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Children's agency in the National Curriculum for England: a critical discourse analysis

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ABSTRACT

Questions of children's agency have experienced a resurgence in education theory over the past years. Yet, there have been few attempts to examine children's agency in the context of a primary classroom from the viewpoint of the curriculum. This gap is being addressed by a longitudinal project exploring the impact of the National Curriculum for England on children's agency through a critical discourse analysis of the curriculum text and an ethnography of three primary schools in England. This paper reports on the results of the critical discourse analysis examining how children's agency is talked about (or silenced) in England's curriculum.

Introduction: what makes curriculum relevant to children's agency?

Agency is commonly defined as an individual's capacity to act (e.g. see Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Gao 2010). However, this definition is lacking in nuance in that it does not capture the two distinct but equally important elements underlying the capacity to act: personal sense of agency and structural opportunities to exercise agency. Sense of agency concerns individuals' belief in their ability to act independently and exercise choice in the given contexts. However, merely having a sense of agency is not sufficient for the exercise of agency – actual opportunities need to be present for individuals to realise their agentic potential. Agency, then, is best defined as a *socially situated* capacity to act. There is a two-way relationship between perceived and actual opportunities for the enactment of agency: individual potential for agency, however strong, will remain unfulfilled in the absence of appropriate structural opportunities, and opportunities, however real, will remain unclaimed in the absence of individuals who believe themselves capable of acting upon them. When opportunities are both available to agents and recognised by them, they become affordances. It is affordances, not mere opportunities, that are crucial prerequisites for the exercise of agency (Mercer 2011). This is a critical realist approach to defining agency which acknowledges and takes heed of the structure-agency interplay. A critical realist account of reality posits that the enabling or constraining effects of structure only reveal themselves in the presence of agents who embark or consider embarking on a certain endeavour. Because 'constraints require something to constrain, and enablements something to enable' (Archer 2003, 4), structure remains neutral in the absence of agential intentions or actions. Similarly, structural opportunities in a school or a classroom become affordances only when students recognise the potential for agency inherent in them. This means that students' capacity for agency is determined not only by the surrounding contexts, but also

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their individual psychologies – their beliefs, attitudes, and emotions (for a more detailed discussion of the critical realist approach to conceptualising agency, see Manyukhina and Wyse 2019).

This definition of agency, grounded in the critical realist understanding of structure and agency as distinct but mutually interacting, has far-reaching implications for understanding the role of schools, and curriculum in particular, in shaping children's attitudes and behaviour in learning. Existing research evidence suggests a direct relationship between learners' beliefs about their socio-cultural, familial, and classroom contexts and their propensity to exercise agency (Mercer 2011, 2012; Reay 2017). In this paper I argue that the curriculum represents one of the critical structural factors affecting both whether children learn to perceive themselves as active agents in learning and whether they get an opportunity to act as such. It represents a domain where affordances for agency are created – or not. A rigid curriculum with no room for creativity and innovation is unlikely to instil in children positive perceptions of their capacity to act as independent agents who have control over their learning. For the curriculum to be conducive to agency, it needs both to support students in developing a sense of agency as well as to provide them with real, well-defined opportunities for its exercise (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019). Thus, any meaningful research into pupils' agency must integrate an analysis of the curriculum's implicit and explicit assumptions about the role and place of children in learning with an exploration of the way these assumptions affect children's agency on the ground, i.e. in the context of an actual classroom.

This paper addresses the first of these two research avenues. It reports on the findings of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the National Curriculum for England (NCE) (DfE 2013) highlighting what appear to be the curriculum's assumptions about children's agency. The paper is structured as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of existing educational literature highlighting the lack of efforts to evaluate school curricula from the viewpoint of children's agency. Next follows the methodology section, in which I discuss the method used in the study, its philosophical assumptions, and its connection to critical realism – a philosophy that provides the theoretical framework underpinning the project. Here I focus specifically on the main goal of CDA and the kind of analysis it requires, as well as the method's limitations. Next, I present and discuss the key findings revealing how certain linguistic features of the NCE create a particular representation of children's agency which may affect children's perceptions and enactments of their role in learning. The paper concludes with a summary of the study's main insights alongside suggestions for further research on the impact of the curriculum on children's agency.

Children's agency in education research

Over the years, educational theory and research have recognised the importance of children's agency. There has been an increase in attention given to acknowledging the rights of children, including in the policies and practices of schooling (DCSF 2008; DfE 2014; UNICEF 2014). Significant developments have been made in the area of student voice and participation, concepts which have close connections with the concept of agency. Examples of such developments include The International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary Schools (Thiessen and Cook-Sather 2007), a series of reports commissioned by the Cambridge Primary Review (Robinson 2014; Robinson and Fielding 2007), and other studies (Edwards and Jones 2018; Hargreaves 2017; Rector-Aranda and Raider-Roth 2015; Lisanza 2014; Leitch and Gardner 2013; Mick 2011).

