

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM PUPIL EXPERIENCE PERSPECTIVES ON CHOICES
AVAILABLE AT 14-16 WHICH CAN HELP INFORM FUTURE CURRICULUM
DESIGN?

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Abstract

This thesis examines how UK teachers, educators and students understand, participate, and respond to the suggested curriculum reform for 14-19 year old students over the period of 2012-2013. The time period is important since it is a crucial point for commencement of the new policy which determines the reform of Key Stage 4 and post-16 education as well as possible changes in the suggested policy based on teachers' and students' perceptions.

The research has been conceptualized using the Constructivist framework based on a belief that knowledge possesses personal meaning that is created or recreated by people as their response to new experiences. The methodology selected to inform the research is the Grounded Theory enabling to gain insight into others' perspectives using inductive analysis of results which is conducted from ground up and making it possible to develop new understandings with the help of dialogue as a tool for communication. Just as education research aims at expanding knowledge in order to improve practice, the current research was positioned within the qualitative paradigm. Namely, the use of the Grounded Theory enabled to analyze the data obtained as a result of in-depth interviews that were conducted with teachers and students alike.

The newly formed insights got further analyzed in their link to the current scholarly literature and experts' opinions in the field. The research has been helpful for articulation of important recommendations for the curriculum change implementation. The study has made an important contribution to research in education at Key Stage 4 and post-16 education in relation to vocational-oriented and lower-ability British students.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Study

Given the need to enhance the teaching practice of core subjects in British schools, curriculum changes to 14-19 have been launched by the Secretary of State for Education. Michael Gove, the major contributor and initiator of the current exam reform in British education, has announced that an English Baccalaureate Certificate will replace the existing GCSE exam system. The English Baccalaureate Certificate will, as Michael Gove explains, comprise English, Mathematics, and Sciences along with Languages, History and Geography. Gove believes that the reform will ensure more rigorous qualifications in the core subjects that constitute “the academic foundation which is the secure base on which further study, vocational learning or a satisfying apprenticeship can be built.” (Sparrow, 2012).

It is expected that the new reform with the 3-lane system that was proposed by Dr Martin Stephen will encourage the learning autonomy among students aged 14-19. In relation to this, autonomous learning is viewed as essentially “self-directed and self-selected according to the learners own needs, preferences, and learning arrangements”, according to Melanie McBride from Ryerson University in Toronto. It is about learners making their own choices regarding what, where, and how they would like to learn (McBride in Richardson, 2012).

Compared to other initiatives by the Secretary of State for Education, this reform is a new concept, which does not have sufficient empirical foundation. In the context of the rigorous character of there form and its focus on higher standards of academic achievement, there is a paucity of empirically based research into the potential outcomes for vocationally oriented and lower-ability students aged 14-19.

This study aims at contributing to current research into implementation of the new post 14 curriculum in secondary and high school context by focusing on the potential

outcomes of the reform and relevance to lower-ability and vocationally-oriented students. The research will expectedly highlight various aspects of the new curriculum policy and how it will affect the studying process, specifically in relation to students' choices and opportunities. Further, the current research will explore the proposed curriculum in relation to lower-ability and vocational students. Based on a range of interviews with teachers and students from two high schools in Barrow-in-Furness and on a series of publications by Michael Gove, Dr Stephen and other proponents of therefrom, this paper will present a complex picture of the reform advantages and disadvantages, as well as potential outcomes for vocationally-oriented and lower-ability students. The findings will be interesting for students involved in secondary and post-16 education, their teachers, parents, and politicians.

1.2.Theoretical Framework

A thorough review of the pertinent literature enabled to construct the conceptual foundations of the new curriculum as an educational reform that is capable of covering some problems of GSCEs. On the basis of analysis of the authoritative research into curriculum reforms, it has been established that the constructivist framework is widely supported in the sources that explore similar issues (Healey 2011, Zimmermann, Peschl, & Rommer-Nossek 2010, Sjoberg 2007, Geelan 1995, London 1990, Goodson 1990).

