



Why curriculum inquiry? Thoughts on the purposes of the field

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Curriculum is an ambiguous word that can be interpreted in a range of ways. Outside of universities, it is most frequently used to refer to a syllabus or subject outline. However, decades of research in curriculum inquiry globally have struggled with the question of what curriculum means and how it should be understood conceptually. Different definitions express particular ideological, conceptual, and philosophical understandings of educational purpose (Connelly & Xu, 2010) and there is limited consensus about what counts as research in curriculum inquiry and how that differs from other forms of educational research. Moreover, the questions driving curriculum inquiry are not the same or static but subject to debate, and what takes priority changes over time and has particular national inflections (Yates, 2018).

As a field of scholarship, curriculum inquiry is frequently claimed to be in crisis. This *Curriculum Perspectives Point & Counterpoint* is the third the journal has published in 5 years focusing on questions relating to the state of the field (the others are in Volume 38, Issue 1, April 2018, and Volume 42, Issue 1, April 2022). As others have written in these issues and elsewhere, the problems include definitional issues (what is distinctive about curriculum inquiry and how is that recognized and bounded), the relationship between curriculum inquiry and curriculum policy and practice, and the changing conditions constraining curriculum inquiry and curriculum work in universities and schools (e.g., Green, 2018; Yates, 2018).

In the Australian context, Green (2018) has argued that two related longstanding problems are that curriculum thinking has had a limited impact on policy and has become increasingly technical and subordinated to policy. Curriculum work is arguably becoming more instrumental

and bureaucratic. Teachers are afforded less time for curriculum thinking and positioned as mere implementors, educational bureaucracies no longer engage with the curriculum innovations that were once core work, and space for conceptual thinking about curriculum in initial education programs has declined.

My own perspective on these debates is that defining curriculum and curriculum inquiry is important work that can speak back to instrumentalist views but that as Yates (2018) has argued, curriculum inquiry necessarily takes in multiple and competing agendas. This is a strength of the field and journals like *Curriculum Perspectives* offer a space for different kinds of questions and debates to be brought together.

In terms of definitions of curriculum, my view is that curriculum can be understood as a complex social practice that captures what is valued in education. It represents a site of struggle over the question of “what counts as knowledge” and is inevitably infused with contestation about educational purposes and what is valued from the past, in the present, and for the future. It encompasses what is intended as well as what is enacted and experienced and the kinds of future possibilities set up and enabled in relation to that (O'Connor, 2022).

My thinking here has been particularly influenced by the work of my colleague and doctoral supervisor, Lyn Yates, and her (2006) argument that curriculum is concerned with both what is set up to be taught and learned at the policy level and in school-level decision-making and what is actually taught and learned by teachers and students in schools and classrooms, and that this requires attention to not just effectiveness but also voices and who gets a say, who benefits, and who misses out, the agendas are taken up and not, and the kinds of futures formed both individually and collectively. As Yates (2006) argues, curriculum is about the big picture of what matters and where things are heading in education, but it is also about politics and everyday practicalities, and curriculum inquiry needs to engage with both kinds of questions.

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More recently, I have also been influenced by the work of Priestly et al. (2021) and their argument that curriculum also needs to be understood as created through the collective work of teachers, students, policymakers, and other actors. As they argue, curriculum practices take place across multiple sites of activity including schools, policy-making arenas, and national and international agencies which interact together as part of a wider system. Curriculum is important knowledge work but also encompasses more than content and knowledge selections, and curriculum practices include the writing of curriculum frameworks and documents, pedagogical approaches, evaluation and assessment activities, the organization of teaching, and the creation of resources and infrastructure for supporting curriculum work in schools. Curriculum is thus more than what is mandated at the policy level in frameworks and documents, but at the same time, this policy level work is integral to the system in which curriculum work in schools and classrooms operates and an important part of the context with which curriculum inquiry needs to engage.

This framing of curriculum captures the breadth of concerns captured in curriculum inquiry but also offers some specificity. It identifies curriculum as about aims, about practices, and about unintended effects and as bringing together questions about cultures and social change; schools and their practices; individuals and subjectivity; educational inequalities; and the outcomes of education practices—both at an individual level and in terms of social patterns. It also identifies curriculum as foregrounding questions of knowledge, questions about the “what” that is set up to be learned or is in fact learned in education institutions and the raced, classed and gendered politics of those selections. And it distinguishes here between the intended curriculum which includes decisions that are made by governments and teachers about topics, textbooks or learning programs, and content; the enacted curriculum which includes decisions about time on task, assessment practices, pedagogies, and what gets rewarded; and the hidden curriculum which includes things that go on in a school culture that children learn. It associates curriculum as concerned with implicit as well as explicit constructions of what is important in relation to knowledge, subjectivity, and vocational preparation and how schooling is set up in relation to institutional arrangements and the choices set up within, between, and beyond schools.

