Whose frame, what frame and what futures? The revision of the National Curriculum for Physical Education in England.

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Abstract:

In England and Wales, arguably the most significant curriculum framework to be developed for state schools, the National Curriculum, is once again a focus for review and revision. This paper draws upon ongoing research that is addressing this revision with specific reference to Physical Education. In the first part of the paper discussion focuses upon the matters of what and whose agendas and interests have been pursued, privileged and marginalised; and the individuals and organisations that have variously been involved in the production of new curriculum materials. Tensions are identified in the development process, between subject interests and agendas established for the curriculum as a whole, and between a desire for development and parallel pressures for minimal changes to the established framework. The work of Michael Young (1998) and Basil Bernstein (1990, 1996) is then utilised in pursuing the degree to which the new framework and associated requirements will facilitate advancement in teaching and learning in physical education, and whose needs and interests will be met in the implementation of the ‘new’ curriculum. The new framework is identified as having inherent conceptual tensions that pose notable challenges for those charged with implementation.

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Introduction

The National Curriculum for state schools in England and Wales was established in the Education Reform Act of 1988, revised in 1995 and is currently once again the focus of central government review. New statutory orders for the revised curriculum are due to be issued to schools early in 2000, for implementation in September. The National Curriculum is a statutory ‘frame’ for the curriculum as a whole, and for coverage of specific subjects within that. It has always been emphasised as providing a ‘framework’ with inherent flexibility, to enable curricula to be designed to meet the specific needs and interests (but also, I would stress, constraints of resources) of individual schools and their pupils. Throughout its development the National Curriculum has highlighted the contested nature of education, the fact that there are always and inevitably multiple discourses at play, that will not all be accorded equal status in the texts emerging either from central government and its agencies, or in schools. Equally evident has been the fact that discourses are not only about what is said, and what is not said, but also about “who can speak where, when and with what authority” (Ball, 1990, p.17); that the processes of policy and curriculum development are no more neutral than texts and furthermore, that there is a critical link between the specific processes and the particular frames established for curricula, teaching and learning.

The research that I have been engaged in has been ongoing for almost a decade and has sought to investigate these issues in the specific context of the development, early implementation and revision of the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE). The research reported here builds upon our previous studies and is once again seeking to further understandings of the complexities of policy and curriculum development, and of the contemporary development of the subject of physical education. The paper reflects our ongoing emphasis that an appreciation and exploration of the dynamic and relational nature of policy and curriculum development is critical to such understandings, and that the concepts of discourse and of “frame” (Lundgren, 1977; Penney, 1994; Penney & Evans, 1999) are powerful tools to employ in policy analyses. We see once again that physical education is a subject that illustrates very vividly the complexities, tensions, and the highly political nature of policy and curriculum development. In addition, the paper reflects our concern for analyses to not merely provide critique, but to also point to potential directions for future development. Inherent throughout our work has been a concern to identify the potential for action directed towards greater equity in physical education, and specifically, policy and curriculum developments that will facilitate positive educational experiences and learning outcomes for all children in contexts of physical education.

As on previous occasions, I point to the work of Bernstein (1990; 1996) as offering a valuable conceptual basis for exploring the texts emerging, the particular interests promoted by and marginalised in the policies and curricula of physical education, but also, ways in which the longstanding dominance of particular discourses may in the future be challenged. Essentially, Bernstein’s work can be seen as critical to our investigation and understanding of the ‘framing’ of policies and curricula, a process that we stress is complex, featuring multiple and inter-related dimensions (see Penney, 1994; Penney & Evans, 1999). The concept of frame helps make explicit the ways in which only particular texts, featuring and privileging certain discourses, come to be deemed legitimate and desirable in education. The paper specifically draws attention to the relationship between discursive frames (Penney, 1994; Penney & Evans, 1999) and structural characteristics of curricula, and addresses the origins of the frames emerging in this latest revision of the National Curriculum, and NCPE. The underpinning interest is to explore what and whose interests and agendas have informed and been privileged in this revision, what future(s) it is directed towards, but also what futures the ‘new’ National Curriculum will encourage and allow to be pursued in implementation. I begin, therefore, by addressing the revision of the National Curriculum as a whole, emphasising that proposals for the revision of the NCPE have been required to reflect interests and agendas extending well beyond subject boundaries, and that establishing the context and stated aims of this latest revision of the National Curriculum is an important starting point for any discussion of developments specific to physical education.
The Revision of the National Curriculum: reflecting and establishing frames

