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Chapter 6

Democracy and the Curriculum: English and Finnish Perspectives

Neil Hopkins & Mirja Tarnanen

Introduction

The issue of democracy and the curriculum in the English and Finnish educational contexts is a vexed one. Is democracy even an appropriate concept when discussing the curriculum and, if it is appropriate, what do we mean by democracy? Ultimately, what is studied as part of a curriculum revolves around debate over knowledge and control. What constitutes appropriate or sufficient knowledge that is necessary for students to study and who determines what this knowledge is? Such questions go to the very heart of democracy and the curriculum. As authors of this chapter, we have defined democracy as the processes that are in place to allow the various stakeholders a voice in how the curriculum is constructed, maintained and modified. We appreciate that this is a loose definition of democracy, when compared to debates within political philosophy or theory, but will serve our purpose within the parameters of this chapter.

This chapter will discuss the levels of government control of the curriculum in England and Finland from a largely historical and theoretical perspective. As stated by many commentators and academics within education and outside, many countries in Western Europe and North America have adopted an increasingly centralised approach to their educational systems, often accompanied by reference to ‘standards’, ‘economic efficiency’ and the need for ‘social inclusion’. Again, many commentators have aligned these arguments with neo-liberalism, in the sense that the state is viewed as working closely with the demands of the ‘free’ market as a ‘provider’ of students who are ‘work-ready’ for industry and business.

Our collaboration has revealed some interesting perspectives on government control, stakeholders and the curriculum. On the surface, England seemingly conforms to many of the neo-liberal assumptions regarding government control of a prescriptive ‘national curriculum’, high-stakes testing to maintain and improve ‘standards’ and a belief that education is inextricably entwined with employability. Finland, on the other hand, has a long-established culture of negotiation and consultation with stakeholders on the curriculum that allows individual schools and local authorities considerable freedom on what is taught and when.

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this chapter has been primarily theoretical. Both authors have researched and analysed a range of legislation, government policy, professional

and academic literature to provide insight into the issue of educating for democracy within given curricula. The selection of references was chosen in order to give a wide perspective of the issues discussed from a variety of different viewpoints.

English Perspectives

The Curriculum in England: A Brief Historical Outline

In England, as with many other countries in Europe, there has been a decisive shift towards control of the school curriculum by central government authorities over the past 30 years. The key event in this development was the implementation of the *National Curriculum* in 1988. For the first time, the school curriculum for state schools in England was divided into ‘core’ and ‘foundation’ subjects and the division of students into 4 key stages. From 1944 until 1988, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) had considerable influence on the creation and content of the curriculum for the schools under their jurisdiction. This was to change in 1988 – the subjects studied within the curriculum became, to a large extent, statutory. Considerable powers were given to the Secretary of State for Education and the LEAs’ role became that of supervisors of a centrally-established curriculum rather than devisors of a range of local curricula.

The centralising tendency in England has been enhanced and extended in several ways since the adoption of the *National Curriculum*. Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) were created at the end of each Key Stage to measure children’s progress according to nationally-set levels for the ‘core’ subjects. In 1998 and 1999, the Labour government, fearing a decline in standards in English and mathematics introduced the *National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategies*. These *Strategies* focused not only on the content of what was to be taught but also on the way the subjects of English and mathematics were to be taught. Based on research, the government demanded specific types of pedagogy, incorporating elements of whole class and group work, in what became known as a ‘literacy’ or ‘numeracy’ hour for schools in primary phase of Key Stages 1 and 2. Since 2010, further changes have been discussed and implemented. A form of ‘deregulation’ and ‘decentralisation’ of the school curriculum has come into force. State primary and secondary schools have been encouraged to become ‘academy’ schools where funding is provided directly to the school. Academy schools are not required to follow the *National Curriculum*. Alongside this, the government has also promoted the creation of ‘free’ schools – like academy schools, free schools are not required to follow the *National Curriculum*.

