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Uncovering the pedagogical potential of texts: Curriculum materials in classroom interaction in first language and literature education

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ABSTRACT

Most teachers in many Western countries make use curriculum materials such as textbooks, workbooks and related teacher's guides in their teaching. In this study, 29 First language and literature lessons are analysed to discover different ways in which texts that are part of curriculum materials are used in the curriculum. The findings indicate that the identification of the pedagogical potential of the texts demands a profound understanding of the subject matter. Moreover, the realization of this potential always involves creativity and improvisation. Thus, we suggest that preparedness to read curriculum materials analytically and critically is a core component of teachers' expertise.

1. Introduction

Elementary and lower-secondary school teachers in Finland and Western countries in general report that they frequently use ready-made curriculum materials such as textbooks, workbooks, and teachers' guides in their teaching (e.g., [PIRLS, 2011](#); [TIMSS, 2011](#)). Among scholars, however, attitudes towards the use of curriculum materials differ considerably. Critics of curriculum materials claim that ready-made instructional materials fundamentally reduce teachers' professional autonomy by obliging them to follow closely the sequence of topics and activities offered by the materials (e.g., [Apple, 1986](#), 85–86; [Koutselini, 2012](#)). Some of the critics even maintain that textbooks are designed to “transmit hard-and-fast unambiguous knowledge in the least problematic manner possible” ([Benhur Oral, 2013](#), 319), and they cannot be used for any other purposes. Thus, the critics argue, professional teachers should be able to create their curriculum without relying on externally produced curriculum materials (e.g., [Luke, 1988](#)).

Advocates of the use of ready-made curriculum materials, on the other hand, suggest that while the existing materials have their shortcomings, they still support teachers in developing their practice and their knowledge about teaching and novice teachers can find them especially helpful (e.g., [Ball & Feiman-Nemser, 1988](#); [Grossman & Thompson, 2008](#)). Notably, in the fields of mathematics and science education, the development of curriculum materials that are designed to support teacher learning is seen as an effective way of promoting teacher learning and improving teaching (e.g., [Ball & Cohen, 1996](#); [Davis & Krajcik, 2005](#); [Drake, Land, & Tyminski, 2014](#)).

The findings of empirical studies on teachers' use of curriculum materials highlight teachers' agency in relation to curriculum materials. Several studies (e.g., [Collopy, 2003](#); [Remillard, 1999](#); [Sherin & Drake, 2009](#); [Thompson & Senk, 2014](#)) have pointed out that teachers tend to use the materials selectively and modify the suggested activities to suit their own purposes, needs and interests.

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In fact, curriculum materials cannot determine the subject matter or how it is taught because teachers' knowledge, capacities, beliefs, values and experiences influence how they perceive, interpret and utilise the materials (e.g., Remillard, 2005). Charalambous and Hill, 2012 (2012) analysed two teachers' enactment of a mathematical task provided by the curriculum materials. Their study demonstrates that teachers' task enactment depends on his or her understanding of the content (Charalambous & Hill, 2012; see also, Remillard, 1999). In summary, previous research shows that although curriculum materials influence learning opportunities encountered by the students, the teacher always mediates their influence. Therefore, the capacity to use curriculum materials in ways that promote student learning is among the core components of teachers' expertise (e.g., Ben-Peretz, 1990; Schwartz et al., 2008; Taylor, 2013).

The findings of our recent review (Karvonen et al., 2017) indicate that the field of research on curriculum materials in Finnish basic education is unilaterally dominated by textbook analyses examining the content of students' materials with the aim of determining how they shape classroom activities and student learning. Furthermore, elsewhere it has been suggested that researchers tend to find it tempting to make inferences about what really happens in classrooms based on curriculum materials alone (Love & Pimm, 1996). In this article, we take another approach. Following some earlier studies (e.g., Karvonen, Tainio, Routarinne, & Slotte, 2015; Pitkänen-Huhta, 2003; Sunderland, Rahim, Leontzakou, & Shattuck, 2001), we argue that the teacher has a powerful role as the mediator between curriculum materials and classroom activities. Thus, we regard it as important to complement textbook analyses with studies examining the situated use of curriculum materials in the actual contexts in which they are deployed, that is, as central elements of classroom ecology (e.g., Guerretaz & Johnston, 2013). A more profound understanding of how curriculum materials are deployed in and for teaching in classrooms enables researchers to discover what knowledge and skills the effective use of curriculum materials demands (e.g., Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008). Thus, it helps to develop teacher education programmes that provide prospective teachers with opportunities to learn to better use different curriculum materials for promoting student learning. Moreover, it helps the authors of the curriculum materials to design materials that serve the teachers' needs.

