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Re-educating the nation? The development of a new curriculum for Wales

Editorial

Chris Taylor and Sally Power

The Special Issue explores the many issues that arise when a country decides to rewrite the school curriculum – and particularly when that rewriting entails a radical departure from a conventional subject-based approach.

In March 2014, the Welsh Government commissioned Graham Donaldson to conduct a review of the Welsh education system. His report, *Successful Futures*, was published in February 2015 and has since received unequivocal support from the Welsh Government. *Successful Futures* promises a radical shift – particularly for secondary schools – towards a more interdisciplinary and experiential education. The resulting proposal leads to significant reforms to curriculum content, teaching and learning for all young people aged 3 to 16 in maintained schools in Wales.

Central to these new reforms is a set of explicit aims – the ‘four purposes’; that all children will be: ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals. *Successful Futures* also proposes that the curriculum should be organised around six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE), replacing the previous national curriculum organised around traditional disciplinary subjects. The six AoLEs are: Expressive Arts; Health and Well-being; Humanities; Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; and Science and Technology. Another key feature of the reforms is a focus on a ‘continuum of learning’ that replaces ‘judgements’ at four Key Stages with ‘reference points’ at five Progression Steps at ages 5, 8, 11, 14 and 16. Finally, these reforms propose a radical ‘re-professionalisation’ of the teaching workforce by encouraging greater flexibility and autonomy in the enactment of the curriculum, both in terms of content and pedagogy.

Since 2015, therefore, the Welsh Government has led a major programme of activity to develop the new *Curriculum for Wales*, ready for roll-out in all schools in September 2022. Following Graham Donaldson's recommendation, the Government adopted the principle of subsidiarity in the reform process – giving teachers much of the responsibility for this process. A network of Pioneer Schools has been established to provide subject expertise to support the development of AoLEs, to assist in the development of training for the implementation of *Curriculum for Wales* and to support the embedding of digital competence across the entire curriculum.

Although the Curriculum for Wales has yet to be formally introduced, the nature of the reforms means that schools and teachers will be preparing their own approach and materials before it starts. Indeed, all primary schools in Wales have already been delivering the Foundation Phase for all 3- to 7-year olds since 2008. The Foundation Phase was developed on very similar principles as the *Curriculum for Wales*, with similar Areas of Learning and Experience and a strong focus on experiential child-centred learning.

Curricular reforms on this scale typically occur only once in every generation. And each time a country reforms its curriculum, it does so because of perceived new demands for that curriculum and/or to respond to particular shortfalls of the existing education system. Therefore, it is very difficult to develop a new curriculum on existing expertise and understanding. Similarly, once a country has introduced a new curriculum there is often little appetite to reflect on and evaluate that curriculum-making process, since it is unlikely they will make a similar set of reforms for at least another generation. It is incumbent on the education research community, therefore, to examine the process of curriculum-making, identify the successes and weaknesses of such reforms and to provide insights to those still involved in the process.

This Special Issue attempts to do this. Drawing on a range of empirical studies undertaken during the design and development phase of the *Curriculum for Wales*, this Special Issue brings together an impressive ten papers all examining a different aspect of the curriculum reform journey in Wales. In each paper the authors provide more detail on the reforms and offer their insights into how this reform journey is going and what challenges still lie ahead.

The Special Issue begins with Mark Priestley, Claire Sinnema and Nienke Nieveen placing the *Curriculum for Wales* in an international context. By contrasting and comparing the curriculum reforms in Wales with other countries, such as New Zealand, Scotland and the Netherlands – each of the authors' own areas of expertise – they highlight the main challenges of introducing a curriculum that is designed to have a complex set of interacting curricular elements. In particular, the authors draw attention to the importance of accountability, professional learning and the social network context for realising the ambitions of the new curriculum.

An example of what Priestley *et al.* describe as a complex set of interacting curricular elements is the relationship between the four purposes and the Areas of Learning and Experience. Gatley discusses this particular relationship and argues that a curriculum driven by the four purposes could make the traditional school subjects in the AoLEs almost redundant. Similar, Gatley argues, a curriculum driven by the six AoLEs will not necessarily help meet the four purposes. Gatley concludes by suggesting that the content of the AoLEs may be a prerequisite for meeting the four purposes, but that these six AoLEs alone will not be sufficient and that other significant reforms will still be necessary.