When the Labour government came to power it inherited the National Curriculum and the recommendation from the Dearing report (1994) that following the revision in 1995, there should be no further major changes to the curriculum for five years, after which “…each order should be reviewed according to a timetable which is published in advance” (ibid, 1994, p.39). Both of these can be regarded as offering opportunities for the government to pursue its ambitions in and for education, but at the same time, as presenting constraints in relation to the developments that would be feasible and furthermore, acceptable to teachers who have spent the 1990s struggling to keep pace with the “unrealistic timelines and policy clutter” (Fullan, 1999, p.54) of central government ‘reform’ of education. It is worth reflecting that teachers in England and Wales have certainly not been alone in this respect. Smyth, Shacklock and Hattam (1997) have referred to teachers in Australia as similarly “reeling from the effects of poorly conceptualised reform policies that have literally torn the heart out of their work” (p.11). The established framework for the National Curriculum (and in particular, the definition of requirements in relation to established school subjects) has to be acknowledged as a critical discursive and structural frame in the policy process, and the strained contexts of implementation have presented further frames for this latest review of the National Curriculum. I argue that we can see clear evidence of these frames in the agenda established for the review and in the tensions inherent in this agenda.

In January 1998, the newly formed Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was asked to advise the government “on the broad nature and scope of the forthcoming revision of the national curriculum” (ibid, 1998, p.7), with the request that this advise should focus on the following four areas:

- “the requirement (currently in primary legislation) for a broad and balanced curriculum;
- greater flexibility and reduced prescription, especially at Key Stages 1 and 2 and Key Stage 4;
- greater emphasis on the basics of literacy and numeracy at Key Stages 1 and 2; and
- the creation of space for the new agenda: personal, social and health education; citizenship; the spiritual, moral, social and cultural dimensions”


Evident here is the government’s clear desire to establish its own agenda for education within the arguably constricting frame of the policies that it had inherited. The National Curriculum is clearly regarded as having a key role to play in the realisation of the government’s ambitions for education, that have been stated as:

To create a nation capable of meeting the challenges of the next millennium. We aim to raise the level of educational achievement for all young people, enabling them to fulfil their potential and to make a full contribution to their communities. We wish to help young people to develop spiritually, morally, culturally, mentally and physically. And we want them to become healthy, lively and enquiring individuals capable of rational thought and discussion and positive participation in our ethnically diverse and technologically complex society.

(Blunkett, 1999)

However, while establishing these wide reaching aims, the government has also stressed that this revision of the National Curriculum will not entail major change. Rather, the QCA was specifically asked “…to adopt a light touch approach, only making changes necessary to raise standards” (Blunkett, 1999, my emphasis). As I discuss further below, certainly in the context of physical education, it seems questionable whether a ‘light touch’ can facilitate the desired improvement in standards and realisation of the governments’ stated aims for education. This emphasis clearly reflects the constraints (and frames) of the context of this review. The existing legislation relating to the National Curriculum created boundaries to possible action, but in addition, the government was made very aware that avoiding “disruption and upheaval” (QCA, 1998, p.9) in schools had to be a priority. “Stability”, rather
than any radical reform, was identified as critical to enable schools to focus on improvement of standards in education. The QCA stated its view that “an all-embracing revision of the national curriculum would be inappropriate. Instead, QCA recommends a more limited range of revisions to the statutory curriculum” (ibid, 1998, p.10), focusing on the above priorities identified by Estelle Morris, and setting these “within a measured process of development which is rooted in the wider context of the range of national initiatives aimed at raising standards in schools” (ibid, 1998, p.10). The QCA further explained that “Such a review would be evolutionary not revolutionary” (ibid, 1998, p.10, my emphasis). In Bernstein’s (1990; 1996) terms this revision was thus clearly not about changing or challenging the “voice” of the curriculum. The established framework of the National Curriculum (and thus the principle of classification (ibid, 1990; 1996) of the curriculum) was to remain firmly intact, despite the fact that consultation had revealed a desire for structural changes at key stages 1 and 2.