The aim of this article is to describe teachers' curriculum use in naturally occurring classroom interaction during first language and literature lessons¹ in Finnish basic education. Like Ben-Peretz (1990, 2010) and Remillard (2005), we use the term 'curriculum use' to refer to the ways in which teachers draw on and employ various kinds of printed and electronic materials. In this study, the focus is on printed curriculum materials designed for use by students and teachers in classrooms. More specifically, the term curriculum materials is used in this article to refer to students' textbooks and workbooks and related teachers' guides. We limit our study to these resources as Finnish teachers have reported in various surveys that these are the most commonly used curriculum materials in many academic school subjects, including first language and literature education (e.g., Atjonen et al., 2008, 124; PIRLS, 2011; Tainio, Karvonen, & Routarinne, 2015).

2. Curriculum materials as pedagogical resources

Teachers are shown to utilise curriculum materials at different phases of teaching: in planning the lessons, during instruction and in evaluating the lessons afterwards (e.g., Remillard, 1999; Sherin & Drake, 2009). In this article, we examine teachers' curriculum use in the context of an enacted curriculum. Enacted curriculum refers to an emergent trajectory of interaction between teachers and students during and across the lessons (e.g., Remillard & Heck, 2014; Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992). In transforming the official curriculum into lesson plans, teachers often draw on both curriculum materials and their own knowledge, including their professional knowledge (e.g. Stein, Remillard, & Smith, 2007). Whether detailed scripts or broad-minded sketches, teachers' and curriculum designers' pre-arranged ideas about the course of activities cannot be implemented as such because the actual lesson unfolds in turn-by-turn interaction among the participants (e.g. Remillard & Heck, 2014). In other words, enacted curriculum is contingent on participants' responses to each other's actions; therefore, teaching always requires creativity and improvisation (Sawyer, 2004). This kind of approach to curriculum use emphasizes the co-constructed nature of classroom discourse. Thus, it helps to understand the complex relationship between curriculum materials and classroom practices.

While curriculum materials may influence an enacted curriculum in many ways, the focus of this study is on the instances in which the texts embodied by curriculum materials are observably integral to participants' interactions. These episodes are referred to as literacy events (e.g., Barton, 2007; Pitkänen-Huhta, 2003). Participants of the literacy event may treat different kinds of texts as a shared reference point.² Many of these texts invite readers to act on them, with the aim of engaging the students in different literacy practices. Therefore, manipulations made by the students, such as written answers in fill-in-the-blank exercises, are often treated as part of the text that is brought into the focus of joint attention during literacy events.

As tool kits designed for supporting the achievement of particular curricular goals, curriculum materials carry their developers' intentions and make those intentions available for the readers through explicit instructions, headings, captions and layout (Brown, 2009; Wells, 1999). Moreover, the teachers' guide may advise the teacher to emphasize some of the ideas and concepts and suggest classroom activities related to the texts. Each text is designed for specific purposes; therefore, it embodies certain intended affordances that enable a certain set of activities (Guerretaz & Johnston, 2013). However, all texts embody a rich array of pedagogical potential, that is, a range of possible ways of using the text for various pedagogical purposes that may not have even been imagined by the designers (e.g., Ben-Peretz, 1990; Brown, 2009). In first language and literature education, in particular, a single text can be

¹ In Finnish basic education, over 90% of students study Finnish as the first language.

² In Finland, first language and literature education is based on a broad conception of texts. Curriculum materials contain a wide variety of different types of texts: fictive, factual, verbal, figurative and graphic. Thus, textbooks and workbooks can be characterised as a macrogenre (Martin & Rose, 2008).

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