The next paper, by Nigel Newton, examines the principle of subsidiarity as set out in *Successful Futures*, suggesting there were four interconnected reasons for its use in Wales. Based on research with pioneer schoolteachers, Newton contrasts the intentions of subsidiarity with the lived experience of the curriculum reforms. In doing this, Newton highlights ways in which the reform

process has deviated from, or diluted, the principles of subsidiarity. Using previous examples of public sector reforms that have been based on principles of subsidiarity, he warns that this could lead to greater tensions within the education system rather than facilitating smooth change.

Susan Chapman also examines teachers' lived experiences of curriculum reform, but from the perspective of one particular group of schools and teachers. Around 20 *per cent* of the population in Wales live in sparsely populated rural areas, and the number of children under the age of 16 in such areas has been steadily declining since 2001. Consequently, schools serving such areas often face several unrecognised challenges because of their geographies. Chapman outlines how the *Curriculum for Wales*, with its increased focus on an experiential curriculum, particularly impacts on rural schools. Through research with schools and teachers in rural areas, Chapman highlights three challenges rural schools will face as they enact the new curriculum: staffing, access to professional learning, and learners' access to extra-curricular learning opportunities.

The next three papers all explore the understanding and meaning of an integrated curriculum – a central tenet of AoLEs in the *Curriculum for Wales*. Claire Gorrara, Lucy Jenkins, Eira Jepson and Tallulah Machin begin by focussing on the assumptions underpinning language learning in the Languages, Literacy and Communication AoLE which is designed to integrate Welsh, English and other international languages. Drawing on their own experiences and research into a major modern foreign language mentoring scheme, they demonstrate how a multilingual approach to language learning can help lead to sustained partnership between previously separate language teaching and learning communities. The second paper, by Judith Kneen, Thomas Breeze, Sian Davies-Barnes, Vivienne John and Emma Thayer, examines the experiences and perceptions of primary and secondary pioneer schoolteachers involved in the Expressive Arts AoLE. The teachers are all united in their enthusiasm that the expressive arts will be given greater status in the curriculum, but they also recognise and have begun to experience the challenges of curriculum integration, not least the danger that such

integration might weaken disciplinary knowledge. The third of these papers, by Sioned Hughes, Kara Makara and Dave Stacey, focuses on the Humanities AoLE. They discuss learner progression through this AoLE and identify four emergent tensions: the relationship between disciplines; the balance between knowledge, skills and values; differences between the underlying models of progression in Humanities; and balancing the complexity of learning with practical considerations for a national curriculum. All three papers conclude by considering the implications of these challenges of curriculum integration for professional learning.

The professional learning theme continues in the paper by Sioned Hughes and Helen Lewis. Here the authors discuss the importance and difficulty of strengthening teachers' agency in the pedagogy of the *Curriculum for Wales*. They note how the use of 'off the peg' or ready-made curriculum and pedagogical solutions are likely to appear attractive to schools and teachers who wish to develop a speedy response to curriculum reforms that are not heavily prescriptive. Using the example of a commercial 'Mindfulness' package in use in primary schools, the authors explore the tension between the drive to empower professional capability and increase autonomy with existing professional practices.

One of the current 'unknowns' surrounding the *Curriculum for Wales* is how the new arrangements will relate to school-leaving qualifications. The uncertainty about the future or structure of GCSE qualifications in Wales and the impact of this on the enactment of the new curriculum has been highlighted throughout the papers in this Special Issue. Elizabeth Titley, Andrew Davies and Stephen Atherton develop this theme by drawing on teacher and learner perspectives of recent reforms to GCSE qualifications in Wales after 2015. They illuminate how the previous assessment-driven system, with its associated pedagogy and external accountability, may be at odds with the principles of assessment as set out in *Successful Futures*.

Finally, Sally Power, Chris Taylor and Nigel Newton consider the implications of the *Curriculum for Wales* for one of the major failings of the previous National Curriculum – the persistence of educational inequalities. In this paper, the authors outline some of the challenges that schools implementing the new curriculum will face in providing ‘successful futures’ *for all*. Drawing on the experience of pioneer schoolteachers, the authors conclude that significant investment and some form of external accountability will be necessary if disadvantaged learners to receive a curriculum experience that opens up avenues to ‘powerful knowledge’.

Clearly, these are early days. At the time of writing, the *Curriculum for Wales* has not yet commenced its system-wide roll-out. What is already clear, though, is that its successful implementation will require considerable hard work, creative problem-solving and significant investment if its promises are to be realised.