More recently, studies exploring children's agency in the context of a school classroom have also begun to accumulate. It has been recognised that children's agency can be either enabled or constrained by institutional and pedagogical practices (Smith 2016; Sirkko, Kyrönlampi, and Puroila 2019; Rainio and Hilppö 2017; Ruscoe, Barblett, and Parrath-Pugh 2018). Sirkko, Kyrönlampi and Puroila;s study (2019) set in the context of a Finnish primary school yields insight into a range of activities that may promote or prevent children's agency, revealing how opportunities to engage in self-directed learning contribute to pupils' experiences of agency. In a study considering primary-aged children's experiences of agency in an English school, Kirby (2020) discusses the

different ways in which children may exercise agency in a classroom ranging from contrarian to conformist. Drawing on evidence stemming from ethnographic research, Dyson (2020) argues specifically for the importance of agency in rendering writing experiences meaningful for children. Overall, this research raises issues concerning children's sense of control and ownership over the learning process, and its implications for their development, achievement, and enjoyment in schools. The accumulated evidence suggests that promoting agency in children is essential for helping them to meet their fundamental developmental needs (Mitra 2004) and develop capacity for self-directed learning (Robinson 2014; Mercer 2011; Bown 2009).

In regard to curriculum specifically, it has been shown that students improve academically when given the power to co-construct the curriculum alongside their teachers (Nicol, Tsai, and Gaskell 2004; Rudduck and Flutter 2000). Fitzpatrick, O'Grady, and O'Reilly (2018) demonstrated how involvement in curriculum decision-making can promote a sense of increased responsibility and autonomy in students. Marsh (2016) argues that more rigid curricula, while not necessarily subversive of children's agency on the whole, may restrict its manifestations to out-of-school environments thus pushing agency to the margins of children's intellectual activity. While this literature contributes towards understanding the impact of school settings on children's agency, research is still lacking with respect to the place of children's agency in written curricula. England's current curriculum has been implemented since 2014, yet to date there has been no attempt to theorise in-depth and/or investigate empirically its impact on children's agency.

Lack of agency-focussed analyses of curricula is especially poignant given the growing trend towards turning character and citizenship education into essential elements of the school curriculum, as reflected in The UN post-2015 Education and Development Framework (UNDES 2015), 2014 UNESCO Report (UNESCO GMR 2014) and in the context of England specifically – The Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) Annual Report for 2017–2018 (EEF 2018). In fact, the EEF identified character education as one of the 14 high-priority issues of focus for educators. This implies that the key orientation of the school curriculum should be to enhance children's ability to exercise agency, both with respect to their own life courses and within society. In the words of Goodman and Eren (2013, 123), student agency is 'a psychological and moral imperative'. Indeed, understanding the impact of the curriculum on children's sense and exercise of agency in learning is essential to ensuring that schools enable children to realise their full intellectual and psychological potential. A focus on children's agency is equally important for wider social, political, and economic purposes. The ability to effectively respond to global challenges such as climate change, world poverty, and human rights violations requires a strong belief in one's own capacity to act and influence the world around us. The current pandemic renders the study's key concern with the impact of the curriculum on children's development as self-sufficient agents and responsible members of society even more urgent.

The relationship between school curriculum and agency being an under-researched area in education research internationally, this study makes an important contribution towards acknowledging and understanding the impact that the written curriculum may have on children's development and experiences of agency in the classroom.

Methodology

The CDA method in this paper is founded on the following steps:

1. Identifying the problem
2. Defining the body of data to be analysed
3. Analysing content
4. Presenting and explaining the findings

The problem under analysis is most succinctly described as children's agency in the National Curriculum. The body of data for analysis comprised of the full national curriculum framework for key stages 1–2, available to view and download on the governmental website (DfE 2013).

Analysis of the chosen content did not rely on a pre-developed set of codes used as a foundation to critically investigate the discourse. Instead, it involved meticulous reading of the entire curriculum text aimed at extracting relevant qualitative insight from the document. The goal was to examine the key assertions and assumptions, explicit and implicit, made in the NCE about children's agency. Analysis was conducted at the level of individual sentences and phrases as well as subject-specific sections, allowing to note which patterns appeared more strongly in or pertained exclusively to which sections. Three readings of the whole text of the NCE were undertaken in close succession, leading to identification of five prominent patterns relating to conceptualisations and treatment of children's agency. These include:

Pattern 1: Children's agency is implied but not acknowledged explicitly
Pattern 2: Agency is conceptualised in terms of academic competencies as opposed to individual capacities
Pattern 3: Children's individual views are acknowledged but not accounted for
Pattern 4: The idea of children's enjoyment of learning has limited presence
Pattern 5: Children tend to be constructed as passive rather than active learners

Each pattern is explained and discussed under a separate subheading in the section reporting the findings.