The current position of the *National Curriculum* in England is, therefore, a complicated one. It is still a statutory requirement for those state schools under LEA control. As was stated above, academies and free schools are not required to follow the *National Curriculum* which could, it is argued, give them a certain latitude with regards to what is taught. However, the *National Curriculum* still exerts a significant

influence, even on academies and free schools as Ofsted inspects schools based on government priorities that are usually reflected in the *National Curriculum*.

Centralising the Curriculum: Causes and Effects

The centralising tendencies of the English state education system have been criticised by a number of authors (Alexander, 2010; Wyse, 2008). This concern operates at least two levels. Firstly, centralisation of the curriculum inevitably puts power in the hands of government ministers and civil servants in the Department for Education (DfE). This creates a tension between a perceived need to maintain ‘consistency’ and ‘standards’ at a national level and a potential decrease in the voice and influence of educational professionals within individual schools. It is important not to over-romanticise the period before the *National Curriculum* as a period of unfettered local democracy. However, the issue of curriculum control is a live one in England. The appeal to ‘standards’ in education goes back to the Black Papers of the 1970s. Successive governments have taken the concept of ‘standards’ to devise a series of targets and benchmarks against which schools, teachers and students are measured and judged (Lingard in Wyse et al, 2013). The debate has often focused on how ‘standards’ can be devised in education and who has control over the drawing up of such standards. Many commentators in education have been concerned that the focus on standards and centralisation of curriculum control have led to a situation where schools feel they are unable to take risks due to the demands of SATs results, Ofsted inspections and other government targets.

The second major concern regarding the centralisation of the school curriculum is the perceived ‘neoliberal’ educational agenda followed by various governments since the late 1970s. James Callaghan’s ‘Great Debate’ speech of 1976 set the focus of the school curriculum very much on the need for economic efficiency, productivity and progress. The creation of ‘core’ subjects in the *National Curriculum*, SATs tests for these subjects and the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies* have had the effect of over-emphasising literacy and numeracy to the detriment of other subjects and disciplines in the curriculum. Competency in English and mathematics have been seen as essential in England’s attempt to maintain and improve its educational standing *vis-à-vis* other competitor nations (see DfE, 2010b). Successive government reports have stated the vital links between competency in English and mathematics and the needs of industry and business in a competitive international climate (HM Treasury, 2006). The curriculum in primary and secondary schools (as well as sixth-form and FE colleges) has reflected this focus.

The division of ‘core’ and ‘foundation’ subjects in the *National Curriculum* had the effect of potentially pushing the arts and humanities to the periphery of both the primary and secondary curricula. There are several implications for democracy with this trend. The marginalising of arts and humanities subjects narrows the opportunities for teachers and students to explore issues and themes that are central to

being an active and informed citizen in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (this trend was alleviated, to a small extent, by the introduction of Citizenship into the *National Curriculum* at Key Stages 3 and 4 in 2002). Alongside this is the message such a curriculum projects to students, parents and other stakeholders that state education is fundamentally a preparation for employment. The notion of education as an experiment in and preparation for democratic citizenship is difficult to maintain when the focus in the state curriculum is so heavily on what is perceived as instrumental to economic growth and productivity. It will be interesting to see if academies and ‘free’ schools will veer from this course towards other curriculum priorities and models.

Democratising the Curriculum: The Concept of Stakeholders

There have been various proposals to address the perceived over-centralisation of the school curriculum in England. The concept of local stakeholders is, perhaps, one of the most promising ideas to develop as a means of opening out discussion on the issue of content and control of the curriculum. A stakeholder is an individual or group that has an important vested interest in a given organisation or institution (see Hutton, 1996). In terms of education, stakeholders would include: government (local and central), teachers, students, businesses, voluntary organisations, community representatives.