Apparently reflecting very strong framing in policy development, the unquestioned and unquestionable assumption is that the existing framework for the National Curriculum (and the NCPE specifically) is an adequate and appropriate basis from which to pursue the desired improvements in education. Goodson’s (1995) words seems highly appropriate here. Goodson likened the making of the curriculum to “the notion of trying to sell refrigerators to the eskimos....Nobody asks the question of why refrigerators, of how such an inappropriate product came to be at the centre of the action” (ibid., 1995, p.206).

QCA’s advice to the government regarding the review of the National Curriculum (see QCA, 1998) was accepted, and the revision of the National Curriculum therefore advanced on the basis of the following stated objectives; to:

- promote stability in schools by restricting changes to the national curriculum to the essential minimum;
- ensure the school curriculum is manageable for all schools;
- ensure any developments contribute to a more inclusive framework for all learners;
- align the key stage 1 and 2 programmes of study in English and mathematics with the national teaching frameworks for literacy and mathematics;
- increase flexibility by reducing prescription and the overall weight of the national curriculum at all key stages, but particularly at key stages 1 and 2 and in design and technology, history, geography, art, music and physical education, and at key stage 4;
- strengthen the position of information technology across the curriculum;
- maintain standards in all subjects whilst clarifying progression;
- clarify the relationship between the key skills and the rest of the curriculum;
- establish more explicit and coherent provision in the areas of citizenship and personal, social and health education.

(QCA, 1999a, p.2)

As indicated above, these objectives have to be acknowledged as strongly framed by the policy context. However, that does not detract from the fact that the emphasis upon stability, greater clarification, further reductions in prescription and corresponding extension of the flexibility in the statutory requirements for the National Curriculum, has in turn established very definite frames for the review. There was to be scope for some, but notably limited and directed, changes to existing requirements.

Discussion thus far has focused upon what frames’ proposals were to be set within. It is also appropriate to pursue whose interests are reflected in these particular frames. The concerns of teachers have been highlighted as a key concern, but it would be naïve to think that teachers’ workloads and levels of morale have been the only, or the most important, point of reference for the government in embarking upon this review of the National Curriculum. The review clearly represented an opportunity and a mechanism for introducing agendas that would signal its distinct development of education and the National Curriculum in particular, and these agendas have found a place amongst the objectives for the review. Certainly the objectives highlight the multiple interests being pursued in and surrounding, the current review of the National Curriculum. In specifically turning attention to the revision of the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE), I pursue the ways in which these have variously found expression and given rise to clear tension in the policy process. I also point to the notably limited opportunities for teachers to play an active part in developments to date and suggest that this is an
important matter to consider in reflecting upon whose interests and agendas have been privileged in the texts emerging.

The review of the NCPE: framed by the past and framing the future(s)

In this section of the paper I focus upon texts that have emerged to date in the context of the review of the NCPE. I draw attention to the ways in which the above agendas established for the review of the whole curriculum have been pursued in the development of new proposals for the NCPE, but also the ways in which these have been embedded within arguably far stronger and long-standing discursive and structural frames specific to physical education. The result, I suggest, are proposals that are conceptually incoherent and that present the possibility of two quite different directions being pursued in the future development of the NCPE. I identify Bernstein’s concepts of “voice” and “message” as aiding our understanding of both the tensions in the proposals and the possible implications for curriculum development.

The old and the new in the NCPE

Throughout the development of the proposals, the QCA’s principal officer for physical education and dance has echoed the emphasis that this revision is ‘about evolution, not revolution’. It has been stressed, therefore, that the new proposals are seeking to clarify and further improve what has been established, rather than signal any radical change to the existing NCPE framework. Proposals were to be informed by, and compatible with, current practice in schools, and in important respects have appeared designed to reassure teachers that implementation of the new order will not entail major or onerous changes to current practice. In parallel, and also reflecting agendas established for the whole curriculum, the proposals for the NCPE have featured the introduction of some new elements. Specifically, ‘core strands of learning’ (Casbon, 1999), have been identified to be pursued throughout the programmes of study, have been identified; and an eight level scale has been developed to replace the end of key stage descriptions and thereby “clarify and support progression” and bring physical education (together with art and music) in line with other National Curriculum subjects (QCA, 1999b). Below I address both the emphasis upon stability and these new features of the NCPE text. I contend that we can see the process of framing reflected in both aspects of the text, and also appreciate the important dynamic between discursive and structural dimensions of framing. In addition, the proposals can be seen as reflecting underpinning political, ideological and economic frames in the policy process.

