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‘Successful futures’ for all in Wales? The challenges of curriculum reform for addressing educational inequalities

This paper focuses on the implications of the transformative student-centred curriculum being developed in Wales for tackling educational inequalities. Informed by longstanding debates within the sociology of education about the role of school knowledge in social and cultural reproduction, our research outlines some of the challenges that those implementing the new Curriculum for Wales need to address if it is to offer ‘successful futures’ for all. Drawing on interview and survey data from those schools tasked with developing the new curriculum, and the evaluation of a very similar curriculum reform for early years and primary education in Wales, we outline the demands the new curriculum will place on material and human resources and the risks of increasing flexibility. We argue that there will need to be significant investment and some form of external accountability to ensure that disadvantaged students receive a curriculum experience that opens up avenues to ‘powerful knowledge’.

Introduction

Over the last ten years, the Welsh education system has been subjected to sustained criticism. In December 2013, the then English Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove (2013), warned voters in England that ‘you need only look over the Severn to see a country going backwards.’ In 2014, he referred to Wales as ‘an object lesson’ in what happens when you abandon reform – claiming that ‘this decline is traceable directly to the Labour Party’s refusal to embrace reforms we’ve been pursuing in England’ (Gove 2014). In some ways it is not surprising that those on the political right in England should seek to gain political mileage out of maligning the more left-wing Welsh Government which has steadfastly refused to move away from a fully comprehensive system (Power 2016). However, while some criticisms may be politically motivated, it is the case that in recent international comparisons,

such as PISA, Wales has done less well than its neighbours. A report by PISA (OECD 2014) concluded that, among other things, Wales has a high proportion of 'low performers' and that Welsh schools are unable to respond to all students' learning needs. It is also the case that, despite being one of the principal priorities of the Welsh Government, the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and educational attainment persists (Taylor *et al.* 2013). Wales may have eschewed the market-driven emphasis on school diversity and parental choice that prevails in England in favour of a fully comprehensive system, but that has not meant that all schools in Wales are equal. A recent report by the Sutton Trust reveals that top performing comprehensive schools in Wales have nearly half as many pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM) than the average school (Van den Brande *et al.* 2019). However, rather than address these challenges through following England's policy agenda of parental choice and school diversity, Wales has instead chosen to overhaul its education system through a radical restructuring of the curriculum. The vision put forward by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government 2020) is that:

Curriculum development should be at the heart of practitioner, school and national efforts which seek to raise standards for all, tackle the attainment gap, and ensure an education system that is a source of national pride and enjoys public confidence.

The new Curriculum for Wales

In 2014, the Welsh Government commissioned former teacher and school inspector, Graham Donaldson, to undertake an independent review of the curriculum in Wales. Graham Donaldson had already been heavily involved in the development and implementation of Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* a few years earlier – with which the new Welsh curriculum shares many characteristics. Donaldson's (2015) report, entitled *Successful Futures*, was published in February 2015. And, as in Scotland, the proposals received significant cross-party support within the Assembly. Huw Lewis, Minister for Education and Skills at the time, fully accepted Donaldson's recommendations. These were

then developed into the Welsh Government's *Curriculum for Wales*, which is due to be rolled out sequentially in 2022.

Briefly, the *Curriculum for Wales* involves moving away from the more traditional curricular approach where knowledge is organised into discrete subjects. The new curriculum is to be driven by four core purposes that will lead to:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

In addition to three cross-curricula responsibilities relating to literacy, numeracy and digital competence (referred to as DCF – Digital Competency Framework), knowledge is being re-organised into six areas of learning and experience (AoLEs): Expressive Arts; Health and Wellbeing; Humanities (including RE which remains compulsory to age 16); Languages, Literacy and Communication (including Welsh, which also remains compulsory to age 16); Mathematics and Numeracy; and, Science and Technology. Alongside Pioneer schools working on the AoLEs and the DCF, there are designated Professional Learning Pioneer Schools which focus on improving professional development for teachers.

Not only does the proposed re-organisation of the curriculum mark a radical departure from the current arrangements, particularly for secondary schools, but the process of curriculum development is also very different from the traditional model. The curriculum has been developed by 'Pioneer' teachers and schools across Wales. It is these Pioneers who have been responsible for fleshing out the detail. This involves the development of 'What Matters' statements that express conceptual content of AoLEs

which are then used to develop 'Progression Steps'. These are meant to be seen as markers of a student's educational journey and reflect an approach that recognises each student's progress and pace may be different. Teachers will be expected to see learning as progressive and developmental rather than in relation to stage completion.. The *Curriculum for Wales* also marks a radical departure – again particularly for secondary schools – not only in *what* is taught but in *how* it is taught. The guidance celebrates integration and promotes the importance of 'collaboration and cross-disciplinary planning, learning and teaching, both within and across Areas' (WG 2020). Teachers are also encouraged to explore subject knowledge more creatively, making it more student-centred – 'active learning' is to be encouraged with a 'real life' relevance.