Constructivism is a theory of learning through seeking meaning (Sjoberg 2007, Healey 2011). Its philosophy focuses on construction of understanding of the world and of the ways it is accepted by individuals. It revolves around creating subsequent meanings. The constructivist approach views knowledge as created by and within a person who is an active participant of the learning process, which necessarily involves a combination of interpreting the phenomena and elaborating meanings (Crebbin 2000)

Constructivism places the person at the centre of the learning process. In this context, learning is viewed as a complex building of information and individual experiences. This process of making meanings involves an incessant reinterpretation of new experiences which change those understandings that already exist (Crebbin 2000).

The important thing about constructivism for the current study is its learner-centred perspective which relates the individual and the communal alike (Healey 2011). Specifically, learning is believed to be shaped via social dialogue by a certain social context. Communication and language are thought to be its primary tools (McMahon 1997). The relevance of this framework for the current research is explained by its acknowledgement that humans learn most effectively if they get involved in producing meaningful things, which means they situate the learning exactly where it is relevant (Healey 2011).

1.3.Statement of the Problem

While much is being said about the benefit of rising the standards for talented and academic oriented students, the review of recent scholarly sources provided little to no research linking the new curriculum to effectiveness of lower-ability and vocationally-oriented students. Neither did it expose the way the problem is viewed by local teachers and students of the selected age group. This study addresses this gap.

In this context, taking into account the fact that vocationally oriented and lower ability students also form a considerable part of overall school population in Great Britain and will be subject to the new reform, the research purpose is formally stated in the following way:

To examine and evaluate the potential of the newly introduced 14-16 curriculum for lower-ability and vocationally oriented students (with focus in the curriculum contents, expert views, and opinions expressed by students and teachers).

To achieve the stated purpose of the research, the following objectives have been formed:

- To examine the theoretical background for the new curriculum development
- To determine and describe the components of the curriculum
- To investigate the extent of the curriculum focus on education of the lower-ability and vocationally-oriented students
- To determine potential benefits and drawbacks of the curriculum for students based on the analysis of experts' and students' views
- To develop recommendations to the Department for Education regarding implementation of the new curriculum.

1.4. Research Design and Methodology

The research is a qualitative study seeking to understand the participants' perceptions and the actual situation. The qualitative study is based on the Grounded Theory, whose inductive nature is compatible with the objectives of the present research. Just as the Grounded Theory aims at establishing meaning of some phenomenon based on informants perspectives, it allows emergence of the theory from the bottom to the top (Glaser 1998).

Employing the interpretive approach, the researcher aims at getting immersed into the world of the study participants in order to see the reality from their perspectives. It is considered that interviewing is one of the most relevant methods for doing this. In particular, in-depth interviewing is thought to be the most useful. Its essence is about leading a purposeful talk in order to reveal the "beliefs, wishes, feelings, desires, fears, and intentions" (Minichiello et al 2000, p.22). Keats (1988) explains that in-depth interviews may be understood as the two-way conversations between the researcher and the informants, which happen in accordance with the set purpose.

The unstructured type of interview was chosen, which allowed the participants communicate their ideas and perceptions in a free and unrestricted manner. The interviews of the unstructured type include several open-ended questions to "elicit views and opinions from

the participants”, while the control on the part of the interviewer is minimal (Creswell, 2009, p.181)

1.5.Research Questions

Given the major aim of the research to examine and evaluate the potential of the newly introduced 14-16 curriculum for lower-ability and vocationally oriented students based on analysis of the curriculum contents, as well as opinions expressed by students and teachers, the following research questions have been posed.

- What is the theoretical background for the new curriculum development?
- What are major components of the curriculum?
- To what extent does the new curriculum reflect the interests of the lower-ability and vocationally-oriented students?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of the curriculum for students based on analysis of experts’ and students’ views?
- What practical recommendations can be given on the ground of the findings of the study regarding lower-ability and vocationally oriented students?

1.6.Research Sample

While the research employs the qualitative design, it involves small numbers (Minichiello et al 2010). The study explored the views of the students from two high schools in Barrow-in-Furness regarding the changed curriculum. 10 students aged 14-16 of both sexes and 4 teachers took part in the interview from both schools.

1.7.Assumptions and Limitations

The research is qualitative in nature, which means it did not engage vast number of people whose data could be the subject to quantitative analysis and used for generalization about the students’ and teachers’ perceptions on the country level. Thus, it will not provide a solid base for wide generalizations about students’ perceptions of the new reform as well as

its adequacy to the needs and interests of students who are vocationally oriented and have lower abilities.

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