

## **Planning a competence-based curriculum: the case of four secondary schools in England**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the belief that schools tend to be resistant to change (Hargreaves 1994), it is possible to find secondary schools in the UK which are investing in the design of an innovative curriculum for their year 7, (11-year-old students). This paper focuses on four of these schools and discusses some of the challenges they face in planning and implementing their competence-based curricula. Such curricula tend to be based on the rationale that they better prepare all students for the constant changes of human knowledge and understanding. They develop transferable skills rather than subject specific content, which are considered necessary requirements for learners as future productive members of society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Advocates of competence-based curricula argue that such curricula are more inclusive and emancipatory than traditional curricula, although this view is contested (e.g. Young 2008). Employing Bernstein's (1973, 1999) concepts of framing and classification of the curriculum this paper describes the challenges and constraints encountered by four schools which have endeavoured to develop a competence-based curriculum.

**Keywords:** *school transition, secondary schools, planning, innovation, competence-based curriculum*

## **Introduction**

This article focuses on the planning processes associated with the implementation and development of a competence-based curriculum in secondary schools. It forms part of a wider case study of competence-based curricula in four secondary schools in England, as discussed in the introductory article also in this issue. This article builds on the overarching rationale and theoretical framework discussed in our introductory article and addresses specific issues raised there with regard to curriculum planning by answering a research question focused on developing our understanding of the challenges and constraints involved in planning and implementing a competence-based curriculum, which was

derived from exploratory interviews with curriculum leaders and an examination of curriculum documentation conducted during an early stage of the project.

Morgan et al.(2007, 14) hold to the view that, “If we are interested in supporting young people to develop as learners, to nurture thinking skills, to develop creative and responsive capacities to engage with the world, then the question of curriculum and how it is negotiated and constructed cannot be overlooked”. The relevance of the curriculum in preparing young people for their adult lives has been strongly highlighted by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) (2006). The process and development of a curriculum in which all young people are included and regarded as important stakeholders is of the utmost importance (Kelly 2009). This perspective of the curriculum does not simply predetermine what students are to learn but places them as active participants who are expected to be critical agents (Blenkin, Edwards & Kelly 1992). Kelly (2004, 3) advocates that such a curriculum has a democratic orientation which adopts, “the promotion of freedom and independence of thought, of social and political empowerment, of respect for the freedom of others, of an acceptance of variety of opinion, and of the enrichment of the life of every individual in that society, regardless of class, race or creed”.

Freedom and autonomy for teachers and learners to develop curricula that are context and culturally specific is regarded as a necessary condition for innovative curriculum development (Kelly 2009, 134). This type of curriculum views school as a human social institution that is responsive to its own environment and therefore, the curriculum must be permitted to develop in specific ways to fit that environment (Kelly 2009). However

developing such a curriculum involves applying changes to the status quo, which have been categorised in three models: (1) rational, (2) coercive, and (3) normative (Morgan et al. 2007). The rational model believes that as long as teachers understand the innovation being implemented, they will be convinced of its benefits. The coercive model forces innovations upon teachers and schools from the outside through monitoring of outcomes and inspections. The third model is based on the assumption that changing schools is about changing people – their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour to a previously and externally agreed perspective. As argued by Goodson (1993), educational change cannot be based solely on the opinions of specific groups such as teachers or government officials. Instead, he points out that changes start with individuals and flow into institutions and society. In fact, as Blenkin et al. (1992, 13) note:

[w]e must accept [John Dewey's] claims that knowledge is constantly evolving, that values are similarly evolving and that societies are evolving too; that nothing in human nature or relationships can be properly or usefully viewed as static and that to treat anything as such will lead to disaster, or, at the very least, will result in a slowing down of the evolutionary process. In short, we need not to arrest change, nor to accelerate it, but rather to facilitate it, to be constantly responsive to it, to learn to live with it.