Curriculum reform and inequality

This paper explores whether Wales' new curriculum is likely to 'raise standards for all' and 'address the attainment gap' as the Welsh Government hopes. This inevitably requires us to engage with some of the debates within the sociology of education about the school curriculum and how it does, or does not, contribute to educational inequalities.

The role of school knowledge in the production and reproduction of educational and social inequalities has been debated since the rise of the 'new' sociology of education in the early 1970s (Young 1971). Of particular relevance for us are the early theorisations of Basil Bernstein (Bernstein 1971; 1977) on the classification and framing of school knowledge and the 'visibility' of pedagogies, as well as more recent discussions (Young 2010; 2013; Beck 2013; Moore 2014; Barrett & Rata 2014) about the nature and significance of access to 'powerful knowledge.' We also need to recognise the gap between curriculum proposals and what happens in the classroom – the inevitable slippage between the aspirations of curriculum designers and the capabilities of teachers and schools to operationalise these designs. In the following paragraphs, we provide a brief outline of some of these issues in relation to the new *Curriculum for Wales*, before going on to outline the empirical components of the paper.

The classification and framing of school knowledge: From 'collection code' to an 'integrated code'

The proposed curriculum reform in Wales can be characterised in terms of a change in the classification and framing of knowledge, as described by Basil Bernstein (1971) fifty years ago. The 'old' Welsh curriculum, which has changed relatively little at secondary school level from the framework imposed as part of the 1988 Education Reform Act, is the epitome of what Bernstein calls the 'collection code'. The new curriculum, on the other hand, is the epitome of an 'integrated' code. Within the collection code, knowledge is divided into subjects, and the boundaries between subjects clearly demarcated. Not only is knowledge strongly classified, but relations between teachers and taught are strongly framed – with the nature of the classroom encounter being controlled by the teacher. It is this demarcation of knowledge into subjects, and the increasing specialisation that this entails, that is being seen as increasingly irrelevant to contemporary society. In the words of the Education Minister, the current curriculum has become 'narrow, inflexible and crowded' (Welsh Government, 2019). Within an 'integrated' curriculum code, the boundaries between subjects are blurred. Subject specialisms become subordinated to some relational idea – in the case of the new *Curriculum for Wales* – the four purposes of education. This places great demands on teachers as they need to regulate the curriculum and manage student progress in creative and innovative ways.

From a 'visible' to an 'invisible' pedagogy

The weakening of the classification and framing of school knowledge usually also entails a change in the relationship between the teacher and the learner, with the student being given (ostensibly) more freedom to direct their own learning. The shift from a more traditional teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach is characterised by Bernstein (1977; 1990) as a move away from a 'visible' pedagogy to an 'invisible' pedagogy. It is important to note that the difference between 'visible' and 'invisible' pedagogies is not in the absence or presence of teacher control, but in the visibility of that control and a relaxation of the rules of sequence, pace and evaluation criteria. For example, all

pedagogies require a means of evaluating whether progress has been made. In visible pedagogies, the criteria are explicit, are usually age-related and are known by both the student (and their parents) and the teacher. In invisible pedagogies, though, the criteria of success are implicit.

Many of the elements that characterise an invisible pedagogy are evident in the new *Curriculum for Wales*, where assessment is to be undertaken through the 'Progression Steps'. The pace through which these steps are reached may be accelerated or relaxed in order to reflect individual rates of learning. As the Guidance (Welsh Government 2020) indicates: 'While the learning continuum is the same for each learner, the pace of progress through it may differ. As a result, the progression steps only broadly relate to age.' The evaluation criteria that determine what counts as 'success' are also less explicit. It is recommended that progression will involve 'deep learning', but what counts as 'deep' may not be easy to define – and may not be understood by either the student or those without a background in education. Within the new curriculum it is also envisaged that student progress will be evaluated *outside* the classroom, as the Progression Steps are 'designed to be considered through a range of contexts. Learning should bring together through experiences a breadth of knowledge and skills, allowing the learners to use and apply them in new and challenging contexts.'

The knowledge of the powerful and 'powerful knowledge'

The social class implications of the way in which the curriculum is organised, transmitted and evaluated raise issues of the nature of the knowledge that is to be disseminated. Early sociological accounts of the role of school knowledge in the reproduction of social inequalities tended to focus on the extent to which school subjects reflect and reinforce the interests of the socially and culturally advantaged. During the 1970s and 1980s there was a general consensus among sociologists that the curriculum is a form of cultural domination – a celebration of the values and achievements of 'dead white males' which render the histories and cultures of the dominated inferior or invisible (see, for instance, Whitty 1985, for an account of these debates).

