Redesigning Schooling - 3

Principled curriculum design

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REDESIGNING
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Dylan Wiliam is emeritus professor of educational assessment at the Institute of Education, University of London where, from 2006 to 2010, he was deputy director. In a varied career, he has taught in urban public schools, directed a large-scale testing programme, served a number of roles in university administration, including dean of a school of education, and pursued a research programme focused on supporting teachers to develop their use of assessment in support of learning.

His recent work has focused on the use of assessment to support learning (sometimes called formative assessment). He was the co-author, with Paul Black, of a major review of the research evidence on formative assessment published in 1998 and has subsequently worked with many groups of teachers, in both the UK and the USA, on developing formative assessment practices. He is co-author, with Siobhan Leahy, of SSAT's *Embedding formative assessment: professional development pack*.

Dylan is also the author of the forthcoming SSAT title *Redesigning Schooling – 8: Assessment*.

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SSAT's purpose

SSAT believes that teachers make students' lives. As the world gets more complex, that vital role becomes ever more demanding. As the hub of the largest, longest-standing network of education professionals in England, SSAT exists to help teachers perform their job even better, more confidently and more professionally than before.

This publication

Audience: Education professionals at all stages and settings

Aims: Dylan Wiliam starkly outlines the challenge: 'the rather terrifying thing about being involved in education at the present time is that we are the first generation of educators who know we have no idea what we are doing.' This is because, although education is changing fast, the world is changing faster. Professor Wiliam explains what this means in terms of curriculum in our schools and outlines seven suggested principles of curriculum design. This pamphlet aims to help schools make curriculum development a planned and collegial process, and one that builds on the expertise of others.'

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Introduction

In recent years in England, discussion of the school curriculum has been all but absent. This neglect has been largely driven by the adoption in 1988 of a national curriculum for schools in England and Wales. Many teachers, leaders and policymakers assumed that because the government had specified what schools were required to teach, then no further discussion of the issue of curriculum was necessary.

This belief was mistaken for two reasons. The first is that the legal framework of the national curriculum specified only what schools were legally required to teach – any school was entirely free to teach whatever it wished in addition to the prescribed national curriculum. The second is that the real curriculum – the lived daily experience of young people in classrooms – requires the creative input of teachers. For example, the national curriculum may require that students learn about negative numbers, but the kinds of analogy that a teacher might use to teach this topic (e.g. heights above and below sea level, temperatures above and below zero, positive and negative bank balances, and so on) must be chosen with an understanding of the students, their experiences, and a range of other contextual factors. So the real curriculum is created by teachers, every day.

Curriculum development therefore takes place constantly in every school, but the lack of attention to this process means that it is rarely given enough time, is generally done by teachers working alone, and tends to be done as an ad hoc activity. The aim of this pamphlet is therefore to help schools make curriculum development a planned and collegial process, and one that builds on the expertise of others. Every school's curriculum has to be, by definition, unique, but by using the ideas in this booklet, schools can adapt and build on the work of others to design a curriculum that will meet the needs of their students.

The first chapter addresses, briefly, the different reasons we have for educating young people.

The second chapter discusses how the idea of 'curriculum' has evolved over the years, drawing in particular on the work of Ralph Tyler, Hilda Taba and Lawrence Stenhouse.

The third chapter shows why the development of the 'real' curriculum requires the involvement of teachers at each stage of the curriculum development process, and presents seven principles of curriculum design that need to be considered in the process, namely that a curriculum should be balanced, rigorous, coherent, vertically integrated, appropriate, focused, and relevant.

The fourth chapter presents some ideas that schools can use with their teachers and other stakeholders (e.g. governors, students, parents) in the development process of curriculum redesign.

Chapter 1

Why educate?

It is – just about – possible to imagine a world without schools. However, as Denis Lawton wrote:

> 'Certain aspects of our way of life, certain kinds of knowledge, certain attitudes and values are regarded as so important that their transmission to the next generation is not left to chance in our society but is entrusted to specially trained professionals (teachers) in elaborate and expensive institutions (schools)'. (Lawton, 1975: p.7)

The question that then arises is what kinds of knowledge, attitudes and values should be prioritised? Different authors have proposed different responses to this question, depending on what they conceive the purpose of education to be. However, it does seem that most of the justifications that have been made for mass public education can be grouped into four broad categories.

Personal empowerment: Arguably the most important aim of education is to allow young people to take greater control of their own lives, perhaps best exemplified by the work of Paulo Freire. The idea is

that rather than simply enculturating young people into the existing systems, education is the means by which people 'deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world' (Shaull, 1970: p.34).

Cultural transmission: Another reason that is often given for educating young people is, in Matthew Arnold's words, to pass on from one generation to the next, 'the best that has been thought and known in the world' (Arnold, 1869: p.70). Those who do not know what people are expected to know are regarded as ignorant – not stupid, but simply lacking the knowledge expected of them.

Preparation for citizenship: Democratic citizenship arguably works only if those who are voting understand the choices they are given, and education therefore has a vital role to play in preparing citizens so that they can make informed decisions about their participation in democratic society (Council of Europe, 2010).

Preparation for work: As a number of reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development have shown, more educated workers are more productive (e.g. Hanushek & Woessman, 2010). Educational achievement is therefore inextricably linked with economic prosperity.

The important point about these four broad philosophies of education is that they are not alternatives from which we can choose our favourites. All are important, and often in tension with one another, and so any education system is a – sometimes messy – compromise between these four sets of aims.

Finding an appropriate compromise between these different, and often conflicting, aims is made more difficult by the fact that the relationships

between the categories of aims are not fixed but are in constant flux. A compromise that works effectively today is not likely to be the best compromise in the future. As the world becomes more complex, what is needed for personal empowerment today may be completely inadequate in the future. As new forms of culture develop, some will be incorporated into the mainstream, and so 'the best that has been thought and known in the world' will change. The knowledge needed to participate effectively in democratic society will also change over time as young people increasingly adopt and adapt their roles as global citizens. And as offshoring and automation change the kinds of employment opportunities available for young people, the kinds of preparation young people receive for the world of work will need to change too.

Any education system is made up of a number of components, including schools, teacher training institutions, assessment systems, governance arrangements, and of course curricula. Each of these is important, and can have significant impact on the performance of the system, but it is important to note that these components differ substantially in how difficult they are to change, and also in the size of the impact of any changes on student outcomes. In particular, while none of these components is easy to change, it appears that attention to the issue of curriculum has the potential to be one of the most powerful levers for improving the performance of the system.