Literature review on skills for life education essay

Introduction

The importance of the education sector of any country lies in its ability to meet the production demands of its economy. The shaping of traditional education (where students are passive learners), for example, was mostly done at a time where the Government needed the ' mass' to conform to the decisions of the ' elites' (Botsford, 1993), who were the ones to be able to access the best form of learning, which the ' mass' could not reach, irrespective of their abilities (Kelly, 2004). As the needs of the society changed, so did the educational system. From the DFEE report (Department for Education and Employment, 2001), a need for an improvement in basic skills has been identified, hence the document ' Skills for Life'. The Leitch Review (2006) also reinforces the need of the UK society to meet the demand of higher level skills in the job market. This report analyses the impact of the ' Skills for Life' (SFL) document on the curriculum that I am teaching (Postgraduate Diploma in the Lifelong Learning Sector- DTLLS). It is developed in the following manner:

A literature review on SFL

An evaluation of the curriculum design model being implemented and the impact of SFL on the curriculum

The above mentioned impact is also evaluated via the analysis of interviews carried out with the Awarding Body and a College representative and a questionnaire filled by the students in the course of an activity conducted in a session on Skills for Life and the extent to which as a teacher I can influence the curriculum and hence the DTLLS programme itself.

Literature Review on Skills for Life

Policies are introduced to solve issues identified. The ' Skills for Life' (Department for Education and Employment, DFEE, 2001) endeavour was an attempt by the Government of that time to maximise the earning capacity of citizens by increasing the levels of their essential skills including literacy, and numeracy. The then Secretary of State, Mr D. Blunkett (DFEE, 2001) stated that there were, shockingly, seven million Britons who did not know how to read and write and use numbers.

These skills are important throughout an individual's life – hence the name Skills for Life. The document discusses on how illiteracy can affect a person physically and emotionally in terms of not being able to do certain tasks by himself/herself, which, consequently, can affect his/her self confidence. The vision expressed in this document is the eradiation of illiteracy and low numeracy skills, (DFEE, 2001). The DFEE proposed to achieve such targets by introducing national standards for numeracy and literacy, assessment tools that will diagnose the exact areas to be improved, and resources to support this endeavour. The department also suggested the training of teachers as specialist in these domains (literacy and numeracy) and promoting and motivating the involvement of learners and those who can support their learning process. This will undoubtedly require quite an effort because it not only means improving the levels of those who have already passed through the formal education period but also ensuring that those who are still in that period do not face the same problems in terms of their functional skills (literacy, numeracy and ICT).

One of the major influences of this project is the Moser Report (DFEE, 1999) which is based on research such as " It Doesn't Get Any Better. The impact of poor basic skills on the lives of 37 year olds" by Parsons and Bynner (1997) and " Skills for Life national needs and impact surveys" (2003) carried out by the DFES (Department for Education and Skills). Literacy and numeracy levels can be classified from Pre Entry to Level 2 and above (Pre Entry, Entry level 1 to 3, Level 1 and Level 2 and above). Basic skills have sub elements, for example literacy has reading, writing, speaking and listening (The Sector Skills Council for Lifelong Learning, LLUK, 2007). The overall level of a learner will be determined by what they achieve in each of these sub areas. Parsons and Bynner (1997) found a relationship between low levels of literacy and numeracy and many social issues that the learners faced. Such a link is quite obvious because if a person is not able to read and count adequately, he/she will not be confident in social interaction.

A solution was put forward in the form of the Leitch Review (2006) where one of the main arguments was that Britain was losing ground in terms of the academic strength of its population compared to countries such as India and China. Another point that I quite agree with is that the educational system of the country should produce individuals with the qualifications which are being demanded by the job market. Therefore if there is a need for increased levels of functional skills, this is the area where the educational investment should be poured.