It is important to state that CDA does not offer analyses of social phenomena but draws on other theories to achieve explanatory critique based on causal relations and normative critique based on values and norms (Fairclough 2017). Consistent with the study's approach to conceptualising agency, critical realism serves as a theoretical framework that informs and guides my analysis of children's agency in the curriculum. Critical realism is particularly apt for CDA as it informs some of the method's key philosophical assumptions, namely that texts have causality, i.e. they can produce causal effects, and that the causality of texts is contextual, i.e. contingent on the context in which any given text operates. A more detailed discussion of both these points is needed and follows below.

CDA and critical realism

From a critical realist perspective, texts represent an aspect of social reality and as any other aspect of social reality, they have the potential to exert causal effects, that is to bring about change. While in Fairclough's CDA the term text is used to refer to both written and verbal texts as well as genres, discourses, and styles, this paper focuses specifically on written texts. The most direct and straightforward effects of written texts are seen in what knowledge and how much of it individuals possess, but texts can also produce change in beliefs, values, and attitudes. These changes can be immediate or built over time, for example when our consumer identities, gender roles, and political positions are shaped through continuous exposure to advertising and news inputs. These changes can be intangible, as in the examples above, or material, such as when texts induce or inform modifications in our built environments, such as new architectural designs (Fairclough 2003). The statement that texts have the potential for causal effects should be the basic starting point for anyone engaging in any form of textual analysis. In education research specifically, it has been long appreciated that policy texts act as carriers of discourses imbued with intentionality that aims to take the reading of the texts in a certain direction (see for example Lingard and Ozga 2008; Lingard and Sellar 2013) and that the reading of political texts in schools is contextually mediated (Alexander 2001).

The causality of texts is not something I simply assume – it is built into the critical realist ontology of reality, in which all aspects of structure are seen as having the potential to causally affect agents

who come into contact with them. The presence of agents is a necessary condition for the realisation of the causal potential of texts. Texts cannot bring about change, individual or societal, merely in virtue of their existence. For any text to actualise its potential causal effects, it has to be actively engaged with – received, made sense of, applied in a certain context. Thus, the causality of texts is not automatic but mediated by meaning-making. This means not only that the potential causal effects of texts may or may not manifest themselves, but also that how and when they manifest themselves depends on who engages with them, in what ways, to what end, and in what circumstances. The causality of texts is therefore not regular but contingent on a variety of contextual factors – it is a product of the interplay between structure and agency. Thus, any research that seeks to reveal the specific causal effects of a particular text has to go beyond analysing the different features of the text itself to examine the interactive processes of meaning-making occurring around it.

We have thus arrived at two critical points: a) the meanings of texts have causal effects, and b) the causal effects of texts are enacted in the processes of meaning-making carried out by agents. Thus, in order to explore the potential and actual effects of the NCE on children's agency, we need to analyse a) the text of the NCE and b) the meaning-making around it. The first objective is well served by CDA, as discussed above, while the nature of the second calls for an ethnographic exploration of the specific social contexts in which the said meaning-making occurs.

The main goal of the CDA

Fairclough takes what he refers to as dialectical-relational approach to CDA, which represents a form of critical social analysis combining normative and explanatory critique. Beginning with normative critique which assesses the phenomenon in question against preferred values and norms, it proceeds to the deeper level of explanatory critique seeking to explain the causes behind the normatively problematic discourse by uncovering the features of reality leading to such a discourse. While CDA can be purely normative, it is of no use to undertake textual analysis in isolation from social critique, according to Fairclough. The aim is not simply to explain how and why certain social processes or phenomena negatively affect people, but also to indicate how positive change might be achieved. Together, the normative critique and the explanatory critique are geared towards action, that is changing the societal features responsible for the emergence and persistence of the unfavourable discourse. As Fairclough (2017, 13–14) puts it:

> We cannot move from critique towards action except via explanation: without explanatory understanding of social reality (…) we cannot know what needs to be changed, what can be changed, and how.

In Fairclough's CDA (ibid.), the connection between critique, explanation and action is achieved through the following four steps:

1. Normative critique of discourse.
2. Explanation of normatively critiqued discourse in terms of features of the existing state of affairs (existing social reality).
3. Explanatory critique of the existing state of affairs.
4. Advocating action to change the existing state of affairs 'for the better'.

Similarly, my effort to analyse NCE from the viewpoint of children's agency is driven not by value-free curiosity to understand its effects on children's self-perceptions and behaviour in school, but by a belief that children's agency is important, and that the curriculum should be an arena wherein it can successfully develop and flourish. We have begun to address Steps 1 and 2 in an earlier publication (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019) as well as a series of blogs (Wyse and Manyukhina 2019; Manyukhina and Wyse 2021), where we argued for the importance and relevance of creating affordances for children's agency in educational contexts, highlighting the potential of the curriculum to create

or foreclose such affordances. This paper focusses specifically on Stage 3 – it seeks to explain, through an analysis of the relevant features of the NCE, how and why the curriculum text is putting constraints on the development of children's sense of agency and their ability to exercise it in learning. Drawing on Fairclough (2017) and O'Regan and Gray (2018), we adopt the following framework for achieving the explanatory critique:

Stage 1: Focus upon a social phenomenon
  (a) Step 1 Identify the phenomenon to be researched
  (b) Step 2 Use relevant theory to theorise the phenomenon
Stage 2: Identify the causes of the phenomenon and the obstacles to changing it (ask why the phenomenon is the way that it is)
  (a) Step 1 Select texts in the light of the object of research and adopt a framework of analysis
  (b) Step 2 Analyse relevant texts
Stage 3: Does the social order require the phenomenon to be the way that it is?
Stage 4: Identify ways past the obstacles. How might the dominant discourse be contested?