If it is the case that the organisation of knowledge into school subjects is an arbitrary and social construction that serves the interests of the socially privileged, it might be argued that a move away from the traditional curriculum might enable the introduction of more democratic forms of knowledge and more equitable outcomes. Such an argument, though, does not recognise the social value that will still be attributed to 'high status' knowledge or the epistemic properties of knowledge itself. Recent work, taking a social realist approach, argues that we should not downplay the importance of knowledge. Indeed, Rata and Barrett (2014: 3) argue that 'the central purpose of schooling and the curriculum must be to provide students with equitable access to powerful curriculum knowledge'

Michael Young, one of the 'founders' of the new sociology of education, has argued for a re-appreciation of 'powerful knowledge', proposing 'a radical case' for a subject-based curriculum (Young 2010). Subjects, he argues, should be seen not so much as arbitrary collections of partisan 'facts', but as the route into and product of 'specialist knowledge-producing communities' (Young 2010: 26). Lindsay Paterson (2018), in his critique of Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence*, which bears a family resemblance to the new Welsh curriculum, claims that:

.... subject disciplines are not merely arbitrary. They are the refinement of knowledge that has been gradually built up over centuries. In relation to that knowledge, each new generation of children are no more than humble apprentices. Knowledge can therefore be emancipating, and knowledge acquired through schools provides that opportunity to people who would not get it from home.

One legitimate response to Paterson is to argue that this kind of traditionalist critique fails to acknowledge that the current subject-based arrangements do not provide emancipatory experiences for disadvantaged learners – something different is needed. Advocates of the *Curriculum for Wales* hope

that the reorganisation of the curriculum will provide a way for teachers to open up more meaningful routes towards this knowledge than the current 'collection' code.

From ideal types to messy reality

The delineations of 'integrated' and 'collection' codes of knowledge, and 'visible' and 'invisible' pedagogies are all idealised representations – in much the same way as the curriculum as outlined in a policy document exists largely in the mind of its author. We know that how a curriculum is described and how it is implemented in the classroom are not the same thing - and this is particularly the case in relation to the kind of radical transformation being envisaged in Wales.

Back in the 1970s, Berlak and Berlak (1981) came over from the USA to observe England's celebrated adoption of child-centred education, but were dismayed to find mostly traditional modes of teaching and learning in primary schools. They pointed to the marked difference between what they called the 'curriculum as conceptualised' and the 'curriculum as practised'. Edwards, Miller & Priestley (2009) identify four levels of slippage between the curriculum as 'prescribed', 'described', 'enacted' and 'received'. Priestley and Minty's (2013) investigation of how teachers were implementing Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence*, found that even when the teachers welcomed the reform in principle, they struggled to enact it in practice.

However, while we recognise that there will be a significant gap between the curriculum as conceptualised and the curriculum as practised, we do not think this divergence will be randomly or evenly experienced. We believe that, unless countervailing measures are put in place, there are likely to be predictable variations in the way in which the curriculum is operationalised that may *systematically* and *disproportionately* affect socio-economically disadvantaged schools and learners.

Bernstein's dissection of the differences in the classification and framing of knowledge and the visibility of pedagogies is important because he enables us to move beyond debates that simply assert one approach over the other. He reveals how different kinds of curriculum and pedagogy entail different resource requirements. For example, he argues, that invisible pedagogies are expensive – and require plenty of space and a high teacher-pupil ratio.

There is, of course, no theoretical reason why 'powerful knowledge' cannot be made available to disadvantaged students through an integrated curriculum. However, this will require high levels of skill on the part of teachers. As Bernstein (1971: 65) points out, this is likely to involve the resocialisation of teachers – and a workforce that is committed, willing and able to take on the challenge. Indeed, he argues that while 'the collection code is capable of working when staffed by mediocre teachers ... integrated codes call for much greater powers of synthesis and analogy.' As Young and Muller (2010: 23) point out, one of the risks of moving away from school subjects and clear progression points may be that less experienced teachers may 'fall behind without knowing it, or miss out conceptual steps that may be vital later on'. And given the uneven distribution of most experienced and highly-qualified teachers across and within schools, it is possible that these risks will be greater for disadvantaged schools and learners.

Bernstein also argues that student-centred pedagogies presuppose a 'long educational life'. In addition, for a child to thrive, he claims that they will need a second site of learning. The child's home becomes another educational arena in which the child is constantly encouraged to learn. Of course, differences in the cultural resources of the home environment and the form of parental engagement already contribute to unequal educational outcomes. Nevertheless, there is a danger that the emphasis on curriculum enrichment and the implicit nature of what counts as successful learning will make it even more difficult for children from poor homes to develop the kind of 'deep' learning that will enable them to have a meaningful encounter with 'powerful knowledge'.

In a similar vein, it is possible that the move towards greater flexibility that the new curriculum and associated assessment arrangements offer teachers will lead to a highly differentiated provision and a diminished access to 'powerful' knowledge for the more disadvantaged learners (Rata 2012). Of course, it is already the case that learners in disadvantaged schools often have a more limited academic curriculum. The risk of even greater flexibility is that the differentiation may increase.