Introducing a competence-based curriculum that is underpinned by these democratic ideals is orientated towards a social logic in which all members of the learning community are equally valued, participate actively and are responsible for their own learning (Bernstein 1990). In other words, a democratic orientation to curriculum development involves reflection on the forces affecting societies and relationships in order not only to understand change but to be able to facilitate it. In reality, however, there are constraints in applying changes and managing the transition from a traditional, disciplinary, content-orientated

curriculum that has, *steered the construction of educational practice for decades* to a more social and emancipatory model (Tiana, Moya & Luengo 2011, 309).

Therefore this study explores how four English secondary schools have developed and implemented innovative, competence-based curricula for Year 7 (11-12 year old) students, and thus, addresses the question:

- *What are the challenges and constraints in planning and implementing a competence-based curriculum?*

### **Theoretical Framework and Related Literature**

When considering curricula, a number of questions can be asked in relation to how different types of curriculum are planned. However, Marsh (2009) points out that what appear to be straightforward questions can lead to an infinite number of sub-questions and suggests instead the use of models which identify basic considerations in order to account for curriculum decisions and show how they inter-relate.

Tyler's (1949) ends-means model and Taba's (1962) inverted model are two of the most influential curriculum models. Tyler's model, has as its starting point the identification of desired curriculum outcomes, while Taba's model starts with an identification of students' needs. Despite their differences these models are useful in guiding the development of a competence-based curriculum. The underpinning philosophy of education is paramount as it will fundamentally influence the structure and content of the curriculum. As we have noted, competence-based curricula are rooted in a democratic and emancipatory view of education that aims to enhance learning for all by providing the appropriate conditions for learning (Dewey

1916, Freire 1972). Freire considers that this requires both learners and teachers to engage in dialogue and act as critical thinkers which allow the learners (and teachers) to reflect on their own situation, and in doing so they are empowered to enact change. Therefore the implementation and planning of these innovative curricula requires the engagement and support of the whole school community, including management, if the aims of competence-based curricula are to be achieved (Ketelaar et al, 2012).

Alongside the goal of encompassing these philosophical aims and objectives the curriculum planned by individual schools requires adaptation to the specific context to ensure that learning is successful (Tiana et al, 2011). To this end a coherent plan that results from a structured, integrated approach to developing the competences through cross-linkages between and within subject disciplines is regarded as the most likely to succeed (Tiana et al, 2011). However, Whitty, Rowe and Aggleton (1994) note that competences can disappear within cross-curricula themes because teachers are reluctant to abandon a focus on their subject specialism. The strong vertical discourses of the subject disciplines make it challenging to plan and effect an integrated, competence-based curriculum. This requires teachers to work together cooperatively to develop different 'realisation rules' when planning these new curricula (Bernstein 1990). Furthermore, a new professional culture is necessary in which all agents are committed to creating these new learning environments by engaging in communities of practice (Wenger 1998) or professional learning communities (Feiman-Nemser 2001) in order to provide a critical mass of individuals who are committed to the planning and implementation of a competence-based curriculum. The strongly classified curriculum (Bernstein 1973) in which separate subjects are regarded as bodies of powerful knowledge is the predominant *modus operandi* in many English secondary schools,

and this is likely to be endorsed by current UK education policy (Department for Education 2010). These factors have the potential to militate against the successful planning and implementation of competence-based curricula.

With underpinning principles of empowerment and learning-to-learn at the heart of such curricula, it is vital that learners should be actively engaged in assessment of their own learning. Assessment for learning (e.g. Black & Wiliam 1998) is commonly recognised as an effective approach to include learners in understanding what they have learned and what they need to do to make further progress. In planning a competence-based curriculum, therefore, attention should be paid to how learners understand and recognise their success. Planning to include formative and summative assessment of competences is therefore a crucial aspect of the overall curriculum implementation and development.

In addition, competence-based learning implies that knowledge is tacit, situated and gained through experience; the learning that takes place is therefore situated temporally, spatially and contextually (Lave and Wenger 1991). Planning for alternative opportunities to practise competences would thus be a further element to ensure the success of these curricula.