Stage 1 has been developed earlier in the paper where I stated the focus of concern, namely children's agency in the curriculum, and presented theorisation of agency informed by critical realism. The rest of the paper addresses Stage 2, i.e. the selection and analysis of the NCE as a means of examining and critiquing the curriculum's assumptions about children's agency. Stages 3 and 4 will be addressed following the unfolding of the second phase of the project when the findings of the CDA will be brought together with the insights arising from the ethnographic investigation of the way the curriculum is applied in a classroom. Before turning to the analysis and discussion of the study findings, it is important to outline the inherent limitations of CDA arising from its underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Limitations of CDA

As we have established earlier, Fairclough's approach to CDA rests on the fundamental principles of the critical realist philosophy. Ontologically, it is grounded in the critical realist conception of social reality, in which equal ontological weight is afforded to abstract social structures (e.g. school system) as well as concrete social practices, phenomena, and events (e.g. the space of a classroom, the structure of a lesson, the content of the curriculum). As a critical realist, Fairclough (2003) distinguishes between three distinct levels of reality: the empirical – what we can directly experience and observe; the actual – the sum of all processes and phenomena that take place, regardless of our knowledge or even our ability to have knowledge of them; and the real, or the potential – the real powers and liabilities of phenomena that may or may not manifest themselves as actual occurrences or empirical events. Fairclough espouses ontological realism in distinguishing between objective reality and our subjective interpretations of it, and in asserting the irreducibility of the former to the latter: 'reality (the potential, the actual) cannot be reduced to our knowledge of reality, which is contingent, shifting, and partial' (Fairclough 2003, 14).

In the context of CDA, commitment to ontological realism has important epistemological implications, namely that the reality of any text always exceeds our knowledge of it. Texts are knowable, but our knowledge of them is:

• always partial: no textual analysis is ever definitive or complete;
• inevitably selective: any textual analysis is circumscribed by the specific questions we choose to ask at the expense of all other possible questions; the particular theoretical frameworks we bring onto it to the deliberate neglect of other possible frameworks; our subjective motivations for selecting those specific questions and theories; and our personal beliefs underlying those motivations.

Similarly, the analysis of the NCE which I present in this paper is circumscribed by:

- the questions that guide the analysis, e.g. how is children's agency treated in the NCE?
- a particular theoretical framework, namely critical realism with its distinct focus on the interplay between structure and agency
- my motivations behind the research, i.e. understanding the potential impact of the NCE on children's agency;
- my underlying value-laden beliefs, namely that children's agency is important and needs to be (come) an essential consideration in the curriculum design and delivery.

In recognising and acknowledging the inevitably partial nature of this analysis, I cannot avoid addressing the question of objectivity. Like Fairclough, and many others who have engaged in work on texts, I do not believe that a fully complete and objective textual analysis is possible, and I have recognised the study's multiple limitations from this perspective above. This, however, ought not to diminish the value of this type of analysis. While the analysis presented may not be able to capture *all* potential and actual effects of the NCE in relation to *all* stakeholders and contexts, it can nonetheless help to explore some effects, namely those pertaining to children's agency, in a specific context, namely that of a school, on a particular group, namely primary-aged children.

Findings and discussion

In conducting CDA, my aim has been to identify characteristic discourse features within the text of the NCE concerning children's agency. First, I outline the overall structure of the NCE and provide some general reflections on its nature.

The national curriculum for England was introduced by The Department for Education in 2014 to be taught to pupils aged around 5–16. It is divided into four key stages and defines:

- which subjects are to be taught
- the knowledge, skills and understanding required in each subject
- the level of ability pupils are expected to achieve in each subject
- how pupiĺs learning progress is assessed and reported.

Within this core structure, schools can plan and organise teaching and learning in the way they see most fit for pupils, and there is no requirement to spend a set amount of time on any given subject. An overarching requirement is that pupils are offered a 'balanced and broadly based' curriculum which:

> Promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life (NCE, 5)

The NCE does not provide a precise definition of 'a balanced and broadly based' curriculum; however, from the statement above it is evident that its concern extends beyond academic learning to include other aspects contributing to the development of children as well as society at large. The statement's separate emphasis on preparing pupils for 'opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life' suggests that children are considered to be the citizens of the future, and that ensuring their all-round development is key to the development of society as the whole. However, the role of pupils in achieving these outcomes is not recognised in the NCE's statement of intent. The particular wording it uses, namely that the curriculum 'prepares' students for what comes later in life, frames children as passive subjects in the learning process as opposed to active agents of it. In what follows, I expand on this and other relevant observations arising from the present study. The findings are organised around five key patterns revealing the treatment of children's agency in the NCE.