Of course, these concerns are only theoretical at the moment, as the new curriculum is still in development. However, during the process of its development there is some evidence that the challenges of resourcing and flexibility are already becoming apparent. In the following sections, we explore the extent to which the early experiences of the Pioneers indicate cause for concern. If so, it is important to voice these concerns while there is still time to put in places measures to minimise the risks.

Research methods

Research data

The data that we draw on in this paper derive from interviews and surveys undertaken in the Pioneer schools tasked with developing the curriculum during 2019 – a critical phase in the overall implementation of a new curriculum in Wales. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 10 Pioneer Leads and 25 teachers in 10 schools serving more economically disadvantaged communities (though it should be noted that disadvantaged schools are under-represented in the Pioneer 'community' of schools, an issue to which we return later). The sample included primary and secondary, Welsh- and English-medium schools and involved interviews with teachers developing each of the six AoLEs. In these interviews, we were particularly interested to explore the implications for disadvantaged schools and their learners. Relatedly, we gathered data on teachers' perceptions of the new curriculum and preparations for delivery; the training and support they have received; their

perspectives on the nature of knowledge in the new curriculum; expected changes to pedagogy; what schools are doing to ensure all learners benefits from the changes. Thematic content analysis of the interview data was then conducted, resulting in a map of significant perceptions and information on the reform process.

Following analysis of the interview data and the identification of the dominant themes and issues raised, a survey was developed and administered to all teaching staff within Pioneer schools in Wales. In total, survey data were collected from 634 teachers across 81 Pioneer schools. There was good representation from primary, secondary and special schools, as well as English- and Welsh- medium schools (see Table 1). The data also included the perspectives of teachers with different levels of responsibility within their schools and differing levels of involvement with curriculum development. Importantly, the survey data also allowed us to compare the perspectives of teachers working in different socio-economic contexts, reflected in percentages of pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM). The data, which contained responses to closed and open-ended questions, as well as demographic data, was analysed using thematic content analysis, along with descriptive statistical analysis (see Newton 2019 for a fuller account of the project and the findings from the survey).

Table 1: School Response Rates

	<i>School response rate</i>	<i>% school response</i>	<i>Individual respondents</i>
All pioneer schools	81/181	45%	634
Primary	38/98	39%	213
Secondary (& all-through)	36/66	55%	357
Special	7/11	66%	18
English medium	49/116	42	466
Welsh (& bilingual)	25/48	52	97

In the following sections we present data from the interviews and the survey to address two broad issues relating to the resource requirements and flexibility opportunities of the new Curriculum for Wales.

Resources: What do teachers think are the main resource requirements of the new curriculum? And what are the implications of this for disadvantaged schools?

Flexibility: How is flexibility being interpreted by teachers developing the new curriculum? And what are the implications of this for disadvantaged students?

Clearly, as the new curriculum has yet to be implemented, we can only predict the likely outcomes of these issues. However, data from an earlier evaluation of the Foundation Phase (Taylor *et al.* 2015; Power *et al.* 2019) – the Welsh curriculum for 3-8 year olds that is similarly organised into interdisciplinary ‘areas of learning’, was designed to foster creativity and move away from set age-related attainment targets – can provide some empirical illumination of the challenges that students, teachers and schools may face in operationalising the *Curriculum for Wales*.

The challenges of curriculum reform for addressing social disadvantage

Overall, the evidence both from our interviews and our questionnaire survey indicates that the majority of teachers in Pioneer schools are excited about the new curriculum. They are frustrated with the current system, seeing it as a prescriptive curriculum which places burdensome accountability demands on schools. For many, the new curriculum promises to give them greater autonomy, enabling them to shape provision that they consider will be more engaging and relevant to their learners. Given a choice of words to describe their feelings about the development of the new curriculum, ‘excitement’ and ‘optimism’ were the most commonly chosen by teachers. However, not surprisingly given that the new curriculum is due to be fully rolled out in 2022, the next most frequently chosen word was ‘nervous’.

However, as the preceding discussion on the relationship between the curriculum and inequality suggests, while there is much to commend such a radical re-think of the curriculum, there are also significant risks – and particularly for disadvantaged learners and schools. It is these risks that we explore in the following sections. They coalesce around the two main issues that we think are particularly salient: resourcing and flexibility.

Resources

As already mentioned, the new *Curriculum for Wales* is being developed by teachers and practitioners through a network of schools from across Wales that cover a wide range of characteristics: English, bilingual and Welsh medium; primary, secondary and ‘special’; rural and urban, and with or without a religious character.