## **The Study**

The aim of this article is to ascertain how teachers in the case study schools, as described in the introductory article, are meeting the challenges of implementing a competence-based curriculum

and what constraints they face with regard to day-to-day planning of competence-based lessons. The evidence for this article is drawn predominantly from individual interviews conducted with school leaders, from focus group interviews with teachers and also from student focus groups. The school leaders provided us with the historical background and the challenges they faced in the adoption of their competence-based curricula and teachers gave us insights into issues of planning for competence-based lessons. Details of the data collection methods employed and their analysis can be found in the introductory article, also in this issue.

## **Findings**

These findings form an amalgamation of the issues raised in all four case study schools rather than a detailed comparative analysis of the different schools, and examples illustrate the overall findings. However reference to specific schools is offered at times and some comparisons are made where findings are relevant to particular school contexts.

### **Issue 1: The aims and objectives of the competence-based curricula**

As explained in the introductory article that accompanies this one, all four schools have developed a substantial part of the overall curriculum for their Year 7 students that aims to focus on skill development rather than subject content, and which embraces a holistic approach to teaching and learning when compared to more traditional and separated subject based curricula. The competence-based curricula (CBC) aim to encourage students to think and to employ the skills they learn in new and different situations, and to make connections between subjects. The purpose of this approach is not an end in itself but has a deeper educational basis; that of enabling students to have the necessary repertoire of skills, knowledge and attitudes to feel empowered to

be able to cope and be successful not only in their future school career but beyond that when they leave school, as this curriculum leader indicates:

*It's definitely creating independent thinkers, and some of the skills that they're learning with us they're transferring across the school, so I think it's helping them think for themselves, use different skills to support their own learning. So that's definitely something that we've been quite successful at embedding.* (Curriculum Leader, School 4).

Support and approval of the aims of CBCs from senior leaders in the school seems to be vital if these curricula are to be planned effectively and given adequate time within the timetable. The underpinning philosophy of CBCs was supported by senior leaders in all the case study schools as the Head teacher of School 1 says:

*We are making it a foundation which can be built on for students' experience of secondary school,*  
(Head teacher, School 1).

This Head, like others in the case study group of schools, viewed the CBC for Year 7 students, at the start of their secondary school education, as developing a core set of skills on which future learning should be based. However, it would seem that some teachers are less convinced of the aims of the CBC, appearing to be quite sceptical about its outcomes, and their comments reflect the dominant subject-focussed discourse within secondary schools:

*There were those that were just going to criticise it from the offset, because they thought it was too primary-based and, you know, this doesn't have a place in secondary school,*  
(Curriculum Leader, School 2).

This fear among colleagues, expressed by the CBC leader, of pitching the secondary curriculum too low, was supported by comments from some of the CBC teachers themselves as they reflected on their opinion of the CBC prior to joining the CBC team. For example, one CBC

teacher, from School 3, stated that she hadn't seen the value of the competence-based approach, particularly for those children she considered to be the most academically able, studying in her subject discipline which she also considered to be "quite academic".

Once teachers had engaged with the processes of planning and teaching on the CBC they are more likely to perceive its advantages over a more rigidly subject based curriculum and consider that there are beneficial outcomes for their own skills as teachers:

*...that focus has meant that the teachers are really thinking much more about the foundations of learning rather than just assuming that the kids are going to assimilate information by reading it. So it's improved them as teachers, (Curriculum Leader, School 3).*

The philosophy and aims of a CBC are, generally to a large extent, shared by all those involved in the planning process in each of the case study schools, but one group of major stakeholders, the students, seems to be rarely consulted about the planning of the curriculum. School 1 appears to be unique among the case study schools in taking account of student voice on a planned and regular basis when determining development of the curriculum. Students in School 1 are cognisant of the impact of their evaluation on the units of work and how this affects the evolving nature of their curriculum and the positive effect it is intended to have on their learning experiences:

*The teachers try to make the units better from previous groups ... with [mentioned unit] we were the very first group to do it so it was not very good but [another mentioned unit] was really good, (Student, School 1).*

Providing students with the opportunity to voice their opinions about the CBC seems to be a more ad hoc process in the other case study schools and while teachers are aware of the influence of student evaluations the students themselves are not, as this teacher comment implied:

*We've amended [part of the curriculum] this year ...and that really came from talking to the students...that largely came from them and their experiences, so we do listen and we do take on board what they say, (Curriculum Leader, School 3).*

Thus the key aim of empowering students in a democratic planning process seems to be rarely capitalised upon, and students are not always made aware of any influence that they have had on modifications to the existing curriculum through the process of gathering student voice in curriculum evaluation. It is also apparent that involving all teachers in the planning process so that the core focus is on skill development within a cross curricular theme, can be problematic and these issues are now discussed.