One interesting example of research into stakeholders influencing curriculum policy and delivery is the work of Luís Armando Gandin and Michael Apple (2002) in Porto Alegre, Brazil. In the 1990s, the city government implemented a policy of *Orçamento Participativo* (OP or Participatory Budgeting). As part of OP, a series of ‘Citizen’ schools were established in the city. One of the ways participation is demonstrated within the Citizen School is through the local negotiation of curriculum aims and objectives. The curriculum is seen, at a fundamental level, as a construct of the local community, something the local population play an active role in discussing and creating. According to Gandin and Apple, ‘[t]he starting point for the construction of curricular knowledge is the culture(s) of the communities themselves’ (Gandin & Apple, 2002: 367; Hopkins, 2014).

Whilst it must be acknowledged that any experiment in school governance is culturally-specific and does not readily translate from one context to another, the Porto Alegre project shows how attempts to democratise the school curriculum might work ‘on the ground’. In terms of the English context, Michael Reiss and John White have proposed the idea of a ‘Commission’ that would oversee curriculum aims every five years and would be independent of the government of the time. Reiss and White also suggest that the *National Curriculum* should be non-statutory but schools would be expected to justify any deviation from the broad-based aims outlined by the Commission (Reiss & White, 2013:70-74). It is important to state here that any proposal to allow greater freedom for schools in the curriculum should be balanced by

schools consulting with stakeholders to ensure changes or experiments have a degree of democratic accountability (Hopkins, 2014).

The role for local stakeholders might be enhanced by proposals set forth in the *Cambridge Primary Review* (Alexander, 2010). The *Review* advocates a curriculum where 30 percent of the teaching time is devoted to a ‘the community curriculum’ that is locally proposed and non-statutory. Accordingly:

Each local authority would convene a community curriculum partnership (CCP) to consider what might be included in the local component of each domain [of learning]. The CCPs would include primary, secondary and early years teachers, domain experts and community representatives, and would have domain-specific sub-committees ... Children would be involved in the consultations, probably through school councils (Alexander, 2010:273-274).

This, in essence, is not radically different from Reiss and White’s Curriculum Commission envisaged on a local basis. It goes a considerable way towards acknowledging the need to include a variety of perspectives and voices in the planning of school and college curricula. Where it differs from Reiss and White is in the statutory/non-statutory distinction.

Finnish Perspectives

The Curriculum in Finland: A Brief Historical Outline

In Finland, the basis of the current basic education was established in the 1960s, and implementation of the comprehensive school system throughout Finland was completed in the 1970s. This comprehensive school reform focused on everything from curriculum and text books to salaries and administration. Also, teacher training underwent substantial revision as it was raised to university level (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006). The comprehensive school reform was part of a larger change in the Finnish society as the entire country turned from an agrarian society to a Scandinavian welfare state. Education played an essential role in this change not least due to ideas behind the *Comprehensive School Curriculum*: pluralism, pragmatism, and equity (Väljjarvi, 2012). The idea was that every child was provided with a good education regardless of family income, social status, or place of residence and these principles and values have remained mostly unchanged since the 1960s (Aho et al, 2006).

The comprehensive school reform was, from the start, a top-to-bottom reform and implemented centralized management and steering of both primary and secondary education in Finland. In practice, this meant that the first national curriculum published in 1970 was strongly centralized. Schools were visited and audited by the authorized inspectors and textbooks were examined and approved by the national

authorities. The transformation phase was considered successful, both administratively and politically, so this centralized management of education continued for the next two decades. The next phase of change was created by a push to decentralize that took place in the late 1980s and 1990s. The *Basic Education Act* in 1983 and the *Curriculum Reform* in 1985 launched the first steps towards decentralization and teacher autonomy as they set higher goals for all students instead of streaming. This turned the focus onto the individual needs of students and provided more decision-making power for municipalities (Vitikka et al, 2012). Also, education experts and professionals were involved in the reform more actively although many basic matters concerning education (such as the core subjects taught to all pupils and the distribution of teaching hours between various subjects) were and are still decided by the government and parliament (see also Aho et al, 2006).

