

CURRICULUM DESIGN: PURPOSE, PROCESS & AGENCY

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Educators in Wales currently find themselves in a *moment*. This *moment* is defined by far-reaching reform. Globally, education reform is nothing new, “national curricula are constantly changing” (Sinnema, 2015, p. 965) and historically, Wales is no different.

Teachers in Wales could argue that they have already seen more than their fair share of change, despite the National Assembly for Wales only holding full regulatory powers for education over such a relatively short time. Earlier reforms in Wales have not been easy for those in the system and it could be argued that the flaws of early reforms include being: too numerous, too quick in succession, narrow in ambition, lacking in coherent vision and perhaps even piecemeal and reactive in character. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017, p. 44) warned whilst reviewing these earlier reforms, that

Head teachers and other stakeholders reported that the sheer number and often short time spans for schools to implement these reforms brought with them a risk of only partial implementation, or reform fatigue.

It is prudent to note at this juncture that the current reforms are noticeably different in scale, timing and connectivity to any of its predecessors. However, if we consider the scale and ambition of the reforms alongside both the implications of a post-Covid landscape and the current public sector volatility, arguably, fatigue is a very real threat to Wales’ education profession.

The current reforming policy permeates almost every facet of the Welsh education system: curriculum, leadership, accountability, equity and inclusion, and teaching. This article focuses upon the curriculum element of the reforms, seeking to serve as a provocation regarding the efficacy of purpose, process and agency in curriculum design.

Curriculum for Wales is a purpose-led curriculum. It is built upon four nationally prescribed, learner-centric purposes of education and a suite of ‘What Matters’ statements, which themselves determine the essential routes for progress in learning. In combination, the four purposes and what matters determine the national ambition for all educated 16 year olds in Wales. Through its organising structure, the curriculum aims to retain a breadth of learning for all learners from the age of three

up until 16, whilst also providing increased flexibility for schools to provide the necessary depth of specialist learning. The structure of the national level framework enables schools to design and plan a curriculum recognising that leaders and teachers are best placed to make decisions for the children and young people within their schools. This ideal raises a discussion on the transversal role of subsidiarity in Wales' curriculum reform. In particular, how the ambition of subsidiarity should be considered within the following heavily interwoven themes: curriculum; purpose; process; and trust. Subsidiarity in education has exponential complexities. Inevitably, realising the new curriculum through subsidiarity has resulted in increased expectations and demands upon both upon those working within schools and the system at large. In order to better understand the intent of subsidiarity in realisation, we need a better understanding of the curriculum.

Curriculum is more than simply the subjects that comprise a course of study. This is not a new concept as Bobbit (1918) stated that curriculum is the "entire range of experiences, both directed and undirected, concerned with unfolding the abilities of the individual" (p. 43).

Furthermore nearly one hundred years later, Donaldson defined curriculum "as including all the learning experiences and assessment activities planned in pursuit of agreed purposes of education" (Donaldson, 2015, p. 6). It is, therefore, crucial to move beyond simply accepting that curriculum is about centrally defined content to a position that encourages school leaders to question and consider the purpose of curriculum and how this can be enacted.

Enacting curriculum has been the topic of much research and conceptual thinking. Historically, and across many countries, curricula have traditionally been at the whim of politicians with nationally prescribed diktat for schools often following close behind. Cuban (1995) identifies this form of curriculum as an *official* curriculum which teachers are expected to teach, and students are expected to learn. He argues that this has the least influence on learning. Any curriculum relies on teachers to teach. It is teachers who make the choices of what to teach and how to teach it. Their choices derive from their knowledge, experiences, affection, distaste and attitudes towards their students (Cuban, 1993). Therefore the *taught* curriculum is influenced by the *official* curriculum but ultimately how teachers interpret and enact the curriculum differs, even with teachers in the same school.

Teachers set the tone and climate for learning, thus how a student learns will depend upon their place in the classroom. Much informal learning occurs within classrooms and often this is a result of the relationship with the teacher. Consequently, the *learned* curriculum is significantly different to the *taught* curriculum. Cuban (1993) identifies that "what students learn does not exactly match what is in the *tested* curriculum" (p. 184). The *tested* curriculum is mostly a narrow and limited view of the *official* and *taught* curriculum. Each layer of these

four curricula adds a layer of subjectivity which ultimately moves away from the original curriculum intent.

Herein lies the problem with a prescriptive curriculum and as Cuban (1993) suggests “to connect the official curriculum to the taught, tested, and learned curricula, policy makers need to give schools the flexibility and the resources to create their own means of integrating the four curricula” (p. 185). Nearly 30 years later, this is becoming a reality for schools in Wales.

Enacting the national policy behind Curriculum for Wales requires school leaders to deftly navigate between policy and practice. There is an ongoing need to ensure that the authentic nature and context of schools provide the necessary clarity for the basis of their curriculum design. The predetermined purpose of the curriculum relies upon schools to develop processes for curriculum design and realisation. This is not linear, moreover, it is messy; it is about slowing down and being attentive to the entire school community. Knowing the particular complexities of the school along with an aspirational vision for learning, is already proving to be crucial to the success of local level curriculum design. Change requires an inspiring vision that brings communities together, integration of teacher professionalism, policy and accountability (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009).