## **Issue 2: Planning the units of work**

Working together as a team in a collegial manner is deemed essential for the success of the CBC in each case study school, as the curriculum leader of School 3 recognises:

*You've got to have a committed team, people that work together...and by involving them in the processes, I think that's helped a lot, (Curriculum Leader, School 3).*

However the dominant structure of subject departments within three of the case study schools meant that teachers' timetables were not conducive to providing time to work together and plan the CBC. As highlighted below, this constraint results from the fact that content-based approaches through subjects are prioritised over the CBC programme:

*It's difficult to organise [meetings] because everybody who teaches [in the CBC] is a specialist in another subject and the other subjects are the priority subjects,*

*(Curriculum Leader, School 2).*

This tends to result in the curriculum being designed centrally, with the CBC leader taking on much of the work, particularly in Schools 2 and 3, leaving individual teachers with less autonomy and a lower level of participation over the structure and nature of the CBC and particularly how the CBC relates to the wider curriculum, as this excerpt from a teacher focus group suggests:

*T1: I don't think we have planning meetings, do we?*

*T2: We don't, in terms of the whole curriculum [CBC], do we?*

*T3: You have your department meetings separately. Your department meetings will be every so often on a Monday night.*

*T4: Yeah, the departments aren't linked to it [CBC]. Yeah, OK there are 7 subjects there but we don't link to departments we're our own unique department with a team of different specialists in it.*

*(Focus Group, School 2).*

Furthermore, the teachers are constrained not only by timetabling but also by the strong vertical discourse of subjects and departmental structures, as the excerpt above indicates. Even though School 1 has planning meetings which are held every 6-8 weeks, the curriculum leader acknowledges that the time set aside to meet as part of this team is shorter than that given to the different subject departments and she understands that the hegemony of subject disciplines can be a powerful and potential barrier to successful, collegiate and collaborative planning in the CBC:

*...but of course when you've got a team and you've got staff from lots of different departments, they're pulled in lots of different ways. So they're obviously pulled to their*

*own subject but also you need to make sure you get them back in to the team (Curriculum Leader, School 1).*

Organisation of the teaching in School 1 and physical arrangements of teaching spaces in School 3 lend themselves to informal collaboration in day-to-day planning. In School 1 pairs of teachers share the delivery of a unit of work and they arrange time before, after or between lessons to discuss their plans. In fact, a log book has been introduced so that teachers who have been paired to deliver a unit can record how far they have managed to progress with their lessons. In this way, lesson content can be adapted and continuity between the different sessions is ensured, as this teacher explains:

*...we'll write down what we did each lesson, what's next, either what you need to do next or where we're up to ...we have a sheet for the week with what we'd like to do each lesson and where we think we're going to go, so we've got an idea, so our 60 hours is planned where we want it to be and if it doesn't happen then [my partner] knows, (Teacher, School 1).*

In School 3 such informal liaison between CBC teachers is facilitated by the proximity of their classrooms; a specific area of the school building has been allocated for the Year 7 classrooms and every groups is situated along the same corridor. This physical arrangement of classrooms appears to have enabled the teachers to more easily support each other on an informal/ ad hoc basis, especially in terms of sharing good practice and resources through opportunities for impromptu observation of colleagues, as exemplified in the extract below:

*I'll walk into her room and say, 'Oh, what are you doing here?' and she'll give me a good idea, and she'll give me her lesson plan or her resources, or what have you,*

*and I'll walk into your room and you're doing something and I'll say, 'Oh, where did you get that from? (Teacher, School 3).*