Discursive and structural stability: the pragmatics and politics of physical education

As indicated above, stability was one of the stated priorities in this review of the National Curriculum and in the context of physical education, it is arguably most apparent in the retention of the established organisational framework for curricula. Specifically, areas of activity remain the reference point for the programmes of study for physical education. Many within the profession may regard this as an entirely natural and justifiable state of affairs, and certainly the structure fits with the perceptions and expectations of the public, the media and politicians. It reflects long-standing practice, of physical education curricula comprising blocks or units that relate first and foremost, to specific activities or sports, and focusing primarily upon the development of skilled performance in these. This framework remains arguably the critical frame in curriculum development in physical education in England. Throughout the development of the National Curriculum, and in the context of the current review, neither the suitability nor lack of neutrality of this framework has been questioned (see Evans and Penney, 1995; Penney & Evans, 1997; 1999). There has been no opportunity to consider whether the established format “…provides reliable frameworks for young people to make sense of the world they face” (Young, 1998, p.5), or rather “…is primarily a leftover of past traditions which have come to be seen as the only way of organizing knowledge” (ibid, p.5). Given the nature of the government’s stated aims for education, and the identification of core strands of learning for physical education, the absence of such debate seems a significant omission. It is an omission that I suggest reflects the discursive frames in the policy process, the origins of which lie in a range of interests embedded in and promoted by this particular framework for physical education.

On the one hand, the retention of the familiar and established framework can be seen as an undeniably pragmatic concern. A fundamental restructuring of the curriculum would conflict with the emphasis of ‘minimal change’ and few teachers would welcome such a move at a time when there is a strong call
for stability. Furthermore, this government is no more free of economic frames than the previous one. Proposals with major training or other resource implications are therefore far from appealing. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are important ideological interests at play here. The development of the NCPE has repeatedly attracted the interest of politicians and this interest has invariably appeared to be more related to concerns for the nation’s sporting achievements in international arenas, than with the education of children (see for example, Evans & Penney, 1995; Penney & Evans, 1999). Furthermore, New Labour has faced overt media pressure to signal its commitment to physical education as a critical arena for the development of excellence in sport (and specifically national teams). The proposed removal of the requirement for one of the two areas of activity pursued in key stage 4, to be games, and the parallel introduction of a free choice in relation to the two areas to be covered at this key stage became the focus for public contestation. The QCA stressed that this change to requirements was designed to “increase flexibility and promote participation by providing a choice of any two of the six areas of activity, which includes games activities” (QCA, 1999b, p.10). The media chose to promote the proposed changes as a damaging blow to the prospective future of physical education. In the Daily Telegraph it was stated that “Within physical education, one of the most alarming proposals, which would start in September 2000 at key stage 4, is to make team games one of the voluntary options from 14 onwards” (Davies, 5/6/99,p.8).

Thus, I suggest that the retention of an activity orientated framework for physical education, and the equally notable absence of any consideration of alternative structures that may reduce the degree to which the subject is, or is perceived to focus upon the development of sporting excellence, and that may challenge the dominance of performance pedagogies in physical education (Tinning, 1992), needs to be viewed in the light of these pressures and expectations. This characteristic of the text can be seen as an articulation of the dynamic between the discursive and structural dimensions of framing, and critically, points to the relationship between what Bernstein (1990, 1996) refers to as the “voice” and “message” of curricula. Essentially, structural aspects of curricula need to be acknowledged as critical sources or origin for discursive frames, but equally, as characteristics that may ultimately be challenged by discursive (and pedagogical) developments (see also Penney, 1998).

It would be inappropriate however, to portray the retention of this critical frame as reflecting only interests that are external to the profession. Research is repeatedly indicating that reinforcement of the dominance of performance discourses comes as much from within as beyond the profession (see for example, Armour & Jones, 1998). I therefore suggest that the latest proposals for the NCPE point not only to a strong desire on the part of central government to retain rather than reduce the association between physical education and the development of sporting excellence; and to the continued pressure from the media for a maintenance and/or strengthening of this association; but also reflect contentment amongst most of the physical education profession with this state of affairs.

New Developments … new discourses ?