Priestly et al. (2021) have defined the sites at which curriculum work takes place as supra (the international policy-making arena led by organizations such as the OECD), macro (national or system-level development of curriculum frameworks and documents led by governments and curriculum agencies), meso (the production of guidance for curriculum making and leadership by governments, curriculum agencies, and textbook publishers), micro (school level curriculum making, decisions, and lesson planning

by principals, leaders, and teachers), and nano (curriculum making in classrooms by teachers and students). At the macro level, this includes the development and writing of curriculum documents, sometimes referred to as curriculum frameworks, guidelines, or syllabus documents. These documents aim to shape and set the parameters of how curriculum is interpreted within schools (at the micro level) and enacted and experienced within classrooms (at the nano level). They cannot capture or control curriculum work in schools but can constrain and enable certain practices (Luke et al., 2013). They can be understood as an official map of what is expected to be taught and learned that sets the parameters for students’ and teachers’ broader curriculum work and educational experiences (Luke et al., 2013).

No research project can engage with all these elements simultaneously, and curriculum inquiry scholarship necessarily takes different approaches to understanding these different facets. My own work in curriculum inquiry has focused particularly on curriculum making at the policy level and in relation to teachers’ and academics’ thinking and practices in responding to particular policy agendas. Informed by the perspectives discussed, it has been concerned with the following central curriculum concerns:

- What counts as knowledge and what is valued in particular curriculum constructions? (and how does this change over time, in different policy contexts, or over the educational trajectory); and
- What does an equitable curriculum look like and what are the problems and possibilities associated with different ways of structuring curriculum at the policy level?

The major projects I have worked on in relation to these questions have included a historical analysis of changes in the Australian school curriculum over time and between states (Yates et al., 2011), a subsequent examination of history and physics teaching in schools and universities, with a focus on the changing context of knowledge and how it is understood and practiced in educational institutions (Yates et al., 2017) and a study of university engagements with partnership based forms of online learning in universities and their implications for knowledge and curriculum work (O’Connor, 2022). These projects take up different things, but what they share is a concern with what is happening to knowledge and curriculum at different times and in different contexts and what are the problems raised by different ways of constructing curriculum. They have attempted to bring research knowledge and big debates together with an acknowledgement of grounded constraints and the perspectives of teachers, academics, and policymakers. And they have highlighted issues with particular policies and practices that are not necessarily that apparent when curriculum concerns are taken for granted or removed from the frame of

reference—for example, when we think about schooling or education just in terms of student learning or engagement or do not acknowledge the fraught nature of curriculum making and the complex debates that sit behind or alongside curriculum decisions (O'Connor, 2022).

As highlighted at the beginning of this paper, curriculum and curriculum inquiry are often difficult to define in part because the terms mean different things to different people and in part because both take in so many different kinds of work. However, to me, this is one of the key benefits of the field of curriculum inquiry—that it promotes conversation and brings different kinds of concerns and interests into dialogue (Yates, 2018). Lyn Yates has previously argued that curriculum needs to be understood as both a public and individual good and a discriminatory mechanism. In a presentation at the University of Stirling in 2017, she remarked that there is a tendency for those researching the curriculum to concentrate on one of these angles—for example, for some to think about what curriculum should do to develop capacities, skills or knowledge, or on the other side for others to focus on what the curriculum is doing that feeds inequality. Yates (2017) argues these two lenses do not fit neatly together, and proposing good answers along one line is often at the expense of adequately addressing the other. But that both kinds of perspectives matter and are important for thinking about curriculum and its purposes. One value of curriculum inquiry as a field is in offering a space where both kinds of questions are kept in play and can be productively brought into dialogue, including through journals such as *Curriculum Perspectives*.

My work has offered a particular perspective on curriculum, but when thinking about the field as a whole, we need to acknowledge the importance of different views and theories and to keep alive different lines of inquiry that conflict with each other because none of these can address all curriculum concerns. As Yates (2018) has argued, we need to keep engaging with different aspects of curriculum. We need to keep thinking about how curriculum is interpreted at the policy level and the implications of that as well as examining teachers' curriculum practices and what children learn and what happens to them via curriculum. We need to keep thinking about educational inequalities and the raced, classed and gendered politics of whose voices are heard and not heard and who gets a say. And we need to keep thinking about knowledge questions and what children and young

people are able to get out of education, and how teachers' curriculum work is best supported in schools. And I hope that's work we'll be able to extend through this journal.

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