In contrast to Schools 2 and 3, the teachers in School 4 are directly involved in their curriculum planning. One explanation for this is that whilst the CBC teachers in School 4 were drawn from different subject departments they were drawn from a narrower set of subjects, namely the humanities subjects only, and this narrower focus for the CBC, compared to the other case study schools, allowed teachers to give a higher status to their subject content, to the extent that subjects were kept as discrete entities within the CBC for the purpose of planning:

*...but we all sort of pulled together and helped each other out, you know, the geography team planned really good schemes of work, the history team did the same thing, and then RE, and it all fed in together, (Teacher, School 4).*

Planning the CBC is also constrained in the other case study schools by the expectations of delivering subject specific content within the CBC. The imbalance between the powerful knowledge of subject disciplines and tacit knowledge of competences was strongly felt by CBC leaders as they started to plan their programmes. At the early stage of the implementation CBC leaders were aware that they needed to liaise with their colleagues in charge of subject departments and that the integration of subject content within the CBC would be directed by departmental requirements, as illustrated below:

*I've made a point of saying to them [Heads of Department], 'Well what are the core skills that you would want?' I think I've adapted our curriculum to make sure I'm not treading on their toes. I've sort of adapted what we do to suit them because I'm very sensitive to the fact that we have taken elements of their lessons away, (Curriculum Leader, School 2).*

Through the process of subject departments having an input into the implementation and development of the CBC, it is more likely to be supported by the whole school, particularly by influential members of middle leaderships such as Heads of subject departments. Furthermore, as subjects may be perceived as losing teaching time to CBC lessons there is a perception, among CBC leaders in particular, that when students move back to a more strongly classified curriculum, they need to be able to show that they have made progress in subject disciplines during the year. The challenge to fulfil this requirement can present additional barriers to planning a truly integrated cross-curricula approach focussed on skill development, as indicated below:

*And how do we show that they've made progress. And that, I think, was probably the biggest issue because if I could get that right then it meant that when I talked to other Heads of Department in Year 8 ....there is evidence ....they have made progress this year...So I think that, for me, as the key challenge, it was showing the academic progress.*

(Curriculum Leader, School 3).

Each of the schools devoted considerable planning time at the implementation stage and particularly in the continuing development of the CBC, to developing assessment strategies that they considered to be robust and rigorous enough to address the perceived concerns of subject departments.

### **Issue 3: Developments in planning including assessment**

The length of time that each case study school has been engaged in providing a CBC differs (see Table 1 in the introductory article). As a result the schools are at different stages of development in their planning, but it is the recognition by all the schools that they need to reflect on practice in

order to improve the curriculum that is of interest. The curriculum leaders in each of the case study schools made regular references to the constant evolution of the CBC in their school. The curriculum leader in School 1 felt this justified the position of the leader at the front of planning and development trying to “push” that forward. In a similar reference to constant change the CBC leader in School 3 recognised that some changes are necessary to improve the depth of learning, such as the need to differentiate for different levels of ability, while other changes contribute to the sense of breadth, freshness and innovation in a CBC:

*It's constantly trying to find what works. ...I mean we didn't have science the first year, it was just the [CBC] in English, maths, and PE. Then it included science and music ... and now we've got the pathways where it's all slightly tweaked and we've got the languages and we've got Latin in there. I think Latin is a great idea...fantastic. (Curriculum Leader, School 3).*

This emphasis on changes to the CBC framed in terms of subject disciplines rather than the development of competences was also echoed by the curriculum leader in School 2 who cited the movement of one subject out from the group of subjects giving over curriculum time to the CBC as it was considered that the subject needed dedicated time and was possibly very challenging for a non-specialist to teach, as he explains here:

*Music was taken out because one of the key concerns was that they [the students] were coming out of primary school and one of the things they were looking forward to was getting discrete music lessons and having a chance with all the fantastic equipment, and they weren't getting that, and it was deemed that that's the one thing they really wanted, and so it was fine take that out and have it back because actually trying to deliver Music when you're a non specialist [is difficult], (Curriculum Leader , School 3).*

A key aspect of the curriculum leaders' role in each school is in taking the lead role in planning the assessment of competences, and ensuring students were aware of the progress they were making. The CBC leader at School 2 admitted that robust provision for assessment was lacking during the implementation phase of the CBC:

*...the assessment was all over the place to start with, and now I feel it's a little bit more formalised – well it's a lot more formalised, and we've got the booklet the students can take away when they're all completed.* (Curriculum Leader, School 2).

