Introduction

> Curriculum as practice cannot be understood adequately or changed
> substantially without attention to its setting or context. Curriculum is
> contextually shaped (Cornbleth, 1990, p. 6).

> Habermas ... proposed a *critical* disposition which is pursued through
> emancipatory action ... through which people develop new ways of
> seeing things ... These insights can lead to a *political struggle* ... [which
> is] a form of *praxis* (Kemmis and Smith, 2008, pp. 22–23).

These quotations represent the perspectives from which this book was
developed and highlight two of its main themes, namely curriculum as
contextualised social process and the importance of *praxis*. Drawing on
his experience as post-primary teacher, teacher educator, student of educa-
tion policy and curriculum developer/evaluator, the author analyses Irish
curriculum policy and practice. His curriculum development experience
includes leadership of the SPIRAL2 Transition from School to Work
Project at Shannon Curriculum Development Centre (1983–1987) and
working as Education Officer with the National Council for Curriculum
and Assessment (NCCA) for the Leaving Certificate Applied (1993–1995).
He has completed independent evaluations of various curriculum initiatives
including the Irish-based EU Transition from School to Work Projects (Ó
hÉideáin and Gleeson, 1983); European Studies (Ireland and Great Britain)
(Gleeson, 1992a); Girls into Technology (Gleeson, 1989); Exploring Mas-
culinities (Gleeson, Conboy and Walsh, 2004); Young Social Innovators
(Gleeson *et al*, 2008).

While drawing on a wide range of national and international litera-
ture, the author portrays the texture of the Irish education and curriculum
context by inter-weaving interview data from some thirty-five key policy-
makers and shapers. These interviews were conducted over an extended

period from 1998–2006 with senior staff at the national ministry and NCCA, key activists in curriculum development, high-ranking teacher union officials, representatives of school management bodies as well as parent, employer and trade union representatives and a member of the team that produced the OECD (1991) report on Irish education. While post-primary curriculum was the main focus, various issues of relevance to primary curriculum were also explored.

The full list of interviewees, together with the reason for their inclusion, is provided at Appendix One. Readers should note that, in order to enhance the readability of the text, quotations are simply attributed to individual interviewees by name. For example, the book contains both interview quotes and literature quotes from Dr John Harris. The former are simply introduced in terms of 'Harris recalled that ...' whereas the latter are referenced in the conventional manner e.g. Harris (1989). While the majority of these interviews took place between 1998 and 2000 (Gleeson, 2000a), they provide a solid basis for discussing the significance and relevance of context so as to enhance our understanding of the present.

When curriculum is seen as contextualised social process the practical or emancipatory interests[1] prevail over the technical interest and its concerns with control of the learning environment and the end product. Within the technical paradigm, knowledge is objective, abstract and independent of time and place. Curriculum, seen in terms of syllabus content, consists of rules, procedures and unquestionable truths. Knowledge is value free and comes neatly packaged in subjects. *The* curriculum (reified by the inclusion of the definite article) is a 'delivery system' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 15) and 'a means to given ends' (ibid, p. 35), namely:

> An educand who will behave according to the image of a person who has learnt what we set out to teach. To accomplish this we must control both the learning environment and the learner. It is no surprise that educators talk of classroom management

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1   These knowledge-constitutive interests, developed by Habermas, have been applied to education and curriculum by Carr and Kemmis (1986), Kemmis and Smith (2008) and others.

> ... [and that] one of the key words associated with such understandings of curriculum is 'objectives' (Grundy, 1987, p. 20).

Within this framework, educational problems are seen 'as technical problems to be solved by educational technology [such as] programmed instruction and packaged curricula (sometimes described as "teacher proof")' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 15). As Cornbleth (1990, pp. 17ff) puts it, within the technical paradigm education is treated in isolation from 'its cultural and socio-cultural contexts' and curriculum, seen as document, is apolitical and value-free. This technocratic conception of curriculum and its construction 'tends to perpetuate myths of curriculum neutrality and benevolence' while ignoring 'questions about the nature of knowledge' and treating knowledge as 'an object that can be reproduced and given to students [and whose] possession is indicated by reproducing, recognising, or applying the appropriate knowledge on a pencil and paper test'. This means that 'alternative conceptions of knowledge' are ignored in favour of 'an engineering mentality' that attempts to manipulate 'cognitive and social as well as material objects'.

On the other hand, the focus of the practical interest is on understanding, meaning and interpretation in acknowledgement of the reality that the 'social world is simply too fluid and reflexive to allow such systematisation' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 36). There is genuine recognition of the importance of contextual influences arising from the complex social situations in which education takes place and a realisation that it 'cannot be viewed as means-ends systems, with clear and definite ends and alternative means (techniques) to achieve them' (ibid).

Some of the main socio-cultural influences on Irish education are identified in Chapter 1 – the prevailing technical paradigm, the neglect of philosophical and sociological analyses of education and of education research, the prevailing anti-intellectual bias and the priority given to education for human rather than social capital. The refraction of these broader socio-cultural influences through curriculum policy and practice, such as the prevailing understandings of curriculum, the lowly status of curriculum development, the nature of Irish curriculum discourse and contestation and curriculum reform efforts, is considered in Part Two (Chapters 3 and 4).