The concept of teacher professionalism and efficacy is an imperative for the potential success of our reform. Shifting the onus of curriculum and teaching decisions towards the hands of the profession requires both the autonomy and agency of those leaders and teachers in the system. Pak tee Ng (2017) comments on the paradox between strategic alignment and central control versus tactical empowerment of teachers. If school leaders solely follow strategic alignment then curriculum design will result in products to be delivered in classrooms. There is a need to empower teachers, to enable agency.

Agency is a relational concept. It has a depth of complexity. The evidence is overwhelming that the agency itself should be built upon trust. Its success cannot be framed as the sole responsibility of practitioners but must be a shared burden across the tiers of a system. To enable curriculum design, there is a need to build agency within schools,

Teacher agency in curriculum matters involves initiating the creation or critique of curriculum, an awareness of alternatives to established curriculum practices, the autonomy to make informed choices, an investment of self, and on-going interaction with others.

(Paris, 1993, in Fleming, 1998, p.20)

In order to embed the concepts of agency, it could be argued that Wales would do well to unequivocally define it as existing on two levels, i.e., that which is

exercised by schools, their leaders and teachers in developing their contextualised versions of the framework – the school-level curriculum – and that which the wider system must exercise by way of providing an environment of support and challenge, within which that local level agency can thrive. Where autonomy frames the freedoms across the tiers of Wales’ system, so then agency is the ongoing intelligent and reflective application of professional practices, within those freedoms. Most importantly, it “is not something that people have; it is something that people do or, more precisely, something they achieve” (Priestley et al. 2015, p. 6).

The reform in Wales is being extolled as being *for the profession by the profession*. The ability to be innovative, creative and flexible with curriculum decision-making is key. The purpose and processes schools are afforded rely on trust. Kuiper, Nieveen and Berkvens (2013, p. 145) argue that “only trust in teachers and teachers’ professionalism does guarantee improved educational quality. Insufficient space for site-specific choices undermines teachers’ professionalism and negatively affects the *imago*” they also qualify the need to achieve a delicate balance between the polarised all or nothing levels of system controls and freedoms – explaining that “too little regulation provides insufficient sense of direction or results” (p. 145). Therefore, this so-called delicate balance can only be achieved on a two-way conduit of trust being given and accepted, a bridge between policy and practice.

It could be argued that this bridge between policy and practice relies upon highly effective professional learning to build the conditions of agency and trust. School leaders are one of the biggest influences upon the success of professional learning. For teachers to be valued and influence curriculum design there is a need for leaders to create conditions and provide support for building professional capacity (Harris and Jones, 2017). Research suggests that it is the quality of leadership that is fundamental to enabling professional learning to be part of school culture, structures and systems (Croft et al. 2010). In support, “improved leadership practices seem to enhance teachers’ motivation, promote professional learning, and facilitate the improvement of school organisational conditions” (Thoonen et al. 2012, pp. 441–460). This leads to a recognition of the need for effective systems and structures for professional learning to be in place within schools, strategically led and managed by leaders. However, to develop a culture where professionals have a desire to invest in their own development and the skills to do so requires careful consideration and time. Croft et al. (2010) commented that a professional culture within a school significantly impacts upon the opportunities afforded to teachers to learn. They added that establishing professional norms and ensuring professional learning activities are close to the daily practices of teachers are “instrumental in fostering an organisational culture” (Croft et al. 2010, p. 8). This raises a question for consideration: If professional learning is most effective when it is “generated and owned by the practitioner” (Department for Education and Skills,

2018), how can school leaders establish a culture in which professionals can flourish?

For school leaders to create such a culture there could be an opportunity to learn from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) *Schools as Learning Organisations (SLO)* model (OECD, 2018). Kools and Stoll (2017, p. 64) state that "the seven action-oriented dimensions of the *SLO* model together add up to a sustainable learning organisation – successfully realising all seven dimensions is greater than the sum of the parts". It is suggested that the *SLO* model is considered by school leaders alongside the four transversal themes of trust, time, technology and thinking together, as Kools and Stoll (2017, p. 32) report that they 'exert their influence' across all dimensions of the *SLO* model.

Considering these transversal themes, providing time for teachers to make sense of new and complex ideas is arguably crucial for the realisation of curriculum design. Leaders need to prioritise time for professional learning but also afford teachers the necessary trust to develop their practice. They need to create active spaces for change and commit to the entitlement of professional learning, whilst protecting a silo mentality developing within individuals. Evidence globally supports that the most improved and best-performing school systems have leaders who prioritise professional learning (Barber and Mourshed, 2007). Fullan and Hargreaves (2016, p. 7) added "The fundamental difference between these systems and many other countries is a *culture of collaborative professionalism* that permeates the system, serving both individual and collective learning." Collaborative professionalism is the "golden cell of professional collaboration, where teachers have strong relationships, trust each other and feel free to take risks and make mistakes" (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018, p. 5).

Trust is perhaps the crux of the realisation of curriculum design. The purpose, process and agency afforded to school leaders in Wales relies upon an authentic trust in the profession. As the reform in Wales tentatively treads the stages of curriculum realisation, this is the opportunity for school leaders to come to the fore and to play their part, not just as the passive conduit between policy and practice, but as proactive instructional leaders – ensuring that they set a purposeful vision; create a culture that both focuses upon and celebrates learning; and ensuring they are present in meeting their learning communities where they are.

BIOGRAPHY

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