Whilst this is a concern for all the teachers and students within the programme it seems to be the curriculum leader who is responsible for such strategic decisions such as changes to assessment practices, rather than a joint decision with other teachers and students.

#### **Issue 4: Opportunities to develop competencies beyond the specific CBC lessons**

One of the dimensions of a CBC is to provide real life experiences for students. Therefore consideration needs to be given to planning opportunities for the students to put into practice the skills they have learned in authentic situations which are beyond the confines of the classroom and, at times, the school. School 1 implements a range of activities in the summer term that develop leadership skills including hosting and planning a set of activities for a group of incoming students from local primary schools as they visit the school for an induction day. They also involve the students in enterprise activities during the school's summer fete developed by selecting the best submission from a set of business plans by each class group.

Such experiences were not unique to School 1, as Schools 2 and 3 both make use of regular off-site activities to develop a wider set of skills, and School 2 utilises one day every two weeks with

an alternative timetable to develop competences within a variety of on and off-site learning experiences

Although students have opportunities to demonstrate autonomy within such broader learning experiences, the nature and type of such experiences are still very much under the auspices of teachers' decision making, and in particular, the planning undertaken by curriculum leaders.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Each of the four case study schools embraced, as a starting point, for planning their curricula the underpinning aims and objects of competence-based curricula in terms of Tyler's (1949) desired outcomes and Taba's (1962) more student-centred approach of addressing students' needs. All of the curriculum leaders explained that the overall goal of the curricula is to develop their students' competences, as defined in the RSA (2006), either to be more resilient in pursuing their learning, or to better equip them to facilitate the transition from primary to secondary school. Choosing to develop a CBC could indicate that the four participant schools aim to form active citizens who, as explained by Crick (2009, 75), "are able to understand and participate democratically in their local, national and global communities and thus contribute to a sustainable social world". In doing so each school has committed to a democratic ideological perspective of the curriculum (Kelly 2009). However, how far the negotiation and the construction of the varied competence-based curricula adopt this democratic orientation is questionable. School 1 presented the most flexible structure, in which planning was negotiated among teachers and students in advance and

informally on a daily basis between teachers. Thus School 1 appears to have adopted an inclusive ideology to planning (Kelly 2009). Some of the changes in the curriculum have been reported as being responses to students' comments, which encourages students to be critical thinkers and have an active role in the planning of their curriculum. All four case study schools aim to prepare their students to be part of a fast changing world. Unfortunately, not all the teachers working in the competence-based curricula enable their students to participate actively and critically in planning their lessons. Therefore, we emphasise the need for both learners and teachers to be seen as critical thinkers in dialogue with one another so that they can see change as a natural aspect of society and can deal with it in a positive and democratic way (Blenkin et al. 1992, Freire 1972). The higher level of flexibility in curriculum planning in School 1 may have resulted from its involvement in a CBC for the longest. Having more experience seems to have empowered this school and its teachers to have some confidence in trying new activities and negotiating their curriculum more openly with their colleagues and their students and in prioritising competence over content that exemplifies a weakly framed and classified curriculum (Bernstein 1999). Having said that, each of the six units are closely linked to specific subjects and the core content is pre-selected by the teachers, indicating that it is difficult to change the high status held by subject content and the dominance of teachers' perspective, as is any attempt, "to change or modify educational codes" (Bernstein 1973, 110).