The 1990s can be considered the start of an era of trust-based culture in Finland which meant that the system (in the form of the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education) believed that teachers together with principals, parents, and their communities knew how to provide the best possible education for their children and youth (Aho et al., 2006). Consequently, the curriculum reform of 1994 provided an even larger degree of autonomy for local authorities as they were now free to make decisions of their own in terms of state funding and organizing schools as part of the education process. The educational reform legislation of 1998 continued the decentralization process and enhanced the local decision-making power and emphasized goals for learning, pupil rights and duties. Thus, as a natural continuation of this, the curriculum reforms of 2004 emphasised moving away from a centrally prescribed national curricula toward the development of school-based curricula with active learning pedagogies resulting in changing roles and responsibilities for teachers (Webb et al, 2004). The curriculum of 2004 was introduced as a normative document for each locally-devised curriculum and provided criteria for student assessment at the end of lower secondary school (this being introduced for the first time). At the time of writing this chapter, the latest curriculum reform is the *Core Curriculum for Basic Education*, introduced at the end of 2014 and coming into effect in 2016. Local curricula based on the national ones are under construction by schools and schools districts throughout Finland.

The curriculum and enabling different voices in schools

According to the *Basic Education Act* (628/1998), state education is governed by a unified national core curriculum in accordance with the *Act*. The government determines the general national objectives of education referred to in the *Basic Education Act* and the allocation of lesson hours to the teaching of different subjects and subject groups. The national core curriculum is provided by the National Board of Education (NBE), a national agency in the education sector and responsible for implementation of the education policy under the Ministry of Education and Culture. The NBE determines the objectives and core contents of different subjects and cross-

curricular themes, guidance counselling and the basic principles of home-school cooperation and pupil welfare under the purview of the local education authority. In practice, the *National Core Curricula* is compiled in working groups as a collaboration process lead by the NBE. Teacher educators, university researchers, schools teachers and educational authorities specializing in learning and teaching of specific school subjects are represented in the working groups. Municipalities, as autonomous authorities, are obliged to provide a curriculum within the framework decided in the core curriculum and these curricula are guidance documents at the local level.

In principle, the national core curriculum in Finland is formed, at least partly, through a democratic process where teachers, parents and other citizens are welcome to participate in discussions in seminars and online settings to give their comments on the draft version of the curriculum. After discussion and comment rounds, the *National Core Curriculum* becomes a binding document. Those who have analysed the Finnish process of national curriculum reform from Habermas's discourse theory of justice point of view consider the process relatively democratic though they question its validity at both the local and the national level when focusing on moral and ethical acceptability in terms of setting up factual norms through a truly democratic process (Heikkinen et al, 2014). In other words, at the national level individuals seem to have the autonomy of deliberating in public spheres as they are provided different forms of participation, and they are even encouraged to do so whereas at local level, the curriculum appears to be devised mainly by the authorities (Heikkinen et al, 2014).

On a global scale, Finnish teachers seem to be highly educated holding Master's degrees and enjoying high levels of autonomy in a culture of trust regarding their performance. As a body, they can decide their teaching methods, textbooks and other materials without interference. Also, in comparison to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of accountability in education, Finland has not followed the testing-oriented assessment culture that makes schools and teachers accountable for learning results but assessment is, as it has been traditionally, the task of each teacher and school in Finland. In the Finnish education system there is only one standardized high-stake test, the matriculation examination at the end of upper-secondary school. Thus, the teachers are free to create their own assessments based on common learning goals and when yearly given school reports are provided the schools can decide if the grades (on the scale from 4 to 10) or literal assessments are used on the report (see also FNBE, 2014).