These findings concurred with the survey, conducted by the DFES, which mentioned low levels of literacy and numeracy (2003). The reasons suggested for the lower levels were the social and economic background of

the individuals, the extent to which they stayed in education and whether English is their first language or not. The last factor is obvious in my teaching practice. I teach international students for whom low literacy level (English) proves to be a barrier in the achievement of their course. These students are studying a Postgraduate Diploma in the Lifelong Learning Sector, after which they aspire to gain a Qualified Teacher Status in the Lifelong Learning Sector, teaching adult learners. Despite being highly literate in their native language, they find it difficult to critically analyse concepts (an essential skill at their level of studies) due to their low English level.

This is where the importance, of the impact of the Skills or Life policy on the programme that I am currently teaching, is apparent. Because of the embedding of strategies to improve the student-teachers' functional skills (which are the skills promoted by the policy) the language barrier that they face during this course is being addressed by the curriculum being taught.

Over the years, the meaning of the term curriculum has evolved specially with the development of the perceived purpose of education. Thus, there are various types of curriculum identified, among which the ' learner focused curriculum' (Brown, 2003) predominates learning in the institution where I teach. Right from the start of the learning journey of a student, we carry out an initial assessment to identify the needs of that learner and to formulate their individual goals with regards to the course. The delivery and assessment of the curriculum are then shaped bearing in mind the information obtained from these initial and any subsequent assessments done thereafter.

Based on the course specifications which are provided by the Awarding Body, I have prepared the curriculum of the course that I teach: Postgraduate Diploma for Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS). During this process, I had to incorporate the requirements of Skills for Life through embedding literacy, numeracy and ICT. The Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) – an independent organisation providing guidance to educational stakeholders about the developments in this sector- elaborates on how the learners' needs, with regards to their functional skills, can be addressed (Lawton and Turnbull for the Sector Skills Council for lifelong learning on behalf of LLUK, 2007). Guidance is given with regards to every aspect of the teaching and learning process namely the resources used, the classroom environment, the teaching and learning approaches and communication strategies. The logic behind embedding these skills is that no matter what a student is learning, he/she will be developing his/her skills for life, be it knowingly or unknowingly For example by using presentations, the learner will not only be demonstrating knowledge about the topic but also will be improving his/her speaking and listening skills. From the very start of the learning process, therefore, the principles of the ' Skills for Life' project are embedded: the initial assessment process includes a skills test so that their learning plan can include improvement of such skills (for example combining their main courses with a ' skill course' depending on where their need lies).

Therefore, developing a curriculum with the principles of the SFL project concurs with the constructivist approach (Bruner, 1960)-which involves constructing learning – adopted by my institution.

Thus the impact of the SFL principles on the curriculum relevant to my practice has caused it to improve. But investing in skills is not always an applauded endeavour.

Investing in human capital has been from long the priority of the Government. There has been a link pointed out between educational background of individuals and their social and economical success.

" Investment in learning in the 21st Centrury is the equivalent of investment in the machinery and technical innovation that was essential to the first great industrial revolution"

(DFEE, 1997a, pp. 15, cited in Coffield, 1999)

I would agree with Coffield's (1999) argument that focussing on the Human Capital Theory (HCT) enables politicians to overlook other factors which could have contributed towards the economic status of individuals. Karabel and Harsley (1997) further criticised this theory saying that it puts the blame of being poor on the poor! Investing in human capital does seem to be profitable for the population. But as Levin and Kelley (1997) pointed out, this theory does not state where the individuals will go after being educated if there is no job market for them.

Being given that the investment has already been done, the best we can hope for is that it has been profitable. When any policy is suggested and implemented by the Government, I feel the urgency of trying to find its political implications. In an article in the Guardian, Kingston (2006) quotes Mr. Wells (the then Director of the Basic Skills Agency) as criticising the

Labour Government for exaggerating the number of adults in the UK who cannot read and write to make their task seem more successful. Vignoles (cited by the Press Association, 2009) further argued that trying to develop literacy skills at an adult age might not be effective because such skills are more easily developed at an early age. Personally, I do not believe that more difficulty teaching adults language is reason enough to completely eradicate the benefits that such a project brought to many individuals: improved chances in terms of job seeking, more confidence, a better social life, among others. Even if the Government may have a hidden agenda for starting the ‘ Skills for Life’ project, the focus brought on these skills have enabled educationalists to give even more weight to their learner-centred approach in designing their respective curricula around very crucial needs of the learners- Basic Skills.

