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Core and peripheral curricula: the division of the primary curriculum between teachers and assistants

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Background

Current discourse around the curriculum in the primary sector denotes some curriculum areas as 'core' (Boyle and Bragg 2008). These curriculum areas (mainly literacy and numeracy but also science - subjects linked to the dominant current economic rationale for schooling - Bottery and Wright 2000) are driven by the performativity agenda (Ball 2003) and externally identified centralised targets. They are also the main focus of the work of teachers and it is in these 'core' areas that the effects of the intensification of teacher work is most readily perceived. The pressure on schools to 'perform' in these core curricula (with their significance for inter-school comparison) has led to a general focus on these areas; a pressure which is, in turn, placed on the qualified teacher. In opposition to the discourse of the 'core' curriculum there have emerged 'other' areas of the curriculum not viewed as 'core' - for example music, singing, PE, sport, and art. By not being included in the core curriculum, these subject areas can be described as 'peripheral'.

Concurrent with the pressures on teachers to 'perform' in core curriculum areas, school workforce reforms since 2003 have enabled another group of workers (teaching assistants - TAs) to take on whole class work. It is argued in this paper that the focusing of teacher work towards the core curriculum has opened up the space for TAs to 'colonise' the peripheral curriculum areas when working with both whole classes and smaller groups: the notion of the 'core' curriculum has provided a 'space' (the 'peripheral' curriculum) into which the work of support workers might be placed.

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Research Questions

This paper focuses on, and attempts to disentangle the multiple layers of change which have been brought about in primary schools through curriculum and workforce reform policies, and by intensification of teachers' work and performativity agendas. These threads are then related to evidence from fieldwork which suggests that core and peripheral curriculum areas can be identified which are the preserve of teachers and TAs respectively. Further, it is argued that one possible way of redefining the teacher role vis-à-vis the TA role, in a workforce reform context in which boundaries between roles might become blurred, is in terms of their control of the core curriculum. In relation to the TA role, the extent to which they might be said to have 'colonised' the peripheral curriculum is explored as are the potential ramifications for teacher/child and TA/child relations.

Methods

The notions of core and peripheral curricula are explored here by drawing on ESRC funded doctoral research (Garland 2008) carried out in two primary schools in the north of England. Thirty two relatively unstructured in-depth interviews were carried out with teachers and TAs, alongside observation, which involved the shadowing of TAs in their work, in a methodology referred to as 'approaching ethnography'.

Fieldwork is examined for evidence of teacher involvement in core curriculum areas and the relationship between TA work and the peripheral curriculum. Further, the discourse of the 'core' curriculum, and its suggested relation to the peripheral curriculum, is analysed both in relation to policy documentation, the academic literature and empirical work.

Frame

This paper analyses the separation of the core curriculum from the non-core, the symbolic significance of this, and the effects on the roles and identities of the teacher and the TA. Further, the ramifications of this separation for the overt and covert rationales for schooling are explored. The potential benefits for the professional status of teachers of defining the role partly in relation to control of the core curriculum areas (in terms of the dominant rationales for education, what is currently valued, and the symbolic importance of the core curriculum), will be considered, as will the potential problems (regarding work intensification, pressures from performativity agendas, diminishing of professional autonomy) of the role being thus defined. From the angle of the TA, there are also implications for this role in terms of status; they have little control over the core areas (though they are involved in intervention schemes in core curriculum areas) and are confined mainly to the periphery. However, TAs do have the space to develop an area of curriculum involvement (to colonise it). In addition, there is an ironic tension here between the lower status significance of TA curriculum involvement and the creativity and autonomy which the peripheral curriculum might allow. Further, in terms of relationships with the children it has been suggested (Woods and Jeffrey 2002) that teachers have less opportunity to demonstrate the 'humanistic' side of their role in the current climate. Conversely, the TA, with a greater involvement in the peripheral curriculum areas can fill the vacuum left by the teacher's focus on performativity agendas.

Research findings

The boundaries between the areas of work covered by teacher and TA roles might sometimes appear to be blurring with TAs taking on whole class work as a result of workforce reform. However, in the research teachers sought to emphasise the importance of certain areas of the curriculum and their expectation and determination to ensure that it was teachers who taught whole class groups in these core areas. It was teachers who took the classes in the core curriculum areas in nearly all cases and there was evidence of a determination not to cede any control of this curriculum 'territory' to TAs. Indeed, the teacher role had come to be defined to some extent by their responsibility for these core areas. In those situations in which a support worker took a whole class in either literacy or numeracy this was in the context of a 'one-off' class similar to a supply teacher role: TAs were not responsible for these areas of the curriculum.

However, the discourse of the 'core' curriculum had allowed the emergence of a 'peripheral' curriculum into which the work of support workers might be placed. Allied to this discussion are the changes which have taken place as a result of the introduction of PPA (planning, preparation and assessment) time into primary schools, and it appeared from the research as if a new 'PPA time curriculum' was being delineated in which TAs could be involved in whole class work without impinging on what is seen within the discourse as the 'core' curriculum. The greater involvement of TAs in these peripheral curriculum areas was found to have ramifications also for teacher/child relations. The peripheral curriculum areas which TAs were seen to be 'colonising' were also those in which children might be at their most relaxed, with less pressure to perform to externally defined targets (performativity agendas). If teachers are oriented towards the core and TAs towards the peripheral curriculum then, as was found in the research, TAs have more opportunities to develop close, friendly relationships with the children.