Accordingly, the pedagogy in the schools seems to differ considerably from the pedagogy applied in systems characterized by explicit tracking and streaming (Väljärvi, 2012). As a result of valuing equality and pluralism, classrooms are grouped heterogeneously meaning that all students, including students with learning difficulties and the most able students, work together in the most cases. According to

studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s heterogeneous grouping appears to be of the greatest benefit to less able students. The performance of the most able students, in contrast, seems to remain virtually the same irrespective of how the groups are formed (Väljörvi, 2007:40-41).

Opportunities for a multi-voiced society within schools

In general, as described above, the Finnish education system provides excellent potential for listening to student voices in relation to many aspects of the school system from curriculum to teaching practices and assessment of learning (Lansdown, 2001). However, enhancing democracy in the schools and fostering student voice do not seem to be evident throughout the various curriculum reforms in recent Finnish education history. According to Harinen & Halme (2012), who have analyzed Finnish children's well-being based on the outcomes of the international comparison study, Finnish elementary schools have problems especially with regard to the right to participate - children's voices are seldom heard in terms of the content of education, pedagogical practices, schedules, length of schooldays and issues related to the equipment at school. Harinen & Halme (2012) also point out that when approaching children's rights as a question of self-fulfillment, this side of well-being, as well as the ability of Finnish students to express themselves and be heard within the official school environment, seem to have been overlooked due to the emphasis on internationally recognized results in knowledge and skills when discussing Finnish children.

In this sense, Flutter's (2007) idea of pupil voice is a term which embraces strategies that offer pupils opportunities for active involvement in decision-making within their schools – something which is not currently actualized in Finnish schools.

FitzSimmons et al. (2013) introduce three key tenets: reflection, the active implementation of the verb to speak and the powerful verb to act in the framework of action-oriented critical pedagogy. According to FitzSimmons et al. (2013) when looking at the meaning of these tenets for the Finnish curriculum, learning should become a 'shock and awe' experience as students learn to embrace the notions of 'formal' and 'authentic' freedom with the understanding that authenticity comes from within. Thus, learning should not be attached to closed physical settings and teacher-led and textbook-based pedagogies which has been traditionally the case in many schools in Finland (Luukka et al, 2011).

There seems to be a belief among authorities, educators and experts that children's wishes and visions have been taken into account in shaping the ongoing reform of the *National Core Curriculum*. For example, the Head of Curriculum Development, Halinen (2015) points out: 'Developing schools as learning communities, and emphasizing the joy of learning and a collaborative atmosphere, as well as promoting student autonomy in studying and in school life – these are some of our key aims in the reform' (Harinen & Halme, 2012; Halinen, 2015). This might be the case at

policy document level, in terms of intended curriculum. In the sense of the enacted curriculum, school communities and teachers play a key role as they produce, reproduce, manifest and contest through their attitudes and behavior what they think about their students and how they listen and respond to students' ideas and how they understand good teaching (see Porter, 2006). Teachers are also influenced by policies as they are a multi-layered, multispatial and locally informed process where people produce and reproduce policies in interaction with each other and with the policy processes (Halonen et al, 2015).

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the issue of how and whether democracy has any role to play regarding the construction and maintenance of curricula. As noted in the introduction, we have taken a relatively loose and expansive notion of democracy as the participation of important stakeholders in the process of deciding what should be taught and studied as part of a given curriculum. The levels of negotiation and consultation between stakeholders might be seen as a possible sign of how 'democratic' the curriculum within an education system or jurisdiction might be. In England, the idea of stakeholders in the formulation of policy and delivery of the school curriculum is a potentially constructive way of facilitating a range of perspectives on this issue. The movement towards a negotiated stance amongst the various stakeholders regarding the curriculum could be seen as a means of democratising a vital area of education. Although the current government's policy emphasis is on deregulation and decentralisation of powers to individual schools, it remains to be seen whether this will result in an increase in local participation and accountability in regards to the curriculum or becomes yet another means of control by government ministers and civil servants. Currently, the centralised nature of the curriculum still generates concerns amongst many educationalists regarding the level of government control and the focus towards a neoliberal model where education is strongly linked to economic productivity and efficiency.