This leads us to the analysis of the impact of the SFL policy on the curriculum I teach.

Implications of the policy for curriculum change and pedagogy

There is much debate about what is to be called a curriculum. With the shift of focus from the teacher to the learner, curriculum is moving away from being just content to be completed during a time period – syllabus- and more of a learner centred approach (Dolence, 2003; Coles, 2003). For the purpose of this report, Wojtczak’s (2002) definition will be adopted. According to him, curriculum is

" An educational plan that spells out which goals and objectives should be achieved, which topics should be covered and which methods are to be used for learning, teaching and evaluation."

(Wojtczak, 2002, pp 6)

Therefore, the construction of a curriculum can start from its objectives, its content and the methods used to teach. If Tyler's (1949) four questions with regards to curriculum design are considered, another approach of curriculum models can be added namely evaluation (Kelly, 2004).

The curriculum I use is designed from the Lifelong Learning teacher training programme. The key driver of the curriculum set by the Awarding Body is the assessment criteria. As the teacher trainer I derive the outcomes to be achieved from the assessment criteria and the content set by the Awarding Body. This is done by discussing the assessment criteria and how to achieve them as a class exercise with the student-teachers at the start of a Unit. The rationale behind this is that if the students are shown what they need to achieve from the start, the learning journey becomes easier. The teaching and learning methods and formative (or ongoing) assessment tools are developed from the outcomes with close adaptation with regards to the learners targeted (in line with being learner focused) whereas the summative assessment is set by the Awarding Body.

It is important to note that wherever the starting point of a curriculum design may be, it will have to use the four approaches identified by Tyler (1949). For example, although I designed the curriculum for Lifelong Learning for my College by forming objectives from the assessment criteria, I still need to

adhere to the content expected and apply the appropriate teaching methods.

At this point it is important that I differentiate between the Unit aims provided by the Awarding Body and the learning objectives that I derive with my learners which are based on the assessment criteria. The learning objectives formed with the learners are more detailed than the aims prescribed by the Awarding Body[1]. Since they are formed by the learners (guided by the teacher trainer), they understand better the reasons for these outcomes and thus are able to take control of their learning process (Knowles, 1984). It is also important to differentiate between the prescriptions provided by the Awarding Body and the curriculum that I design for my student-teachers. For the purpose of this part of the report, the curriculum to be analysed will be what I design in terms of a long term plan of how the assessment criteria set will be achieved (the teaching methods, activities, the assessment techniques and resources to be used).

The manner in which I build up my sessions is thus objective based (firstly because the assessment criteria set by the Awarding Body act as general objectives and secondly because I derive specific objectives to be achieved with my students) which can be said to be very precise and scientific (Kelly, 2004). As Bobbitt (1918; cited by Kelly, 2004) stated, the learners are more focused in terms of what they need to complete to achieve the certificate. Building a curriculum from objectives has been criticised by Kelly (2004) as assuming passive learning. The learning goals seem to be more extrinsic. This is closer to the behaviourist approach to learning where the learners are moulded to achieve goals, which most of the time, are derived for them.

Szasz (1991) strongly criticised such an approach to education stating that humans, unlike animals, need to have intrinsic motives to learn. If Kelly's (2004) thinking is considered, one might have the impression that this curriculum is closer to training as opposed to education. According to him, training is very focused on what knowledge is to be gained and does not consider the students at all. But this is where the combination approach to curriculum design comes as a rectifying tool. Although the curriculum starts with objectives (based on assessment criteria), I can adapt the learning journey of my student-teachers through the teaching and learning methods that I use[2]which include embedding the requirements of SFL.

