This topic was designed to link to and build on children's background knowledge and experience. He developed the guidelines partly to overcome the practices of older established members of staff, whom he had 'inherited' on appointment six years previously, and who could not or would not change their teaching approach from what he saw as a formal chalk and talk' one, with desks in rows facing the blackboard, to mixed ability teaching and grouped desks. He had imposed the necessary organisational/physical changes (eg mixed ability classes), and encouraged others.

It is interesting to note that this Head teacher, together with others, had imposed particular forms of curriculum organisation, and guidelines on content, on teachers, in order to inhibit their use of didactic, ability-based teaching methods and to move them towards a somewhat more child-centred approach that incorporated some integration of subjects, mixed

ability grouping and the valuing of children's background knowledge and experience. But prioritisation of 'basics' remained.

Head Teacher's Appointment Priorities

In regard to staff appointments to his school, he stated:

"A good class teacher is what I want. The school did and still does need a music specialist. It was stated in adverts for three new appointments but from those who applied I appointed good classroom teachers and not a music specialist amongst them. I'd rather appoint a good classroom teacher than a mediocre class teacher in order to get a music specialist. I'd like a balance of (subject) specialists on my staff but it's not the main priority." (Head Teacher, Junior)

He was not alone in this view. Eight of the nine heads who explicitly commented indicated that appointing a good generalist class teacher was their main concern.

"I think if I appointed somebody who's fantastic at science but only in science, it wouldn't really be good enough, would it? Well, I don't think it would ... I'd appoint a good classroom

teacher and then try to help the teacher develop, by going on courses..."(Head Teacher, Infant)

"I think much more important is to try and obtain people who are going to relate well to children, understand children's needs, and how children learn. You can be a brilliant mathematician and can't teach a thing." (Head Teacher, JMI)

Head teacher's appointment priorities for new staff clearly indicated a preference for teachers with expertise in the teaching and learning of young children, generalist class teaching and breadth of curriculum coverage (see Footnote 2). This, I would argue, clearly indicates an area of primary teacher specialism that is rarely acknowledged as such by both educationalists and politicians alike. For no apparent reason, other than convention, teacher specialism is primarily thought of in terms of subject specialism (Alexander et al 1992b). Such a definition undermines the professional work and status of primary teachers whose key areas of special expertise do not fit comfortably under a traditional subject heading.

Teachers' Curriculum Roles and Identities

Initial teaching appointments were based on being a good generalist class teacher, and virtually all full-time teachers had sole responsibility for their class of children. In addition almost all teachers in the sample also carried a cross-school curriculum leadership role. The majority of these roles had a traditional subject label, indicating a subject base to curriculum management, organisation and planning, and confirming the apparent priority given to maths, language and science in these schools.

Areas assigned for curriculum leadership

| <u>Nat. Curric./RE</u> | | <u>Other</u> | | <u>Age</u> |
|-------------------------------|----|---------------------|---|-------------------|
| maths | 15 | special | 8 | H.ofInf.7 |
| science | 14 | computer | 8 | H.ofJn.1 |
| language | 13 | env.stud/topic | 6 | H. of LowJn 1 |
| music | 7 | INSET | 6 | |
| games/PE | 4 | audio vis.aids | 2 | |
| RE | 2 | equal opps. | 1 | |
| art | 2 | display | 1 | |
| history | 2 | school journeys | 1 | |

(nb there were no designated curriculum leaders for geography or technology within this sample at this time, although aspects of geography eg the local environment were included in the responsibilities of Environmental Studies curriculum leaders)

Whilst the majority of posts of responsibility were labeled with a separate subject heading, there were also a considerable number of 'other' areas covered. Fifty-nine posts were held for traditional subjects, with the 'basics' of science, language and maths occurring most frequently. Forty-two posts covered other areas', twenty-five of which might be described as child-centred/Plowden type curriculum specialisms (ie environmental education/topic, special needs, equal opportunities, display and age-range posts). Nevertheless, the priority for cross-school curriculum leadership was clearly 'basics'.

Generalist class teacher roles were combined with predominantly subject-based curriculum leadership in these schools, by teachers who were primarily appointed because of their class teacher rather than subject expertise.