It might be argued that the process of curriculum development has already risked exacerbating inequalities between schools. There is anecdotal evidence that the designation of schools as being either ‘pioneers’ or ‘non-pioneers’ has caused some discontent. The Welsh Government subsequently changed the designation of ‘non-pioneer’ to ‘partner’ school, although the nature of the partnership is not in any way formalised. Evidence from our headteacher interviews indicates that collaboration between Pioneers and partners is patchy. While some schools do appear to be working with other schools, this is not always the case. As Kneen (2019) found in her research with Pioneer leads in the AoLE on Expressive Arts, relations with other schools have not always been easy. Although any school could potentially put themselves forward to be a ‘pioneer’, the division of two ‘classes’ of schools has clearly caused some resentment. In addition, where competition for students is high, collaboration is likely to be difficult. Kneen records one Pioneer Lead being forbidden to respond to a request for information from a neighbouring partner school because the headteacher perceived the school to be a competitor. It is undeniable that Pioneer schools will be far better prepared, and have had greater

resource allocation, than the partner schools in preparing for the new curriculum. Their favourable situation is particularly significant given that they are generally more socio-economically advantaged than the partner schools. While there *are* Pioneer schools serving disadvantaged communities, the overall eFSM profile of Pioneer schools is lower. Schools with below-average numbers of pupils eFSM are represented at a ratio of 0.81 from that which we would expect if they were fully represented. These challenges of unequal investment are likely to be compounded by two factors: a) the degree of changes being proposed, and b) the extra resourcing required by the new curriculum.

There is almost universal consensus from everyone we spoke with that successful implementation will depend on teachers changing how they teach. All of our Pioneer leads emphasised the scale of the task that this would require, and phrases such as ‘changing mindsets’ appear often in the interviews. We asked teachers in the survey how much professional learning they thought would be required for the curriculum to be successfully implemented. On an eight-point scale that ranged from ‘little training’ to ‘a lot of training’, the overwhelming majority (79%) of respondents leaned towards ‘a lot’. As already noted, Bernstein argued that a shift from a collection to an integrated code curriculum would require the ‘resocialisation’ of teachers. It is concerning then that even the Pioneer Leads, who are already in the forefront of professional development and are the most enthusiastic about the new curriculum, are anxious about lack of funding for this in their own schools:

You’ve still got teachers who take a very didactic approach to their teaching, I know that we’ve been trying to change this for a number of years, but it takes time... And there isn’t the time or money to do it. (BHHS Secondary School, Pioneer Lead, Humanities)

I think professional development is going to be the biggest resource, because there does need to be a lot of retraining and we are picking up on it for maths but I think it’s going to be

across the board, that's going to be the biggest resource. (Penllwyn Primary, Pioneer Lead, Mathematics and Numeracy)

It is not only that professional development is expensive but also that, as Bernstein points out, integrated curricula and invisible pedagogies are expensive too. Sitting young people in rows behind desks and delivering blocks of disciplinary knowledge is much cheaper than the kind of educational experience that is envisaged in the new *Curriculum for Wales*. For some, the opportunity to experience creative and experiential activities will benefit disadvantaged students;

To ensure that they have those opportunities that perhaps not, that they haven't had in the past, you know. So they are able to experience theatre, experience art and experience those things. Even if it means those schools have to bring it into them. You know, it's that idea of enrichment, which is part of the new curriculum. (Secondary school B, Pioneer Lead, Expressive Arts)

There is already strong evidence, though, that it is just these kinds of disadvantaged students who are least likely to have access to these enrichment activities while at school. The opportunity to participate in out-of-classroom learning activities is very uneven. In general, those schools with more advantaged intakes not only offer far more activities, but they also offer ones which are more ambitious and enriching (see Power *et al.*, 2009; Taylor *et al.* 2009). Without significant redistribution of resources, it is hard to see how this will change. As the following Pioneer Lead, who comes from a school with a high level of eFSM pupils (nearly 30%) comments:

Children will want to go on a trip to see something and we try to honour that. Our children don't pay, so we have a large amount of our children that will not pay for a trip. [And] technology, in terms of computers, ... we need them ... You'll go to some schools and they've

got everything, other schools have got virtually nothing of any value. And that's very outdated, and I think that's unequal. As a country we need to address that. (Primary school B, Pioneer Lead, Expressive Arts)

Already it appears that resource limitations mean that some schools are having to blur the boundary between the outside world and the school through bringing activities *into* the school, rather than sending young people *out* of the school:

The difficulty is just providing those experiential opportunities for your children as best you can within the budget that you've got or the setting that you've got. I mean it would be lovely if every school was told 'right we're going to provide visits for every, you know, every half term every school gets to go on a visit for every class'. But that's not going to happen which is why we've gone down the route of you know, making the most of what we can here. (Primary school T, Pioneer Lead)

Alongside the challenge of providing an experiential curriculum are the resource demands of a technologically driven curriculum, as proposed by the Digital Competence Framework. Again, even the Pioneers worry about whether they can deliver on this front:

We can't afford to buy [Microsoft] Surfaces for every room ... we don't have enough. So unless there's funding coming that's going to provide schools with all the tools and equipment they need to be able to do those things ... I mean how can I deliver DCF if I don't have Surfaces or iPads and I can't book a room? (Secondary school M, teacher, Science and Technology and Professional Learning).