Children's agency is implied but not acknowledged explicitly. Many skills and capacities that pupils are expected to develop and demonstrate as they progress through the curriculum rely on the exercise of agency. At the same time, children's ability to exercise agency appears to be taken for granted in the NCE – agency seems to be understood as a resource that children already have and are able to draw upon when engaging in learning rather than a capacity they are yet to develop and might need support with. Linking back to the definition of agency as consisting of a personal sense of agency and structural opportunities to enact it, neither of these two essential elements are recognised as needing deliberate investment of attention and effort on the part of the school. Consider the following statement from a section outlining the purpose of study for English:

> All the skills of language are essential to participating fully as a member of society; pupils, therefore, who do not learn to speak, read and write fluently and confidently are effectively disenfranchised. (NCE, 13)

Participating fully as a member of society clearly requires exercising agency, as does the ability to communicate. Communication constitutes an essential aspect of agency as it provides individuals with opportunity to interact with others (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In stating that the skills of language are essential to being a contributing member of society, the NCE also draws a direct link between agency and the necessity of the acquisition of linguistic abilities. Yet, this relation is not recognised anywhere else in the curriculum text, which sets intended learning outcomes in different subjects without explicitly acknowledging the role that agency plays in allowing children to fulfil these expectations. For example, in outlining the statutory requirements for English, the NCE aims to ensure that:

> … all pupils are competent in the arts of speaking and listening, making formal presentations, demonstrating to others and participating in debate. (NCE, 13)

Similarly, in the statutory requirements for reading, the NCE requires that pupils are taught to:

> … participate in discussion about books, poems and other works that are read to them and those that they can read for themselves, taking turns and listening to what others say. (NCE, 28)

Other prominent examples of NCE's statements of learning goals which presume agentic capacity in children while failing to explicitly refer to it include:

> Pupils should be taught to control their speaking and writing consciously. (NCE, 15)

> Pupils should be taught to evaluate and edit by assessing the effectiveness of their own

> and others' writing and suggesting improvements. (NCE, 39)

These abilities require that children perceive themselves as active agents in learning and have opportunities to act accordingly in the space and time provided by the primary classroom. Having both elements in place is essential as it is the combination of a personal sense of agency with relevant structural opportunities that creates a genuine affordance for the exercise of agency.

Yet, neither of these two crucial elements is explicitly acknowledged in the NCE. Instead, the curriculum assumes both that agentic capacity unproblematically pre-exists in children and that opportunities to realise this potential are available to them in the classroom. One example where the curriculum acknowledges, albeit implicitly, the need to promote the development of agency in children comes from a non-statutory section outlining notes and guidance for reading for Years 5 and 6. In positing that 'pupils should be encouraged to work out any unfamiliar word' (NCE, 43), the curriculum encourages promoting children's capacity to engage in self-evaluation and self-learning, thus contributing to their sense of agency. It is noteworthy that the taking of children's agency for granted and as not needing explicit attention occurs overwhelmingly in sections outlining statutory requirements, while instances where agency is treated as a capacity that needs to be supported and further promoted in children appear in sections outlining non-statutory guidance and

notes. Such associations suggest deprioritisation of children's agency as compared to the required learning outcomes in core subjects.

Agency is conceptualised in terms of academic competencies in a narrow range of subjects. While explicit mentions of agency are absent from the NCE, the curriculum text makes indirect references to agency through the use of terms such as independent/independently, confidence/confident/confidently, effective/effectively/effectiveness, motivated/motivation which capture various elements of what it means to feel and act as an active agent. Examples of such mentions include:

> Pupils should be using joined handwriting throughout their *independent* writing. (NCE, 38, emphasis added)

> If they cannot decode *independently* and fluently, they will find it increasingly difficult to understand what they read and to write down what they want to say. (NCE, 33, emphasis added)

> In years 3 and 4, pupils should become more familiar with and *confident* in using language in a greater variety of situations. (NCE, 34, emphasis added)

> *Confidence* in numeracy and other mathematical skills is a precondition of success across the national curriculum. (NCE, 9, emphasis added)

> *Effective* composition involves forming, articulating and communicating ideas, and then organising them coherently for a reader. (NCE, 15, emphasis added)

> As in years 3 and 4, pupils should be taught to enhance the *effectiveness* of their writing as well as their competence. (NCE, 41, emphasis added)

> … teachers will wish to use different contexts to maximise their pupils' engagement

> with and *motivation* to study science. (NCE, 145, emphasis added)