Leadership roles normally took the form of organising resources and coordinating the views and curricular practices of others. These teachers generally advised others and shared their area or subject expertise through discussion and staff meetings. Head Teachers also saw them as formal mechanisms

for staff development, through team-teaching, working alongside class teachers or giving demonstration lessons. One head stated of her maths leader:

"She has actually spent some time working in each class, with groups of children. So the teacher can actually see her working, and can gain from her experience and influence. She goes on courses and things, and to disseminate it throughout the school we thought it best if she went into the actual classroom, alongside the teacher." (Head Teacher, Infant)

Many heads wanted curriculum leaders to visit other classes whilst they were 'in action', and to work alongside other class teachers, although this was difficult to organise given the lack of non-contact (non-teaching) time for class teachers with a leadership responsibility during the school day.

Primary Teachers as Specialists

When talking about their roles as primary teachers almost the whole sample described themselves as generalists. When asked specifically if they thought primary teachers are specialists, and if so what in, most said no, although some teachers related specialism to generalism and said it involves

coping with everything:

"I think teachers are specialists in absolutely everything. Don't you have to be? ... You've got to know a little about everything. And what you don't know, if a child comes to you with a question you've jolly well got to go home and find out."

(Reception, 4-5yrs, JM I)

"I wouldn't say they are specialists, but I think they're very special ... if children are deadened in education in their early formative years, if they haven't developed a joy of reading, a joy of finding out, at 11 years old, 12, 13, you're not going to get that back, that joy, that enthusiasm". (Year 2, 6-7yrs, JMI)

The apparent convention, that a specialist teacher is a subject specialist, clearly permeated the views of these teachers. However, their comments, and my observations of their practice, indicates that they possess a specialism but that it is of a different kind ie in the teaching and learning of young children and breadth of curriculum coverage. It is simply not recognised as such.

Subject specialism is also an important part of their role as primary teachers, through being cross-school curriculum leaders. When asked, most teachers could identify a subject in which they could claim specialist knowledge, either from their

initial training or subsequent INSET courses. However, they viewed subject specialism as predominantly secondary to, and following from, their expertise in generalist class teaching.

Summary of Initial Findings

The data generated from this research, some of which is presented here, clearly demonstrates that in these schools the whole curriculum was predominantly delivered by class teachers, often under a topic heading, to mixed-ability classes, whose pupils worked as individuals; but, it was also predominantly planned using a traditional list of subject headings, was delivered primarily in 'single subject-focus' teaching sessions (with very little integration), with overt teacher-direction and control, and was largely undifferentiated according to individual pupil interest or need. Class teachers tended to treat different areas of the curriculum differently i.e. in the form of curriculum planning and delivery of 'basics' and 'the rest' of the curriculum; 'basics' were effectively given priority in terms of aims, time allocated and time of day taught. These teachers also had two curriculum specialisms and roles, that of generalist class teaching and cross-school curriculum leadership.

Adherence then, to a particular model of curriculum practice, such as child-centredness, was not typical of these

teachers in these schools and classrooms. The complexity of the curriculum found in most of these schools and classrooms went significantly beyond questions regarding the degree of adherence to or emphasis on child-centredness.

Conclusion

It is difficult to gauge how much subject-centred teaching has increased as a result of the introduction of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, although research continues in this area. Clearly it has not been demonstrated to have increased sufficiently in the mind of Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools, Mr. Chris Woodhead (TES 1995), who so recently castigated primary teachers for, what he believes to be, their 'resistance to change' and their 'commitment to particular beliefs about the purposes and conduct of education' ie their adherence to progressive education.

What this research clearly demonstrates is that the primary curriculum, at least in these schools, was far more subject-focused and less child-centred than had previously been thought, and that such patterns of curriculum organisation and delivery were clearly in place at the time the National Curriculum was being introduced in primary schools. The concern, for example, with subjects (especially basics) and

overt teacher direction of children's activities did not result from the introduction of the National Curriculum although they may have become more widespread as a result.