It won't work if money isn't given to schools. There's a serious need to reform technology. In the subject that I'm attached to, technology is completely rooted in everything. One of the... we don't call them subjects any more, do we? We call them areas? Oh, specialisms? What do we call them? Disciplines within the area are film and digital media ... We're going to have to buy experts in to run projects... But without the resources, it's going to be hard and very, very frustrating how is it possible to do that if we don't have the resources? (Secondary school C, teacher, Expressive Arts)

If these schools are envisaging difficulties, it will be even more challenging for those schools with fewer resources. And not only is the *Curriculum for Wales* likely to require more resources within the school, it also needs to be supplemented by resources in the home. Again as noted earlier, Bernstein argues for pupils to succeed in student-centred approaches they are likely to need two sites of acquisition – the school and the home. If this is the case, students from socio-economically disadvantaged homes may fall behind. As the following teacher comments, these may not be available:

The only thing that would really hinder their progress in some of these approaches is their lack of access to things outside of school. Obviously, maybe there would be some pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who would like to do more sort of video blogging, but they wouldn't necessarily have the support at home or the resources at home to do it ... We always offer those resources and support in school ... but maybe that could be the one way in which some pupils may have been hindered somewhat, if they didn't have the resources and then support at home. (Secondary school B, teacher, Expressive Arts)

Invisible pedagogies are resource-intensive. They require more resources in the school, more activities outside the classroom and can often assume an appropriately 'educational' home environment. Where

these are not available, the curriculum experience may end up being very different from that envisaged by those designing the curriculum:

Where the catchment area of a school draws upon a lower working-class community it is likely ... that the school will adopt strategies, or have strategies forced upon it, which will affect both the content and the pacing of the transmission. The content is likely to stress operations, local skills rather than the exploration of principles and general skills, and the pacing is likely to be weakened (Bernstein, 1990, p. 75).

Because of this, Bernstein argues that schools in poorer neighbourhoods may well provide a narrower range of experiences, focus more on the basic skills and be more relaxed about what they expect their pupils to learn. This is something we discuss next.

Flexibility

Flexibility is one of the key hallmarks of the new *Curriculum for Wales* – flexibility in the provision of particular kinds of learning opportunities and flexibility in terms of assessment. It is one of those features that most appeal to teachers. Pioneer Leads spoke of the opportunity it would give them to tailor the curriculum to the particular needs of their pupils.

You are going to be able to be more flexible. Spend more time on the things you think are important or important for the pupils you have. You'll have to be more creatively generally in your approach to it, to the delivery and the experiences you want the pupils to have. (Special School, Pioneer Lead, Health and Wellbeing)

For some Pioneer Leads this differentiation will be of benefit to disadvantaged learners because the curriculum can be more 'personalised'. This was particularly welcomed by the Pioneer Lead at the special school:

I feel that those particular pupils [disadvantaged students] should be less disadvantaged as the curriculum should be more personalised and all about supporting pupils to move on from their starting point. It may mean the school, as now, has to put certain measures in place to provide specific support either to do with wellbeing/ nurturing, raising aspirations and developing a relevant and engaging curriculum. Again, this will be a more natural approach rather than an accountability measure. (Special School, Pioneer Lead, Health and Wellbeing)

However, this differentiation is also likely to be more common within 'mainstream' schools with students within the same school being offered very different kinds of opportunities. To some extent this happens already in secondary schools, as pupils are 'tiered' into GCSE options and can supplement their core courses with more vocational options. However, it appears as if this kind of differentiation will be even more pronounced in the new curriculum.

The provision of a 'relevant and engaging' curriculum may mean reduced opportunities to pursue the more academic discipline-based options. The comments indicate that many teachers will use the flexibility to provide disadvantaged learners with more vocational opportunities:

I'm so glad we're not going down that academic exam route The world would be a very boring place and not everybody's set out to get loads of GCSEs and be an academic learner. We need the more vocational as well, and we need our bin men, we need our ballet dancers, we need our doctors, we need our engineers and I think this curriculum will help us to provide

those opportunities for those, rather than just squeeze everybody down that 'you've got to get all these academic qualifications.' (Secondary school G, Pioneer Lead, Science and Technology)

I would like to see a lot more of our pupils doing more vocational work ... They'd follow the KS4 programme from Year 9 and in Year 10 I suppose - looking at today, is putting kids on maybe a more vocational pathway. We're still doing their English and maths, so they have those core skills, but they're following that vocational pathway as well. So, they've got that. What I was looking at this morning was an Introduction to Construction. So, that's the nature of the work that a lot of these boys are going to go into. (Secondary school L, Pioneer Lead, Mathematics and Numeracy)