Upon closer inspection of the above extracts, it becomes apparent that these terms are used in relation to academic abilities in specific areas of learning. Consider again the following phrases: 'independent writing', 'decode independently', 'confident in using language', 'confidence in numeracy', 'effective composition', 'effectiveness of their writing', 'motivation to study'. Here the focus is placed on confidence, independence, effectiveness, and motivation as they pertain to specific learning outcomes in particular disciplinary areas to the neglect of the holistic value of these abilities beyond the academic domain. This not only places severe limitations on children's individual agency in school in respect of what this is taken to entail, but also undermines the NCE's stated general aim to promote 'the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils' and prepare them 'for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life'. Once again, the curriculum fails to explicitly acknowledge and promote the two essential elements, namely, a sense of agency and structural opportunities to exercise such agency, which together create affordances for children to meaningfully engage in agentic behaviours.

Children's individual views are acknowledged but not accounted for. Opinions and beliefs constitute essential aspects of agency as they inform individuals' intentions and actions (Hieronymi 2009). The recognition that children have their own views, understandings, ideas, and feelings which they bring to the classroom and with which they approach the curriculum has some presence in the NCE. This is revealed by statements of learning goals which appear in the section outlining statutory requirements for English:

> A high-quality education in English will teach pupils to speak and write fluently so that they can communicate their ideas and emotions to others. (NCE, 13).

> Pupils should develop a capacity to explain their understanding of books and other reading, and to prepare their ideas before they write. (NCE, 14).

> Pupils should be taught to articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions. (NCE, 17).

While the curriculum acknowledges the need to promote children's ability to prepare, communicate, and justify their views, its application seems to be limited to children's performance in relation to the fixed programmes of study outlined in the NCE. The curriculum does not extend the importance of children's individual ideas and feelings to apply to what they learn, how, and when, particularly in relation to learning programmes for the core subjects, which are intended to be delivered to children 'as is', with no in-built flexibility to account for children's preferences. When it comes to non-statutory guidelines and notes, the curriculum affords a certain degree of agency to children in relation to their learning, as suggested by the use of modal verbs such as 'might' and 'could' which imply a degree of choice on the part of the pupils:

> Pupils *might* draw on and use new vocabulary from their reading, their discussions about it (one-to-one and as a whole class) and from their wider experiences. (NCE, English, non-statutory, 31, emphasis added)

> Pupils should consolidate their understanding of ratio (…) They *might* use the notation a:b to record their work. (NCE, Mathematics, non-statutory, 138, emphasis added)

> Pupils *might* keep records of how plants have changed over time, for example the leaves falling off trees and buds opening. (NCE, Science, non-statutory, 148, emphasis added)

> They *could* construct a simple food chain that includes humans (e.g. grass, cow, human). (NCE, Science, non-statutory, 151, emphasis added)

The idea that choice represents an essential aspect of agency is widely recognised in the literature (Archer 1996; Snibbe and Markus 2005; James 2009). By affording pupils a degree of choice in making decisions around what activities to engage in and how to demonstrate their learning progress, the above statements provide children with opportunities to take control over (and thereby exercise agency in) their learning. It is noteworthy that such phrasing occurs exclusively in the sections outlining non-statutory notes and guidelines for different subjects, reiterating a lack of intention to create opportunities for children to exercise agency when working towards fulfilling the statutory requirements set out by the curriculum, and thereby denying them such agency.

The idea of children's enjoyment of learning has limited presence. The idea that children should be enjoying the learning process has limited presence in the NCE. Mentions of enjoyment and pleasure appear almost exclusively in the section outlining curriculum requirements around reading, where emphasis is placed on the importance of children's engagement in reading for pleasure:

> They [pupils] should be developing their understanding and enjoyment of stories, poetry, plays and non-fiction, and learning to read silently. (NCE, 33)

> They [pupils] should be reading widely and frequently, outside as well as in school, for pleasure and information. (NCE, 41)

The only other two mentions of enjoyment (no mentions of pleasure) appear in the section outlining the requirement for mathematics:

> A high-quality mathematics education therefore provides a foundation for understanding the world, the ability to reason mathematically, an appreciation of the beauty and power of mathematics, and a sense of enjoyment and curiosity about the subject. (NCE, 99)

and physical education:

> They [pupils] should enjoy communicating, collaborating and competing with each other. (NCE, 199)

The NCE does not specify what conditions need to be present for children to enjoy their learning experiences and what needs to be done, within schools and/or at homes, to ensure such conditions. In relation to reading specifically, the curriculum states that:

… all pupils must be encouraged to read widely across both fiction and non-fiction to develop their knowledge of themselves and the world in which they live (…) Reading also feeds pupils' imagination and opens up a treasure-house of wonder and joy for curious young minds. (NCE, 14)

The emphasis on promoting children's imagination and curiosity implies that opportunities are provided for children to follow their imagination and curiosity in the directions that are interesting and meaningful to them. This aligns with research literature linking children's enjoyment of learning to the opportunities to make own choices, e.g. children having the freedom to choose which books to read (Meek 1988). However, while stating that 'teachers should continue to emphasise pupils' enjoyment and understanding of language' (NCE, 41), the curriculum does not require that students be offered choice in reading. The only relevant recommendation occurs in the section outlining non-statutory notes and guidance on reading:

Pupils should have opportunities to exercise choice in selecting books and be taught how to do so. (NCE, 27)

Whether and to what extent the curriculum leaves room for creating free choice opportunities for children is a question that needs to be explored empirically on the ground.