The tension between subject disciplines and competences was also perceived in the other case study schools where concerns about planning to include curriculum content were voiced despite the overall aim of the CBC for skill and competence development. Thus

planning an integrated competence-based curriculum has been a challenge when faced with the strong vertical subject discourses apparent in each of the case study schools (Bernstein 1999). However in different ways and to different extents teachers and curriculum leaders have developed practical solutions to this subject hegemony and power relations when planning the CBCs. The curriculum leaders in School 2 and 3 liaised with heads of departments when planning the CBC. This seemed in part to appease subject departments who were sceptical about the value of the CBC and its contribution to students' progress, especially when it took away valuable curriculum time from subject disciplines. In School 4 the tension was not as acute since the CBC is more narrowly focused around the humanities, and planning is highly subject based. Planning the CBC in this way could be criticised as not espousing an integrated cross-curricular approach in which the competencies are taught through the linkages between subject disciplines and therefore rendering it less likely to succeed in its overall aims (Tiana et al. 2011). However the curriculum leader of School 4 considers that the students do achieve the planned aims of the CBC by becoming independent learners but the extent to which this is monitored and assessed in School 4 was not ascertained.

Assessment of the competences was regarded as an important development in the planning process of the other case study schools. This seemed to stem from two potential challenges. The first is the need to demonstrate student progress so that subject departments would continue to support the CBC. The second is to ensure the aims of a democratic curriculum are met so that students are aware of and have ownership of their learning (Freire 1972). The latter is less controversial than the former because it is consistent with challenges faced in other curricula that

aim to implement good practice in terms of assessment for learning (Black & Wiliam 1998). However there appear to be few planned opportunities in any of the schools to enable the students to practice their skills in a real life situation and therefore have them assessed in an authentic environment. Situated and context-based learning (Lave & Wenger 1991) is regarded as an important aspect of CBC's and this seems to be an ongoing challenge in planning the CBCs. The need to demonstrate student progress indicates that the CBCs are vulnerable to criticism in terms of academic rigour and therefore continue to struggle for leverage for a place in the overall school curriculum. Because curriculum development is a product of choice and thus, a political act, the fact that planning and curriculum development is an ideological activity cannot be ignored (Wood 1998). Therefore the strong vertical discourse of subject disciplines has again the potential to derail the planning of the CBCs.

Time and opportunities to plan the CBCs effectively seems to be an additional challenge for teachers who are otherwise pre-occupied with teaching within the strongly classified curriculum of the rest of the school (Bernstein 1999). In some schools this resulted in the curriculum leader taking responsibility for and ownership of the planning which they disseminated to the other teachers on the CBC team. Thus, they negated some of the principles of a democratic curriculum by disenfranchising teachers in making planning decisions (Freire 1972). Further, for CBCs to be effectively planned teachers need to work together cooperatively to develop different 'realisation rules' (Bernstein 1990). This seems to be a particular challenge in some of the case study schools where the constraints of customs and practices of subject departments are difficult to overcome (Tiana et al. 2011). Having said that, teachers have found informal opportunities to work collaboratively in some schools appear to circumvent the issues created by the well

established vertical discourse of subject disciplines. However developing a community of practice (Wenger 1998) or professional learning communities (Feiman-Nemser 2001) in which a critical mass of like-minded teachers can plan together means that the CBCs will be in a stronger position to defend themselves from their critics. Furthermore the cooperation and support of senior management is essential for the continued planning and implementation of these innovative CBCs (Ketelaar et al. 2012). This appears to be the situation in all case study schools and therefore the future of the CBCs are assured. Nevertheless the changes to the national curriculum in England (Department for Education 2010) that endorse separate subjects and a strongly classified curriculum could mean that school leaders have to question their educational philosophy if they continue to adopt a CBC even if it is for only part of their curriculum (Bernstein 1973).

Therefore in order to ensure the continuation of CBCs school leaders must enable these new learning environments to flourish (Tiana et al. 2011). In order to do this schools need to ensure that teachers and students have opportunities for a variety of fora for discussion; these include teachers and leaders, teachers and teachers, teachers and students and, students and students. Therefore, school leaders need to recognise the value of providing teachers and students with a structure that offers them opportunities to formally liaise, work as a team and question the plans being implemented. As raised by Tan (2006) in her evaluation of curriculum changes in Singapore, it is crucial that teachers have time to learn. In other words, time to plan, reflect and share.

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