The curriculum content for the DTLLS programme was introduced after the SFL project. When this project came to be put in place, it has, thus, affected the curriculum that I utilise in two ways. Firstly, SFL amplified the skills required as teachers to include minimum core areas. Secondly, the teachers had to learn skills to embed these minimum core subjects- literacy, language, numeracy and ICT- in their teaching strategies. These two aspects are linked because to be able to address the needs of learners, teachers must have an adequate level of these skills themselves[3].

Every Unit of the teacher training programme has opportunities for the student-teachers to improve their own functional skills. This will enable them to be in a better position to identify the SFL needs of their learners and adapt their teaching strategies accordingly. Therefore, each part of the curriculum has to reflect SFL in these two aspects: developing the student-teachers' own minimum core skills and equipping them with the ability to develop those of their students.

Taking Wojtczak's (2002) definition of curriculum, SFL will have to be reflected in:

the goals and objectives to be achieved

the methods to be used in the teaching and learning process

The above will again be in two folds: as a student-teacher and as a future educator, that is, the improvement of the student-teacher's own SFL and his/her ability to embed the minimum core subjects in his/her teaching. To be able to start this teacher training, the student-teachers have to have a level 2 in Literacy and Numeracy. This is conducted, using the skills test, which was developed by the Secretary of State in 1999, following the Green Paper published by the Department for Education and Employment (DFEE) in 1998 on improving skills of teachers (Blunkett, 1998). Thus, right from the start of their learning journey (Lawton and Turnbull for the Sector Skills Council for lifelong learning on behalf of LLUK, 2007), the student-teachers feel the impact that these skills mentioned in the SFL policy will have on their teaching and also their learning processes. The Individual Learning Plan of the student-teachers then will contain individual objectives to be achieved in terms of their functional skills. The goals are negotiated in line with the principles of Androgogy (Knowles, 1984) as part of my motivation strategy.

With regards to the teaching methods, with each Unit of the DTLLS programme, as the teacher educator, I had to make sure that the improvement of these skills was being encouraged. This was done by encouraging more group discussions and presentations and, more recently, by including a literature review hour where the student-teachers will be

discussing on the articles and books that they have recently read. These will not only improve their communication and discussion skills and develop their research skills (which are crucial for the professional development of a teacher) but also will enable them to construct learning in line with the principles of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1986, 1990, 1996).

Although great emphasis is not made on Numeracy Skills in this teacher training programme (unless the specialist area of the student-teacher is related to numbers such as science and mathematics), there are aspects of these skills which, as a teacher educator, I can develop in my learners. Part of the continuous professional development of the student-teachers is being able to evaluate their own skills. In the second part of the training programme, the student-teachers learn to represent data in a simple graphical manner to be able to interpret the extent of success or a particular teaching method. If such exercises are carried our frequently, the student-teachers' improved numeracy skills will enable them to better explain their continuous professional development.

Another important aspect proposed by the SFL project is computer skills, which the majority of the student-teachers lack. In the current age, where learners are digital natives[4](Garrison and Anderson, 2003), future teachers cannot afford to be below average in ICT[5]skills. Their responsibilities include not only to improve the ICT skills of learners who are not in tune with their peers but also to challenge the skills of the digital natives. The curriculum has thus to comprise of strategies such as use of computers for research and presentation purposes[6].

During the completion of the teacher training programme, the student-teachers have to build up their teaching (planning and delivery) and assessment strategies. For each of the strategy developed, they need to demonstrate how they will embed the principles suggested by the SFL project. When embedding these principles in teaching my student-teachers, I am also giving them ideas which they themselves can use in their own teaching practice. It is to be noted, however, that their embedding strategies have to be specific to their own specialist area.

