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Teachers' construction of curriculum challenge: contextualising the evidence base through dialogue with practicing teachers

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Background

This paper reports firstly, on the findings of a systematic review based on filtering from 3,000 plus studies that resulted in a synthesis of 43 studies of curriculum interventions, all of which were judged to embrace the following definition of curriculum challenge:

Irrespective of prior attainment, challenging young people in curriculum terms means designing teaching and learning to elicit from students their best efforts (i.e. challenge needs to be motivating) and to enable them to think and act in ways that are transferable and/or discipline-specific; and which are progressively more complex, critical, creative and independent.

Research Questions

The review set out to answer three main questions:

- How much do we understand about how teachers construct the idea of 'challenging' young people in curriculum terms?
- What are the key judgements teachers make that affect the level of challenge within their curriculum offers?
- What do teachers see as the most challenging learning terrain and learning processes?

Methods

Approaching this review through the lens of the curriculum resulted in the inclusion of studies which were concerned both with curriculum design and with its enactment in the classroom. Insofar as we found an identifiable challenge literature, it encompassed three broad and largely unconnected strands:

- Studies which are concerned with developing challenge from a subject base (in particular the literature focuses on mathematics, science and English);
- Studies which aim to investigate challenge in relation to specific target groups of students (in particular the literature focuses on gifted and talented learners; those who are either disengaged or at risk of disengagement and minority or disadvantaged groupings);
- Studies investigating the relative merits of different pedagogical approaches, the majority of which were concerned with cognitive challenge through problem based learning and structured group work.

Results from these studies were synthesised across the literature strands in relation to the review questions.

The next step in building the evidence base was to investigate how these research findings translated into practice for teachers in England. The paper also reports therefore, on a series of six follow up focus groups that explored the implications of some of these review findings for practice in England. The findings were used as prompts within six focus groups of nearly 50 teachers. These focus groups consisted of two groups each of maths, science and literacy specialists in primary and secondary

schools. They were used to investigate three key issues which emerged from the literature review and from the survey data.

The research questions were as follows:

1. An important component in the construction of challenge in the curriculum relates to diagnosing individual learner's starting points in order to pitch the level of challenge appropriately: what do they know, and what can they do already? There is evidence that teachers find this difficult. What are the difficulties teachers experience in doing this, and how can they be overcome?
2. Under challenge and over challenge: there is some evidence that teachers choose to avoid the risk of 'over challenging' learners (Gainsburg, 2008). What can we learn about the risk assessments that teachers make, and how teachers are setting about managing these risks?
3. Knowing when to 'step back' and assume a more facilitative role: there is evidence that this is a difficult judgement for teachers. What do teachers see as the main problems, and how can these be overcome?

Frame

The approach to this work was that of a systematic review, using an adapted version of the EPPI Centre review process, involving a comprehensive keyword search of electronic databases, applying systematic inclusion criteria to titles and abstracts. The retrieved full studies were then refiltered using the same criteria. Those studies which remained for review were then subject to a process of data extraction, using a common framework which addressed both content and method. The extracted data were then synthesised. The focus groups that followed the literature analysis and synthesis, aimed to explore the review findings with practitioners, facilitating knowledge transfer between research, policy and practice.

Research findings

Literature review findings included:

- Personalisation, including that of learner learning goals, was an important feature of challenging curriculum experiences;
- Constructing challenge often required teachers to shift to a more facilitative role, encouraging learners to take increasing responsibility for their learning;
- Many studies highlighted the importance of diagnostic activities aimed at establishing learners' starting points and monitoring their individual progress in learning, so that teachers could construct appropriately challenging and personalised curriculum experiences. There was evidence that teachers could find this process difficult. Linked to this also, was evidence suggesting that teachers may find it easier to under challenge learners, rather than risk over challenging them.

Individual reports were constructed from the outcomes for each specialist focus group by phase. These were then synthesised to identify emerging patterns and trends and to embed the review findings in current practice. The results will be presented in this paper.

References

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