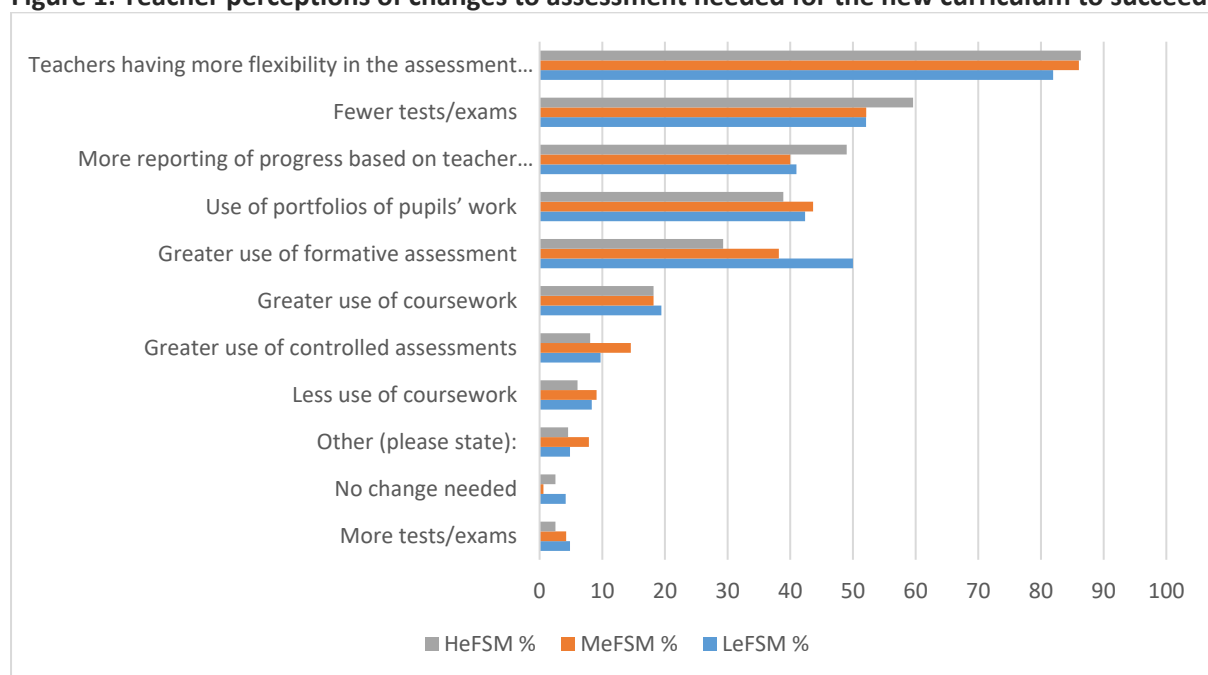
The move away from a more academic curriculum for disadvantaged learners is also signalled in the following quote, where an increased role for Health and Wellbeing is seen as being beneficial for disadvantaged learners:

I think a lot of those [disadvantaged] children are more likely to benefit ... For example, like the Health and Wellbeing being given a big role in the curriculum I think massively it's a benefit to those children. And those children might come in with poor literacy skills and so on early on, I think it's nice to think that skills in other areas can be, you know, explored and celebrated and developed. Rather than this constant kind of feeling of catching up for some children that might come into the school, lower than you know sort of national average in those kind of core skills. (Primary school B, teacher, Expressive Arts)

Related to flexibility in the curriculum offer is flexibility in assessment. Indeed, it is this kind of flexibility that teachers think is most important. In the survey, teachers were asked what needs to happen to pupil assessment for the curriculum to succeed. After greater flexibility, the majority of teachers felt

that it was essential that there were fewer tests and exams (Figure 1). It is also notable that these changes were most strongly supported in those Pioneer schools with the highest intake of eFSM pupils (HeFSM schools) compared to schools with an average or middle intake of eFSM pupils (MeFSM) or schools with a low intake of eFSM pupils (LeFSM). Indeed, the removal of external scrutiny of the relative attainment of eFSM pupils was seen to be a particular benefit of the new curriculum for the following Pioneer lead:

Figure 1: Teacher perceptions of changes to assessment needed for the new curriculum to succeed



The free school meal accountability measures, any school who is honest with you about this will tell you that effectively that's forced them into a situation where they're focussing on a minority of kids in that school who are going to make or break their measures because of the free school meal quota, at the expense of perhaps some others ... anybody in education shouldn't be actually looking at it in terms of that and whether it's closing the gap and helping disadvantaged kids. We should be making sure that every single one of our kids has the opportunity to be challenged and reach their potential. (Secondary school G, Pioneer Lead, Science and Technology)

Whether the removal of these kinds of external scrutiny procedures will make a difference to the outcomes of different groups of students is unclear, but there must be some concern about removing the focus on raising the attainment of the disadvantaged. It would be very unfortunate if the reduction of external scrutiny through standardised assessment and the flexibility of curriculum content led to disadvantaged learners being offered a combination of activities that focus on vocational opportunities alongside basic skills and Health and Wellbeing. In general, it would seem that these Pioneer Leads believe that removing the requirement to take standardised academic assessments will improve their wellbeing and esteem. This may well be the case in the short term, but there are likely to be long-term consequences for these students. Too much emphasis on basic skills and Health and Wellbeing will squeeze out the opportunity to access powerful knowledge.