As indicated, the new proposals also feature some new characteristics. In this next section of the paper I am specifically concerned to pursue the degree to which the new developments signal the privileging of new discourses in the NCPE, the ways in which the developments have been framed, and will be likely to themselves frame curricula emerging in schools. In discussing the new features of the NCPE we should firstly recall that their origins lie in agendas created for the whole of the National Curriculum, rather than for physical education specifically. Work in all subject areas has been directed towards the development of a rationale for the subject and enhancement of clarity and coherence (QCA, 1999b, p.3), and the introduction of the core strands of learning can be seen to relates directly to these concerns. It has been stated that “The identification of four strands to be developed across all areas of activity has clarified the requirements and established a more effective framework for planning, performing and evaluating” (ibid, 1999b, p.10, original emphasis). So what are the strands, how have they been framed and how will they frame curricula in schools?

The strands currently proposed are:

- Acquiring and developing skills
- Selecting and applying
- Evaluating and improving performance
- Knowledge and understanding of fitness and health

(QCA, 1999b, p.171)
Elsewhere I have questioned the degree to which these strands articulate, or will promote, breadth of learning in physical education. I have suggested that they reflect, legitimate and are likely to reinforce, the dominance of performance pedagogies in physical education (Penney, 1999a; b). I have also pointed to the development of the strands as openly illustrating processes of discursive framing, with political and ideological underpinnings. In particular, we can note that the following strands were presented in the QCA’s ‘work in progress’ issued in January 1999:

- Acquiring and developing skills
- Applying and combining skills
- Health and fitness
- Autonomy and independence

(QCA, 1999c, p.2)

Referring to the current proposals we see that the first two strands have remained essentially unchanged, the ‘health and fitness’ has now been reversed to read ‘fitness and health’ and also repositioned as the fourth, rather than third strand. In addition, the wording of the fourth strand above has changed beyond all recognition, to now become associated specifically with performance, and also repositioned, seemingly to prompt a more direct linkage to the former two strands. I suggest that essentially we have now moved to a situation which three of the four strands focus explicitly upon development of performance, and the fourth (now “knowledge and understanding of fitness and health”) is concerned to address an additional aspect of learning that can be seen as potentially relevant to (and supportive of) the performance agenda. Interests in other aspects of learning in physical education (focusing upon participation, social, moral and cultural issues associated with sport and physical activity that seem highly pertinent to agendas of preparation for adult life and citizenship) seem marginalised to the point of virtual exclusion from the texts. Particularly as the areas of activity (that furthermore, are identified as notably distinct from one another) are the focus for the development of the programmes of study, the strands seem likely to support rather than challenge the dominance of performance discourses and thus, likely to reinforce rather than deflect the familiar and dominant framing. I see little prospect of the core strands extending the discursive frames within which the texts are interpreted and teaching and learning is set, and in relation to these concerns draw attention to a further characteristic of the proposals. The outline for the programmes of study for each area of activity currently includes three points, (a), (b) and (c), that relate directly to the three strands of “Acquiring and developing skills”; “Selecting and applying” and “Evaluating and improving performance”. Absent, is a point (d) that one would surely expect to indicate the application and potential development in the programmes of study, of the fourth strand; “Knowledge and understanding of fitness and health” (see QCA, 1999d). The only prompt and guidance for the development of this strand, is a general statement at each key stage, prior to the more detailed outline of the programmes of study in relation to specific areas of activity. The text thus seems to accord a notably marginal status to discourses associated with health and physical activity ‘for life’.

The newly created level statements can also be regarded as a key point of reference for teachers, shaping (or framing) the particular focus of teaching and learning in physical education, and perhaps, the ways in which the above strands come to be expressed in practice. The statement for level 8, and the additional statement that has been developed as an indicator of “exceptional performance” provide a vision of desired achievement in physical education. The description for level 8 states that:

Pupils consistently distinguish and apply advanced skills, techniques and ideas in the areas of activity studied, consistently showing high standards of precision, control, fluency and originality. They draw upon their understanding of the principles of advanced tactics or composition, and apply them with proficiency and flair in their own and others’ work. They adapt them appropriately in response to changing circumstances and other performers. They evaluate their own and others’ work showing an understanding of the impact of skills, strategy and tactics or composition, and fitness on the quality and effectiveness of performance. They plan ways in which their own and others’ performance could be improved, devising action plans and ways of monitoring improvement. They use their knowledge of health and fitness to plan and evaluate their own and others’ exercise and activity programme.