Children tend to be constructed as passive rather than active learners. One important feature revealed by this analysis concerns the phrasing of statements of learning outcomes and goals in the NCE and its implications for children's agency. In the NCE, there are two main ways in which learning outcomes and goals are phrased:

1. Through applying active voice to pupils, e.g.:
   They *will attempt* to match what they decode to words they may have already heard but may not have seen in print. (NCE, 35, emphasis added)
   Pupils *begin to relate* the graphical representation of data to recording change over time. (NCE, 125, emphasis added)
   Pupils *learn* decimal notation and the language associated with it, including in the context of measurements. (NCE, 123, emphasis added)
2. Through applying passive voice to pupils, e.g.:
   They should *be shown* how to use contents pages and indexes to locate information. (NCE, 37, emphasis added)
   They should *be guided* to participate in it [discussion] and they should be helped to consider the opinions of others. (NCE, 29, emphasis added)
   Pupils should *be taught* how to read words with suffixes by *being helped* to build on the root words that they can read already. (NCE, 21, emphasis added)

While this analysis does not involve quantification of this insight (i.e. exact counts of all instances of application of passive and active voice to pupils throughout the NCE), it reveals that several phrases are mostly used in the NCE to outline learning goals and outcomes, and that these phrases come in both active and passive versions. These phrases are outlined in the table below: (Table 1)

Table 1. Statements of learning goals and outcomes in the NCE.

Active voice	Passive voice
Pupils should learn to	Pupils should be taught to
Pupils should develop their ability to	
Pupils should consolidate their understanding	
Pupils should have guidance	Pupils should be shown
	Pupils should be introduced
Pupils should know	Pupils are expected to know
Pupils need to know	
Pupils should ask for help	Pupils should be supported

Whether learning goals and outcomes are phrased through applying active or passive voice in relation to pupils is of direct relevance to children's agency. When using passive verbs, the curriculum constructs pupils as objects to whom actions are done as opposed to independent agents who perform the actions in an intentional way. This makes the difference between children who take ownership of their learning and children to whom learning simply happens, between children being active participants in acquiring knowledge as opposed to passive recipients of it, and between assigning responsibility for achieving intended learning outcomes to children themselves as opposed to shifting this responsibility elsewhere.

Following on from the previous point, the question of attribution of responsibility for pupils' progress towards and achievement of learning outcomes is highly relevant from the viewpoint of children's agency. This analysis reveals that attribution of responsibility for learning outcomes in the NCE occurs along the following lines:

1. Responsibility attributed *implicitly* to teachers/schools (most common in the NCE):
   Pupils should be taught to learn how to use sentences with different forms: statement, question, exclamation, command. (NCE, 32)
   At this stage, teaching comprehension should be taking precedence over teaching word reading directly. (NCE, 35)
   The principal focus of mathematics teaching in lower key stage 2 is to ensure that pupils become increasingly fluent with whole numbers and the four operations. (NCE, 113)
2. Responsibility attributed *explicitly* to teachers/schools:
    … *teachers should* ensure that pupils build secure foundations by using discussion to probe and remedy their misconceptions. (NCE, 145, emphasis added)
   Teachers should develop pupils' numeracy and mathematical reasoning in all subjects so that they understand and appreciate the importance of mathematics. (NCE, 9, emphasis added)
   Schools should do everything to promote wider reading. (NCE, 10, emphasis added)
   All *schools must* provide swimming instruction either in key stage 1 or key stage 2. (NCE, 200, emphasis added)
3. Responsibility attributed *directly* to pupils, and implicitly to teachers/schools:
   In years 3 and 4, *pupils should* become more familiar with and confident in using language in a greater variety of situations … (NCE, 34, emphasis added)
   At this stage, *pupils should* start to learn about some of the differences between Standard English and non-Standard English … (NCE, 40, emphasis added)
   Pupils should continue to add to their knowledge of linguistic terms … (NCE, 48, emphasis added)

The different attributions of responsibility for learning progress within the NCE bear a direct relationship to children's agency, the sense of responsibility being an essential component of what it means to perceive oneself as an independent agent and to act as one. Constructing pupils as active agents responsible for the outcomes of their learning means to acknowledge and promote children's agency at the level of the intended curriculum. Conversely, talking about pupils in the passive voice is to frame them as passive recipients of the curriculum content thus failing to acknowledge their right to, and their capacity for, taking ownership of their learning. This may have implications for how the curriculum is delivered to pupils in the classroom which, in turn, may profoundly affect how children understand their role in the learning process and how they consequently perform. While CDA does not allow quantifying this insight, the analysis indicates that attribution of responsibility for learning outcomes directly to children is significantly underutilised within the NCE. Instead, the preferred phrasing is to refer to pupils in the passive voice while attributing responsibility implicitly or explicitly to teachers and schools.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the findings from a critical discourse analysis of the National Curriculum for England exploring the curriculum's approach to children's agency. The analysis has revealed some important features that bear direct relevance to and may have profound implications for how children view and enact their role as agents of learning.