Lessons from Wales' Foundation Phase

In the previous sections we have outlined some of our concerns about the extent to which the new *Curriculum for Wales* will meet the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged learners and their schools. It is, of course, too early to say how it will work out in practice. However, given the strong similarity between the proposed new curriculum and Wales' Foundation Phase (taught to all children between the ages of 3 to 8), it is important to examine the outcomes of the Foundation Phase for disadvantaged learners in these earlier years.

The outcomes of the Foundation Phase are complex, and they point to significant benefits as well as disbenefits. It is clear that implementation of the Foundation Phase pedagogy was uneven across Wales – with some schools being more student-centred than others. We found that there was a positive relationship between the degree of student-centredness within the classroom and average children's scores of wellbeing. So, it might be predicted that the *Curriculum for Wales* will lead to an overall increase in pupil wellbeing. It is also the case that greater degrees of student-centredness were

associated with greater levels of attainment. This might also be seen as auspicious for the new curriculum.

However, while overall levels of wellbeing and attainment improved, the introduction of the Foundation Phase did nothing to reduce socio-economically based inequalities in attainment. Analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD) showed that the introduction of the Foundation Phase has not, to date, led to any significant reduction in the achievement gap for pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 (Davies *et al.* 2013) – eFSM pupils are nearly 30% less likely to achieve the expected level in English than other pupils. This suggests that the introduction of more student-centred approaches, such as that being currently developed for older learners, will not benefit students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

In our analysis of the outcomes of Wales' Foundation Phase we were able to identify a number of factors that contribute to its failure to raise the attainment of children from poorer homes. Systematic observations of classrooms revealed that, despite a common curriculum, learners in disadvantaged settings appear to have had qualitatively different kinds of educational experience than learners in advantaged schools. One aspect of this related to curriculum coverage. Children in schools with high levels of disadvantage experienced a narrower curriculum that covered fewer Areas of Learning. Not only does it appear that children in high eFSM schools were more likely to be observed learning basic skills (i.e. literacy and numeracy) and experiencing a narrower range of the curriculum, but they were less likely to be exposed to a more embedded curriculum (i.e. where more than one Area of Learning may be the focus of each task). This is the kind of experience which the new *Curriculum for Wales* promises. If it is differentially experienced within Foundation Phase classrooms – where there is less differentiation of students – it is probable that the differences will magnify at secondary school level. It is not only that students in high eFSM schools had a narrower curriculum, there were also qualitative difference in the pedagogy. In general, it would appear that in the poorer schools, pupils were more

likely to experience adult-directed activities and adult instructions. Again, these are the very kinds of learning experiences that the new *Curriculum for Wales* is based upon, but which have not been as effectively implemented in disadvantaged schools in the Foundation Phase.

Discussion

It is clear that the curriculum, and associated teaching and assessment approaches, that are currently in place in Wales are not enabling disadvantaged learners to access the ‘powerful knowledge’ that will enable them to expand their horizons. The new *Curriculum for Wales* is intended to address this shortcoming through changing the way that knowledge is classified, framed and transmitted so that all young people can be more actively engaged in progressive, deep and meaningful learning.

However, while moving from a teacher-centred to a more student-centred curriculum may have merits in principle, we contend that it contains risks that need to be addressed if the new *Curriculum for Wales* is indeed going to provide ‘successful futures’ for all. Some of these risks are associated with the attributes of the new curriculum. The *Curriculum for Wales* will be a more expensive curriculum to implement than the current arrangements – more expensive in terms of resources and enrichment activities. It is more demanding of the teaching profession, and considerable investment will need to be put in place if teachers are to be provided with the understanding and skills to make it work. The survey and interview data presented here suggests that teachers in Pioneer schools are already worried about this.

In addition to extra resources, the Curriculum for Wales provides teachers with greater flexibility in the kind of experiences they make available to learners. While teachers see this as an opportunity, we argue that it carries risks. In particular, the greater the flexibility, and the associated move away from standardised external assessments, the more likely it is that disadvantaged learners will miss out on the more academic content that will open up the pathways into powerful knowledge. Indeed, the comments of some of the Pioneers indicate that this is already being envisaged.

In conclusion, in this paper we have raised concerns about the development of the new *Curriculum for Wales* for disadvantaged students and their schools. It is clear that if Wales' schools are to help their students meet future challenges, the content and process of school knowledge does need serious scrutiny. However, it seems to us, on the basis of empirical evidence and theoretical insights presented here, that the process of curriculum reform that is currently underway is in danger of underestimating the extent to which current social and economic inequalities in Wales may be not only perpetuated but possibly even magnified under the new arrangements. For *all* learners to benefit from the proposed reforms, there will need to be huge levels of investment in disadvantaged schools and the introduction of accountability mechanisms that ensure that disadvantaged students receive a curriculum experience that is equivalent to that available to advantaged students. In particular, it will be important to ensure that their avenues into the specialist knowledge-producing communities of academic disciplines are not closed off prematurely.

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