The SFL endeavour has thus influenced the teacher training programme to a very large extent. Not only do the student-teachers need to develop their own skills as part of their Continuous Professional Development, but they need to create and/or adapt ways to improve the skills of their learners. Thus the curriculum that they have to follow as learners (and I have to follow as their educator) has to promote the development of their functional skills, be it in terms of the goals to be achieved or the methods and resources to be used. As future teachers, they need to be well equipped with regards to their own SFL to be able to facilitate the learning process of their learners.

The purpose of this research is to ascertain the impact of the Skills for Life policy on the curriculum that I teach. After reviewing the literature on the topic and an initial analysis of the SFL policy on the DTLLS programme (which affects the curriculum I build for my teaching), I wanted to analyse the views of three main stakeholders of the College- the department executive, the students and the External Verifier from the Awarding Body- on the matter.

Evaluate curriculum changes resulting from the policy / research document.

Because of the individualised nature of collecting opinions, a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis will be quite useless (Miles and Huberman's, 1994). Moreover it is the depth and meaning of the data which I am after and therefore a qualitative direction seems to be more appropriate (Bryman, 2001).

The data collection tool chosen for this purpose is semi structured interview (Appendix A). Semi structured interviews combine the benefits of structured and unstructured ones. They not only provide the interviewee with the freedom of expressing his/her views in detail (which is required to obtain a deeper understanding of the opinion given), but also, with the questions set by the interviewer, the discussion is more focused on the relevant topic (Horton, Macve and Struyven, 2004). Instead of hindering my conclusion, the subjective nature of this tool (Bryman, 2001) will, hopefully, provide new ideas about the project. Because it is also very specific to the curriculum that I teach, the issue of inability to generalise the results (Bryman, 2001) will also not arise.

The third stakeholder to be questioned will be the student-teachers. A session will be conducted on Skills for Life (Appendix F) after which the student-teachers will be asked to work in groups to fill the questionnaires (Appendix B). To ensure confidentiality (Bryman, 2001), the names of the stakeholders will not be disclosed. The results of these two approaches are analysed below.

The student-teachers seem to grasp the impact of the SFL policy on the DTLLS programme and even identified the aspects of the programme which develop their own basic skills. As one of the groups mentioned the objectives that they have to achieve have been affected by the SFL policy in that they have to " Embed minimum core subjects in the curriculum" (Extracts from questionnaires, Appendix D).

On the other hand, both the External Verifier and the Vice Principal of the College described the link between SFL and DTLLS programme quite similarly in terms of development of the student-teacher's own skills and embedding strategies that he/she has to implement to develop that of his/her students (Appendix C). As the Vice Principal suggests:

"… DTLLS students have, to apart from a select group of specialists who do are not involved in SfL, consider SfL as a key focus for all their work. Approaches to delivering DTLLS therefore have to be adapted to achieve SfL requirements"

(Extract from transcript, Appendix C)

I quite agree with both of them that the programme as it stands, although it does offer resources and teaching methods that reflect SFL principles, can still be improved. Offering an optional module which is specific to SFL instead of ' the fragmented' state it is now (as the Vice Principal states) will provide the student-teachers with unique skills that are very much in demand in the education market.

As mentioned before, the DTLLS programme came after the SFL policy. However, had there not been this policy, the programme would not have included the minimum core requirements as it does now.

The impact that the SFL policy has on the DTLLS programme will inevitably affect the curriculum used to deliver it. This leads us to the evaluation of the curriculum built on the basis of the assessment criteria and general objectives prescribed by the Awarding Body.

The first aspect to be analysed is the purpose of the evaluation. Most evaluations done are to determine the extent to which set objectives are being met (Tyler, 1949; Kelly, 2004), that is summative evaluation. However, a more meaningful evaluation would be one which assesses the objectives themselves. As Kelly (2004) states, curriculum should be subject to " continuous evaluation as an essential element of continuous change and development" (pp 36).

This leads to the next issue which is choosing a model of curriculum evaluation. According to Kelly (2004), this should match the curriculum model adopted, otherwise " the criteria of evaluation will not reflect the purposes of the planners or the teachers" (pp 139).