(QCA, 1999d, p.183)
While the following signifies “exceptional performance”:

Pupils consistently use advanced skills, techniques and ideas with precision and flair. They draw upon their understanding of the principles of advanced strategies and tactics or composition, consistently applying them with originality, proficiency and flair in their own and others’ work. They evaluate their own and others’ work, showing understanding of the relationship of skills, strategy and tactics or composition, and fitness and their impact on the quality and originality of performance. They reach judgements independently about how their own and others’ performance could be improved, prioritising aspects for further development. They consistently apply appropriate knowledge and understanding of health and fitness in all aspects of their work.

(ibid, 1999d, p.183)

Once again I suggest that the text is doing little to encourage a broadening and critical extension of teaching and learning in physical education, or, furthermore, promote greater coherence in teaching and learning in the subject. Discursive frames in and of the subject, have not been notably challenged or extended, and it may be all too easy for these statements to be interpreted as legitimating an emphasis upon the development of sport specific skills and performance.

In summary, I see little evidence of new discourses being accorded a notable status in these new developments, and furthermore, see this as reflecting strong discursive framing in the policy process. New discourses have arguably been subsumed within established and dominant discourses, such that they are compatible with those discourses and will serve to reinforce them. I have also indicated, however, the range of interests that the retention of the familiar curriculum framework and dominant discourses appears to ‘fit’. In these circumstances it is particularly difficult to ascertain exactly who and what has directed the framing of the developments. To gain further insights into this issue, I suggest that we need to also consider the processes of the policy developments.

**Who has dictated the play?**

As previously (see for example Evans and Penney, 1995; Penney & Glover, 1998; Penney & Evans, 1999), I stress that the processes of policy and curriculum development are no more neutral than texts, and need to similarly be regarded as framed. I therefore regard the absence of opportunities for members of the profession to debate certain aspects of the texts (such as what could and should be identified as core strands of learning, and what is the most appropriate curriculum framework to facilitate that learning) and the constraints (in relation to the timescale and agendas for responses) within which teachers have been accorded a role in the development, signifying strong discursive and political framing in the policy process. I feel it is accurate to say that the majority of teachers have been marginal to the latest review of the National Curriculum. A selected few have been involved as members of writing (or ‘task’) groups (QCA, 1999a) and as such, have been requested to work to arguably very tight agendas and timelines. Other teachers have been invited to conferences or seminars organised by the QCA with the stated purpose of gathering views and reactions to draft proposals. Once again however, the agendas have not been of teachers’ making and time constraints have been all too evident. Instant reactions have been required to materials unseen prior to conference or seminar days. Some teachers have had the opportunity to attend similar conferences organised by their Local Education Authority, with similarly limited scope for informed input to the development process. Some have gained some knowledge of the developments via professional association circulations and publications. All teachers, it is claimed, have had the opportunity to be involved by making a response to the formal consultation, and/or submitting further comments to the QCA directly. However, many of these claims of involvement and openness seem to overlook the constraints of the policy process and of the contexts in which teachers are working. In particular I highlight the limited range of issues upon which feedback has been sought, the short time-lines for submission of responses, the apparently non-negotiable aspects of proposals, the limited ability of busy teachers to display the necessary awareness, interest and commitment to make a personal response and furthermore, the fact that all and any input from teachers is subject to “slippage” (Bowe and Ball with Gold, 1992) in the policy process, as responses are interpreted, collated and thus mediated by those in positions of greater authority. The
emphasis here is that slippage is not a uni-directional characteristic of the policy process, but rather, features as much in transmissions from teachers to policy ‘makers’ as vice versa (Penney & Evans, 1999). Thus, I contend that teachers’ input to the process has to be seen as tightly framed (Lundgren, 1977; Penney, 1994; Penney & Evans, 1999) and that the development of the latest proposals has been conducted in such a way that few physical education teachers have had knowledge of, let alone played an active role in, the policy process.

**Whose frames, what frames, what futures ?**

My discussion thus far has focused upon the “official texts” for the NCPE. In this final section of the paper I want to focus attention upon the future expression and development of those texts, in curricula in schools. Continuing our exploration of the notion of framing, I consider what interests will be dominant in framing these curricula. In what ways will the frames established in the official texts frame curricula, teaching and learning? What new frames will come into play? What future(s) do the official texts and their interpretation and implementation signal for the subject and the profession?