The overarching observation has been that children's agency is implied but not explicitly acknowledged in the NCE. While many learning goals set out by the NCE rely on the exercise of agency by children, agency is not mentioned anywhere in the curriculum text. The importance of supporting the development of agentic capacity in children receives implicit attention through references to efficiency, independence, motivation, and confidence. These capacities, which constitute important aspects of what it means to feel and act like an individual agent, are only mentioned in relation to academic competencies in specified subject areas, such as writing efficiency or confidence in numeracy. Such narrow framing fixes attention exclusively on children's academic progress to the neglect of their development as effective, independent, and confident agents in learning and in life in general.

Another prominent finding concerns NCE's approach to children's individual views, feelings, and their sense of enjoyment in learning. While some statements of learning goals in the NCE indicate that the curriculum recognises the importance of developing children's ability to form and express their own opinions and perspectives, this is applied only to their performance in reading and writing. Similarly, children's enjoyment of learning receives only very few mentions which are limited almost exclusively to one particular area, namely reading. When it comes to curriculum design and delivery or approach to assessment, accounting for pupils' individual preferences and views seems to be excluded, suggesting a lack of intention on the part of the NCE to heed to children's right to exercise agency in relation to all aspects and stages of their learning. This means that the curriculum is not grounded in child-centred orientations; instead, specified sets of constrained knowledge and skills in a narrow range of subjects constitute the key rationale behind it. By failing to provide room to build teaching on pupils' individual interests, goals, and priorities, the curriculum prevents creation of learning experiences that have personal significance for children thus inhibiting the development of their agentic capacity both as pupils and as social citizens.

This conclusion is further reiterated by the NCE's approach to phrasing statements of learning outcomes and goals which tend to apply a passive as opposed to an active voice to pupils, thus framing children as mere recipients rather than active agents of learning. The validity of this insight intensifies when considering how the curriculum understands responsibility for the learning progress of pupils which is attributed predominantly to teachers and schools and much more rarely – directly to children. This further contributes to the NCE's lack of acknowledgement of children as agents capable to take ownership of their learning and responsibility for its outcomes. The lack of attention to children's agency results not only in a failure to provide children with opportunities to exercise agency but also in a failure to support the development of their agentic capacity in the first place. Denying children the right and the opportunity to contribute to the curriculum thinking, design, and delivery prevents them from becoming co-participants in the process of discovering, exploring, and creating knowledge thus inhibiting their sense of autonomy and empowerment in learning. This places significant constraints on both children's perceived and actual ability to exercise agency in the classroom and potentially beyond its confines.

Based on the above insights, we find the NCE's approach to children's agency wanting for it fails to provide the basis for a personally relevant school curriculum with consistent opportunities for children to develop and exercise agency in learning. To what extent this conclusion holds true in practice, that is in the context of an actual classroom, calls for further investigation.

From CDA to the ethnography of a primary classroom

The value of CDA lies not in the analysis of the linguistic features of texts as such, but in understanding the role of texts in meaning-making and connecting this to wider social practices. I approached the analysis of the NCE with the same goal in mind applying CDA not to produce descriptions and interpretations of the curriculum text for its own sake, but in order to examine its potential effects on children's agency, both as participants in learning and as social citizens. This goal cannot be achieved through a mere textual analysis of the NCE without considering how, by whom, and to whom the curriculum is used in practice. Understanding the causal effects of any text requires examining the ways in which the text is interpreted and applied in particular contexts. Ethnography, then, becomes the most appropriate and effective method for achieving this goal and the next essential step in researching the impact of England's national curriculum on children's agency.

Combining CDA of the NCE with an ethnographic exploration of primary classrooms allows linking the 'micro' analysis of a text with the 'macro' analysis of the meaning-making process around it beyond that in its relationship to society. The emphasis on the importance of relating the 'micro' to the 'macro' reiterates the deep-seated philosophical connections between CDA and critical realism, in which causal explanation of social phenomena is achieved through examination of the interplay between structure and agency. Building on the findings presented in this paper, the next phase of the project will explore what happens when a specific structural element, that is England's national curriculum, starts to bear upon individual agents, that is children, and what effects this may have on children's self-perception and behaviour as agents in the choices that make up their lives.

Disclosure statement

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