The Greek distinction between the dispositions of *techne* and *phronesis* captures the 'underlying motives and attitudes that inform the two major styles of thought pervading contemporary understanding of education, curriculum and teaching' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 34). *Techne* is concerned with the quality of a product that is external to the producer. *Phronesis* and its associated action, *praxis*, have the moral purpose of bringing about the self-development of each individual learner in his/her own interests and those of the common good – '*enabling praxis* requires *helping students to reflect on the conduct, character and consequences of their thinking, their actions and their ways of relating to others.* [It] requires teaching students to be philosophical about what they think and say, what they do, and how they relate to others' (Kemmis, 2008, p. 289). Teachers from the tradition of *techne* see themselves as fountains of information, technicians who use the 'tricks of the trade' and follow the manual. On the other hand, those who choose *praxis* are reflective facilitators of learning who depend on their professional judgement to interpret the curriculum as text, while 'denying the authority of the syllabus to impose its own meaning' (Grundy, 1987, p. 69).

The practical interest gives rise to an 'alternative outlook which is explicitly informed and guided by the disposition of *phronesis* and involves a view of education that is essentially strategic' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 34). This strategic outlook, like Habermas's critical or emancipatory interest, recognises the significance of contextualised social process, locates educational activities in their historical context and views education as a social activity that is 'intrinsically political, affecting the life chances of those involved [and] the character and expectations of future citizens' (ibid, p. 39).

The author introduces some key aspects of the Irish policy context in Chapter 2, including the populist nature of party politics, the fragmented nature of policy-making and the adoption of a partnership, consensus-seeking model of governance. The significance of the *Investment of Education* (OECD/Department of Education, 1965) policy is considered in Chapter 5 and its implications for curriculum are explicated from the perspectives of economic development, social inclusion, partnership and fragmentation in Part Three.

As argued by Sarason (1990), Ball (1990), Apple (1979), Lynch and Lodge (2002) and others, when the technical paradigm is adopted this militates against recognising both the influence of contextual factors and the significance of power relations in education policy-making at all levels. In a critical discussion of Irish curriculum decision-making, the author considers the influence of sectional interests on policy-making, whether exercised by 'direct representation or the exercise of influence on or over the state' (Ball, 1990, p. 20).

Fragmentation, another key theme of the book and the focus of Chapter 7, is another key characteristic of technocratic systems of mass education. For example, Cornbleth (1990, pp. 13ff) notes the tendency to regard curriculum construction as being separate from curriculum policy-making and implementation:[2]

> Given the widespread decontextualisation of curriculum both conceptually and operationally, we ought not to be surprised by continuing discrepancies between curriculum documents and curriculum practice or by repeated disappointments with the effects of technocratic curriculum change efforts (ibid, p. 18).

This reflects the conclusion of Carr and Kemmis (1986, pp. 15–16) that the technical paradigm has caused the field of curriculum theory to fragment. In this context, 'the special demands of teaching school subjects' became paramount, 'the overarching character of the field was submerged … fundamental questions could be neglected [and] curricula [were] thought of as visible products'.

Section Four calls for balance between *techne* and *praxis* and between the twin policy goals of economic growth and social inclusion. Alternatives to the prevailing contractual model of accountability (Gleeson and Ó Donnabháin, 2009) are considered and the limitations of the representational model of partnership are discussed in the light of Schwab's (1978) notion of curriculum as responses to uncertain practical problems. The importance of national leadership in order to meet the emerging challenges, restore

2   She suggests that this arises from 'conceptual separation', based on an outdated business management model.

balance between *praxis* and *techne* and promote the strategic/critical view of education is highlighted.

Recognition that educational acts are 'problematic in a deeper sense than the craft or technical view can admit' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 39) encourages the establishment of critical communities of enquiry where curriculum is regarded as 'a cultural construction' (ibid, 1987, p. 5), a 'social process, created and experienced within multiple, interacting contexts' (Cornbleth, 1990, p. 13). In such an environment previously taken-for-granted assumptions are open to question and students are 'let in' on the knowledge construction process as envisaged by Stenhouse (1975, p. 80) in his notion of induction.

Strategic/critical thinking is typified in Sarason's (1990, p. 111) questioning of the taken-for-granted 'axiom that education best takes place in encapsulated classrooms in encapsulated schools'. One Irish-based example of such an axiom is that, insofar as possible, provision is made for a single class period for every subject every day in post-primary schools. This suggests an underlying belief that knowledge is best assimilated by passive students when they are 'drip-fed' small manageable bites at frequent intervals. At another level, the priority afforded 'academic achievement' is reflected in the frenzied sense of emancipation (of a different kind) that surrounds the annual publication of the state examinations results. This sense of emancipation may also be reflected in the behaviour attached to the associated celebrations, while the acute disappointment of those who don't achieve the desired points reflects the other side of the story.

While *techne* has generally prevailed over *phronesis* (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 34) there are some exceptions to this rule. As Kemmis (2008, p. 293) notes, Dewey's early twentieth century progressivism promoted *praxis* while the 'New Basics' and 'productive pedagogies' movements in Australia also pursue this approach. From an Irish perspective, *praxis* has received little attention and liberal functionalism persists as the only salient paradigm for linking school and society (O'Sullivan, 1989; Drudy and Lynch, 1993; O'Sullivan, 2005).