In addressing these issues, the complex nature of framing becomes very apparent. The answers, I suggest lie in the outcomes of the inter-action of multiple frames that can variously be associated with the specific emphases of the official texts, characteristics of the policy process, characteristics of school contexts of implementation, and the personal histories and interests of teachers.

I have pointed to the ways in which the official texts can be seen as presenting a notable structural and accompanying discursive frames. I have perhaps under-played the opportunity inherent in these texts for the development of notably new emphases in the curricula, teaching and learning of physical education. The creation of core strands of learning can be seen as an important prompt for physical education curricula, teaching and learning, to display distinctly new orientations. At the same time, however, the proposals fail to follow through with a framework that would secure these new emphases in curricula developments emerging in implementation. Essentially, the retention of an activity-based framework seems to destine the new discourses to a position of marginality. The introduction of the strands seems to point tantalisingly to the possibility of a change in ‘voice’ of the curriculum of physical education (Bernstein, 1990; 1996), but without a corresponding change structural change in the curriculum (i.e. to programmes of study that relate directly to the core strands, rather than areas of activity), I see little likelihood of “messages” (ibid, 1990; 1996) arising that will privilege a different voice and thus challenge the established principle of classification of the curriculum. These doubts relate to my anticipation of other frames coming into play in interpretations and implementation.

With respect to the process of the development, given the arrangements for policy (Hill, 1980) that we have witnessed, it seems inevitable that the vast majority of teachers will view this latest revision of the National Curriculum as an initiative imposed upon them, rather than developed in collaboration with them. Furthermore, it is also important to note that this revision will surely be seen as ‘yet another’ imposed change; a continuation of the trend of the nineties, of ‘initiative overload’, burdening rather than helping teachers. In these conditions and in the light of the nature of the development processes, I suggest that far from feeling that they are key players in the ongoing development of the National Curriculum, the majority of teachers in England will once again feel imposed upon. These feelings need to be acknowledged as framing responses. Furthermore, I associate them with a particular, and in the context of the NCPE, now familiar outcome; the accommodation of new requirements within largely unchanged patterns of provision (see also Curtner-Smith, 1999; Penney, 1994; Penney & Evans, 1999). I therefore anticipate that implementation of the new NCPE will in many instances be characterised by notably limited changes to curricula, teaching and learning in physical education, and little in the way of any challenge to established dominant discourses. The new proposals can be regarded as lacking the ‘top-down mandate’ for arguably long overdue ‘local reform’ (Fullan, 1999) in contexts of physical education, and as enabling new requirements to be subsumed within established practices. Both discursively and structurally, teachers have been presented with a notable match between the past and the future. But what are the characteristics and consequences of ‘limited change’?

Firstly, diversity in the curricula that will emerge as expressions of the new requirements. Undoubtedly, the NCPE will continue to look different in different schools, with variations in both the range and quality of educational experiences provided in physical education. This is a familiar characteristic of the National Curriculum and one that may be portrayed as an expression of appropriate
and necessary flexibility in the statutory order, enabling national requirements and agendas to be suitably tailored to local needs and contexts and furthermore, enabling curriculum development to be informed and directed by teachers’ professional judgements. However, I draw attention to the need to pursue the ways in which flexibility is being expressed, what frames are reflected in the particular direction of developments, and what and whose interests are being privileged in this process? Invariably, it has been pragmatic constraints and concerns arising in local contexts, rather than educational ambitions, that have directed responses and the diversity inherent in them. In the forthcoming implementation of the new proposals, it may well be the constraints of the contexts in which teachers are working, rather than any educationally orientated hopes and ambitions that they may have, that have the over-riding influence in determining responses and shaping curricula.

Thus, the critical role that teachers play in determining the nature of pupils’ experiences in physical education is not denied, but very apparent is the degree to which physical education teachers are acting (or interpreting policy) in conditions of there are not of their own making (see also Ball, 1993; Evans, Davies & Penney, 1994; Penney & Evans, 1999). These conditions are arguably very strongly framed by physical, economic and human resource issues, the micro-politics and histories of their schools, as well as discursive frames specific to physical education that arise from the NCPE official texts and surrounding contexts (Penney & Evans, 1997; 1999). The result is that the implementation of the NCPE can be regarded as (re-)presenting a future that is familiar, and yet at the same time will be different; different that is for different pupils in different schools, since inequities, as well as stability, are inherent in a continued pattern of diversity in the interpretation and implementation of the NCPE. In 1994 Dearing stated that “It must not be forgotten that the National Curriculum was introduced to raise standards and expectations and to ensure that all children had access to the same educational entitlement” (ibid, 1994, p.22, my emphasis). In the latest revision of the National Curriculum, the latter concern once again seems to be largely overlooked.

