Specialist Teachers and Curriculum Reform in a Western Australian Primary School in 2002

A Comparative Study of Specialist Music, Health and Physical Education, and Languages-Other-Than-English Teaching Professionals

Helen Stone

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Abstract

This thesis details research on the first phase of curriculum reform (1999–2004) in a government primary school in Western Australia. The purpose of the study was to examine what progress had been made with the implementation of the *Curriculum Framework* (1998). The research focussed on Music, Health and Physical Education, and Languages Other than English as specialist teachers working with the *Curriculum Framework* (1998). Teachers and school administrators, as frontline practitioners, considered their experiences and perceptions of daily practice and provided their perspectives on curriculum reform.

The hypothesis formulated for the study was that with the introduction of the *Curriculum Framework* (1998) the delivery of these three subjects could be further improved. This study argues that successful curriculum performance of these three subjects traditionally considered “specialist programs” may be more fully supported by becoming aware of the forces influencing Australian curriculum discourse and delivery. Subject knowledge endorsement in this study refers to the transfer of valued knowledge in Western Australian educational systems. It is proposed that if teaching professionals articulated the substance of their educational beliefs and experiences with regard to subject knowledge meaning, place and value, curriculum delivery in primary schools may progress more effectively. Positive learning experiences for all students can be provided through the encouragement of communication and collegiality together with relevant and accessible professional development. These measures can also be supported by mounting whole-school primary programs that engage with beliefs about Music, Health and Physical Education, and Languages Other Than English through collaborative networks and learning communities. Accordingly, curriculum delivery can come within reach of the seamless curriculum anticipated by reform (*Curriculum Framework*, 1998:6–7).

In this qualitative interview study, the frontline participants included generalist teachers, specialist teachers and school administrators. These educational practitioners were asked to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured discussion that explored their perceptions of specialist teaching and knowledge while employed at Deep Sea Primary School in 2002.
They teachers also commented on how these perceptions may be linked to their experiences of socially constructed and established notions of valued knowledge.

The findings of this study indicated that the progressive implementation of these three subjects or specialist’s areas were characterised by subtle historical, economic, political and social forces. This thesis suggests that, these largely obscured external forces together with individual yet, taken for granted perceptions of what is perceived as valuable knowledge work together to position curriculum rhetoric and curriculum enactment that reflect established perceptions of the knowledge hierarchy. Teachers and administrators at the school often operated within the structures and meanings of conventional teaching practice of subject knowledge as determined by dominant culture in Australia. The findings indicated that school culture in a time of reform re-traditionalised hierarchical patterns of subject knowledge organisation and evaluation. Accordingly, current subject knowledge endorsement in terms of specialist teaching often worked to the benefit of established power relationships typical of post-industrial market economy in Australia.

The findings also indicated that issues pertaining to curriculum prioritisation were influenced by institutional, group and individual experiences of subject specialist knowledge. Poor perceptions of these three subjects could also be generated by experiencing inflexible and inadequate yet established funding and resource patterns in educational systems. Frontline teachers, their school-based roles and responsibilities attached to the teaching and learning of the three specialist areas were typified by rigid school organisation and job structures together with condensed teaching time and community backing.

This thesis argues that progressive, outcomes education requires an articulate and supportive school culture, more funding and the genuine maintenance of quality Music, Health and Physical Education and Language Other Than English teachers. In addition, curriculum implementation would benefit from the promotion of constructivist-orientated student activities within specialist programs.
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is the result of independent research, and that all authorities and sources that have been consulted are duly acknowledged. The content of this thesis has not been submitted for a degree at any other tertiary institution.

(Helen Stone)

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