The DTLLS curriculum that I developed is based on a combination of the four perspectives proposed by Tyler (1949) with objectives as starting point[7]. But if I use an objective model of curriculum evaluation, it will not serve my purpose as it will only identify success or failure of achieving the objectives set (Kelly, 2004). According to MacDonald, a more holistic approach would be assessing " the project's impact on the educational system and the types of

evaluation problems which the impact would throw up" (1973, pp 83 cited by Kelly, 2004, pp 142).

As mentioned before, the curriculum is designed on the basis of the outcomes derived from the assessment criteria set by the Awarding Body. This enables the student-teachers to be focused on what is to be completed to achieve the Units. But one of the consequences of such an approach is a decreased possibility of achieving unintended (but potentially beneficial) outcomes. Although the student-teachers do have to attain a certain level in the minimum core subjects (similar to SFL), if they are already at that level there is no incentive to improve them further (since there are no specified needs to do so in the curriculum).

Developing SFL is often drowned in the achievement of the multitude of other objectives to be achieved. Having said that, with the embedding strategies -where the student-teachers learn to develop the minimum core subjects of their own students- the picture is more promising. This is because the focus is then on developing these skills.

But the extent to which my curriculum evaluation will be considered by the Awarding Body is questionable.

If we take the interview carried out with the EV (Appendix C), when I was discussing about agreeing a date for the interview, she initially did not see a link between SFL and DTLLS,

" To be quite honest with you Shaivi, at first I thought that there was no direct link. Basic Skills is what it says….. basic. …… But if we analyse it

deeper, we can see that one of the requirements for teachers on the programme is to have a level 2 in literacy, numeracy and ICT."

(Extract from transcript, Appendix C)

After I explained my project and my point of view, she agreed with me and hence the interview was much more useful.

The Vice Principal's suggestion that SFL delivery techniques should be added as an optional module to the curriculum as the next cycle of improvement is valid because this will increase the marketability of the award. But, although the External Verifier shared his views, from our experience in terms of suggestions we made, it is doubtful that she will take it on board and suggest it to her institution.

Thus as a curriculum developer, although I can certainly build up outcomes which will further improve the minimum core levels of my student-teachers, the extent to which I can influence the curriculum development is restricted.

This brings us to the argument that the External Awarding Body still has a very strong hold on what is important in terms of delivery and assessment. The extent to which they will consult the Delivery Centres (such as my College) to determine or assess what is to be delivered is quasi nil, that is their own evaluation of the DTLLS programme and resulting curriculum seem to be more autocratic (Mac Donald, 1975, pp 133, cited by Kelly, 2004). A more democratic approach to curriculum evaluation (where the teachers are involved) would have served the purpose of meaningful continuous curriculum development (Kelly, 2004).

If we were to measure how stringent the Awarding Body is with regards to the four perspectives of curriculum identified by Tyler (1949)-Appendix E- we can see that assessment has a medium level of stringency since we can choose the evidence linked to practice to be included in the portfolio from a set list. The same is with the specific objectives which we can form on the basis of the assessment criteria set by the Body, which is thus the key driver of the curriculum. The only way that the curricula will differentiate in different centres is through the delivery methods being used and the objectives to be set (which is however based on the assessment criteria set by the Awarding Body). Centralised control (Kelly, 2004) is apparent over the content of the curriculum.

This also demonstrates how the programme is driven by its assessment process (Kelly, 2004). Any method or activity used is geared towards the final portfolio of evidence of achievement of learning (based on the assessment criteria set by the Awarding Body).

The DTLLS programme, although very specific to the age group the student-teachers are being trained to teach, have similar outcomes to the other programmes on the market (Postgraduate Certificate in Education for Post Compulsary Education) with regards to strategies of embedding basic skills. Because the student-teachers are mostly international, they have specific timeframes within which they have to complete the programme. Therefore, they do not have time to explore the topics in dept