Further futures...

In conclusion I emphasise that I see the revision as both reflecting and precipitating uncertainty in relation to the future directions for development. The proposals present some, but arguably inadequate, prompts and support for the development of new (and arguably, much needed) orientations for the curricula, teaching and learning of physical education. Elsewhere I have described the proposals as thereby positioning the subject perhaps more obviously than at any other time, at a ‘cross roads’, with decisions needed as to what path its future development should pursue (Penney, 1999a). There is every scope for little change in emphasis, orientation and experiences, but equally, the creation of the core strands signals an explicit possibility for a notably different approach to be pursued in the future development of the subject and may enable the consideration of alternative organisational frameworks for the curriculum. With the inclusion of multiple discourses, there is always potential for different readings, that raise the profile of discourses marginalised in dominant readings, and furthermore, for the an extension of the scope for negotiation in relation to the future development of the NCPE. It remains to be seen what readings of the new texts will emerge, be promoted and/or supported both within and beyond schools. Undoubtedly, training institutions have a key role to play in relation to these matters, representing arenas in which possibilities for different readings may be either emphasised or overlooked. Teacher educators certainly play an important part in framing future teachers’ thinking and actions, but like teachers in schools, teacher educators are far from free agents in educational change, but rather are always acting within frames (discursive and material) set for them by factors which may have origins “at sites or levels of decision making and action which are not always either accessible, immediately apparent, or easily observed” (Evans, Davies and Penney, 1999, p.11; see also Penney & Evans, 1999). We are certainly very aware that challenging established discursive and structural frames in policy and curriculum development is far from easy and that in attempting to do so, we risk further marginalisation, for ourselves, and the discourses that we seek to privilege in physical education.
References:


QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM AUTHORITY (1998) *Developing the school curriculum. Advice of the Secretary of State and his response on the broad nature and scope of the review of the National Curriculum*. London: QCA


Endnotes:

1 From 1990-1995 Evans and Penney undertook research investigating the impact of the Education reform Act (1988) on the provision of physical education and sport in schools. This research was supported by grants from the Sports Council (1990-1993), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (1992-1994; project reference No.ROO 23 3629), and the Leverhulme Trust (1994-1996; project reference No. F1800).

2 The Dearing Report was the reference point for the first revision of the National Curriculum in England and Wales.

3 In October 1997 the government announced that the QCA would have responsibility “for keeping under review all aspects of the statutory and non-statutory school curriculum including the national curriculum programmes of study, attainment targets and the associated assessment requirements” (QCA, 1998, p.7). Programmes of Study refer to the matters, skills and processes which must be taught to pupils in order for them to meet the objectives set out in the attainment target for the subject. The attainment target identifies the knowledge, skills and understanding that pupils of different abilities and maturities are expected to develop (DES/_WR, 1991).

4 The programmes of study and the formal assessment for the National Curriculum is related to four key stages of education. Key stages 1 and 2 embraces the primary years of education. Key stage 1 comprises a reception year and years 1 and year 2 (ages 5-7), and key stage 2 comprises years 3 to 6 (ages 7-11). Secondary education is similarly divided, with key stage 3 including years 3 to 6 (ages 7-11) and key stage 4, years 10 and 11 (ages 14-16).

5 Estelle Morris was the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Education.

6 The Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

7 Some respondents had advocated the conflation of some of the traditional subjects into broader areas of experience (see QCA, 1998).

8 End of key stage descriptions appeared in the 1995 revised order for the NCPE and described the “types and range of performance that pupils should characteristically demonstrate by the end of the key stage, having been taught the relevant programme of study” (DFE/_WR, 1995).

9 The NCPE identified six areas of activity for physical education. These comprise: dance activities, games activities; gymnastic activities; swimming activities and water safety; athletic activities; and outdoor and adventurous activities.

10 Planning, performing and evaluating were identified as three inter-related elements to be encompassed within the single attainment target for physical education (DES/WR, 1991).