The 'Mixed Model' of the curriculum in practice results, in part at least, from external, wider societal influences. The constraints and influences of the wider social context are clearly present in the definition given by the teachers of themselves, as non-specialists, because they are generalists first and foremost (but, I would argue, experts in the teaching and learning of young children and breadth of curriculum coverage). If that is how they are defined by society in general it is not surprising if that is how they perceived and defined themselves. For these primary teachers subject-specialism was secondary. As the predominantly accepted delineation of a curriculum specialism it was not a high status identity that they felt they could claim for themselves. However, they should!

For credibility amongst colleagues, and, as demonstrated, for initial teacher appointment, head teachers said candidates had to be good, generalist class teachers (indicative of child-centredness). Yet we know that males, who teach older primary children and who are more likely to have a science/maths/IT subject specialism, tend to take precedence for career advancement and the holding of senior management positions (DES/NUT 1990, Alexander 1991,

Thornton 1996 forthcoming, also see Footnote 2). The criteria related to career advancement are clearly permeated by wider social power/status issues relating to gender, age-range taught and particular, individual, subject affiliations and thus further reflect the constraints and influences of the wider social context on primary curriculum practice. Gendered constraints and influences certainly pre-date the National Curriculum.

Primary teachers have some control over how they interpret and respond to changes in their working environment, even ones of such magnitude as the National Curriculum. They also have authority over their pupils. Primary teachers thus have some degree of power regarding how they perform their curriculum duties and in relation to their pupils. However their power and status in relation to secondary school and higher education teachers appears to be low. This may be due to their perceived lack of a subject specialism, and because teaching young children has historically carried low status, likened to 'mothering' by both educational researchers and a recent Secretary of State for Education in his attempts to create a 'mums army' of primary teachers with limited education and training.

Clearly primary curriculum practice is socially embedded. It does not exist in a vacuum, in an idealised educational world, divorced from its social location. Whilst not pre-determined or simplistically mirroring wider society, the

primary curriculum does reflect in some ways those wider social pressures, tensions and conflicts. Primary teachers have some measure of autonomy regarding the curriculum, but they are not free to do as they please in their classrooms; they are themselves socially located, and the curriculum is constrained by formalised political demands, and formal and informal social expectations eg regarding the teaching of basic literacy and numeracy skills to young children.

The 'Mixed Model' of curriculum practice also indicates a lack of societal consensus about the aims and purposes of education, and the means by which to achieve them. The resultant curriculum patterns, as identified by this research, could be viewed as a selective and flexible response by primary teachers to diverse social pressures and constraints. It should not be surprising that it varies significantly from the idealised model of child-centredness it is often characterised to be. This variance, and the underlying reasons for it, must be recognised if we are to move towards a consensus about the aims and purposes of primary education and to enable all children to develop to their full potential.

As a teacher in the sample noted

"The problem is fitting everything into a single day, or week, or term ... And everyone wants us to be everything to everybody. Now we're never going to do that." (Year 6, 10-11yrs, JM1)

Footnote 1

Sixty-three classes were observed and their teachers interviewed out of an intended sample of sixty-eight. The five missing classes are accounted for by the practice of vertical grouping in a limited number of schools. This resulted in five teacher interviews and classroom observations covering more than one age group ie three teachers taught vertically grouped infant classes covering both reception and year 2; two teachers taught vertically grouped year 2 and year 3 classes.

Footnote 2

The data also suggested that, contrary to Head teacher's appointment priorities, primary teacher promotion may relate

more to subject specialism, teacher gender and the age of pupils taught, thus supporting Alexander's findings (1991).

The relationship between gender and subject specialism, as it emerged from this research, is explored more fully in, "Subject Specialism, Gender and Status: The Example of Primary School Mathematics", *Education 3 - 13*, Spring 1996 (forthcoming). Briefly, the sample was chosen according to age-range taught (Reception, Yr2, Yr3, Yr6 plus Headteacher) rather than gender.

However it emerged that:-

- * Deputy Headteachers more frequently taught Yr6 than any other age-range.

- * Yr6 teachers were more likely to co-ordinate mathematics or science than teachers of other age-ranges.

- * Yr6 teachers were more likely to be male.

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