The Anglo-Saxon accountability movement has not reached Finland yet although there is public discussion in the media and amongst education experts if there should be a standardized testing system at the end of basic education to ensure reliability of assessment and control the differences between schools. Generally speaking, public opinion seems to be mostly against testing-orientation so far. According to Rinne et al. (2002) the Finnish populace has always had a proud mentality and stood its ground, even though the prevailing political and economic elite at various periods in history would, if left to their own devices, have quickly changed course in the direction indicated by world trade or the political expediencies of the age. However, Finnish society is going through profound demographical, cultural and structural transitions regarding the globalization and internationalization of its economy and trade.

Finland is considered to be culturally and linguistically homogenous but this is changing as the country becomes more diverse. Alongside this diversity is a society more complex and unpredictable which makes it challenging for schools to prepare their students for future citizenship. Thus, children and young people's participation cannot be understood in isolation from social, cultural and political context in which it occurs. The current curriculum reform has not shown, yet, if it provides equal and appropriate opportunities for all students to manifest their individual agency and participate in decision-making in their school communities. Such participation can, hopefully, have a positive impact on the attainment levels of the students themselves and on the well-being of all members of the community.

Nevertheless, a notable area of difference concerns teacher autonomy and professionalism in the two countries. England's attempts at making teaching into a Master's profession in the 1990s and early 2000s has now been quietly shelved while the emphasis in Finland is still on teacher education as a Master's discipline. Since 1994, Finland's process of decentralisation has continued with teacher autonomy and school-based curricula becoming central themes in a series of reforms. These reforms are part of a process of giving more power to local municipalities in Finland and it will be interesting to see whether schools involve other local stakeholders when devising the curriculum. One potential danger of decentralisation and deregulation is the power that could be vested in teachers and headteachers in relation to the school curriculum at the expense of other interested parties in the locality. There is possibly more likelihood of this in Finland than England due to the culture of teacher autonomy and the regard that the profession is held in there. Whether the 'free' school movement in England offers the prospect of genuine stakeholder involvement in school-specific curricula is something that will be watched over carefully especially with the announcement of an increase in 'free' schools from 2015. Interestingly, however, England's system appears to be more open than Finland, at present, on the inclusion of student voice in the governance of schools. Whether this openness goes as far as discussion of the curriculum will depend on the phase, context and culture of the individual school but this observation challenges, in certain instances at least, the idea that England has an exclusively 'top-down' approach to education. Finland's adoption of 'active-learning pedagogies' since 2004 also opens the way, potentially, to more student involvement into what is studied and how as part of their learning.

It could be argued that in England, the focus on English, mathematics and science as a drive towards greater economic productivity and growth leaves little room for exploring issues, themes and subjects that are conducive to active citizenship. The marginalisation of arts and humanities subjects is a worrying trend in many educational jurisdictions because these disciplines facilitate the creativity and sense of debate necessary for active citizenship in the twenty-first century. This trend is not exclusive to England or other countries normally associated with neo-liberalism in education. The situation in Denmark, for instance, has also shown signs of leaning heavily towards measurability and employability in education over the past couple of

years. The Danish government has implemented a series of policies to increase the proportion of curriculum time devoted to literacy and numeracy alongside an expansion of school hours. This, alongside other issues, led to an industrial dispute between the government and teacher unions and a six-week 'lockout' when the schools were closed. This might be seen as evidence of what Pasi Sahlberg (2012) has referred to as the Global Educational Reform Movement or GERM, a tendency within various educational jurisdictions to look for instrumental 'improvements' in educational 'performance' at the potential expense of the wider concerns of any given curriculum or programme of study. It is within these wider concerns where democracy in education is most likely to flourish and any movement towards an instrumental approach to the curriculum will have negative consequences for our topic of discussion.

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