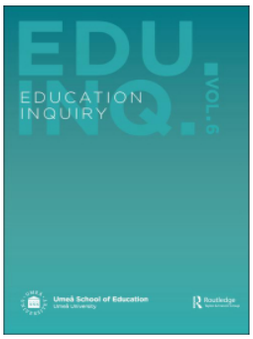

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A new dawn or false hope? Exploring the early implementation of Curriculum for Wales

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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper explores the evolution of Wales' new national curriculum. Launched in 2022 and reflective of a new international trend in curriculum reform, *Curriculum for Wales* is founded on the idea that key decisions related to teaching and learning are best made in schools and at the site of practice. The principle of subsidiarity is championed as a way of empowering teachers and encouraging local ownership within the confines of a much broader national framework. But implementation of such curricula is not without difficulty. This paper reflects on early implementation and explores a number of familiar challenges, like how to ensure equity of experience in a system that actively promotes difference. It considers the strengths and weaknesses of decentralisation, and ponders the implications of curriculum reform, and its associated teacher freedoms, for both policymakers and the profession itself. A scarcity of resource that endangers not only curriculum realisation, but also the motivation of those responsible for making it work, is also contemplated. The paper concludes by plotting a possible way forward, and presents the case for a national professional learning programme to give teachers the confidence needed to make Wales' curriculum vision a reality.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum; education policy; curriculum reform; professional learning; teacher agency

Introduction

Wales is a relatively small, yet culturally diverse country in the United Kingdom (UK) with a population of around 3.1 million people. Boasting a mixture of bilingual, Welsh and English-medium schools, its education system faces numerous challenges, chief among which is poverty and the pernicious effects of deprivation on pupil attainment. According to statistics released by the UK Government, more than a third of pupils in Wales live in poverty and the number is rising (Stone, 2022). The impact of these statistics is stark, with pupils who are eligible for free school meals (FSM, a proxy for deprivation) displaying poorer performance at every stage of compulsory education and on all recognised performance measures (Welsh Government, 2022a). Research into

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inequalities in GCSE results, qualifications typically sat by pupils aged 16, found that the achievement gap between children from poorer and more prosperous backgrounds in Wales was equivalent to around 22–23 months of educational progress, and roughly half of pupils experiencing persistent disadvantage end up in the bottom quintile of GCSE scores (Cardim-Dias & Sibieta, 2022).

Since the devolution of legislative powers from the UK Government to the Welsh Parliament in 1999, a series of interventions have been introduced in an attempt to break the cycle of deprivation leading to poor attainment. The Pupil Development Grant (PDG, formerly known as the Pupil Deprivation Grant) was launched in 2012 and provides extra money to schools based on their number of pupils eligible for FSM. It represents one of the longer-term policies aimed at tackling the impact of disadvantage, and remains a key feature of the Welsh Government's Child Poverty Strategy, costing more than £130 m in 2022–23 (Welsh Government, 2022b). While the PDG ringfenced funding for individual pupils, initiatives such as Schools Challenge Cymru took a more holistic approach, and was designed principally to make better use of the professional expertise and creativity already residing in Welsh classrooms (Ainscow, 2016). A collaborative effort involving 40 secondary schools and a range of support partners, it was scrapped in 2017 three years after its launch.

The new *Curriculum for Wales* (CfW) represents the Welsh Government's latest, and arguably most ambitious, response to the poverty challenge. Reflective of what scholars have called "a curricular turn" (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014, p. 50), CfW is based on the idea that key decisions related to teaching and learning are best made in schools and at the site of practice, as opposed to more traditional "teacher-proof" curricula that are prescribed centrally and "delivered" in a fashion that limits the agentic capacity of teachers (Sinnema, Nieveen, & Priestley, 2020; Taylor, 2013). CfW went "live" in all primary and some secondary schools in September 2022, and will be phased in gradually until all pupils aged 3–16 are benefitting from new curricular experiences in 2026. This paper considers the curriculum's early evolution, and reflects on implementation progress to date. It narrows focus to two core issues, both interrelated and of ongoing significance to CfW development. The first relates to the notion of subsidiarity, upon which the new curriculum is built, and its implications for the poverty agenda in Wales. The second issue explores the consequences of curriculum change for teachers, and the extent to which practitioners feel confident and able to respond to the needs of the new policy landscape. The paper concludes by plotting a possible way forward, built on clarity and coherence at all levels of the education system.

Subsidiarity

In his review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, which can be considered the blueprint for what would later become CfW, Donaldson (2015) championed the principle of subsidiarity by encouraging local ownership and responsibility within a national framework of expectation and support. In essence, this would require the transfer of responsibility for curriculum design and all it entails from civil servants to teachers, thus entrusting and empowering those whose job it is to educate and nurture future generations. Kuiper, Nieveen, and Berkvens (2013) consider this a shift from *curriculum regulation*, reflecting governments' intention to prescribe the high-

fidelity implementation of directives at input level, to *curriculum deregulation*, motivated by governments' desire to refrain from prescription and control at input and output level by stimulating school-based decision-making. The idea that practitioners should take more of a lead in their own practice, drawing on their demonstrable knowledge, skills and experiences as qualified educators is, on the face of it, good sense and respects both the professionalism of teachers and the bespoke needs of individual children. After all, it is teachers who know their learners best. However, this somewhat utopian image of schools being liberated from the shackles of government diktat is quickly dispelled by legitimate concerns related to equity of experience.

Such concerns are neatly encapsulated by Newton (2020) in his paper on subsidiarity in the context of curriculum reform, in which he contends that the absence of clear policy about what degrees of flexibility and freedom schools will be allowed has given rise to doubts amongst teachers in Wales as to what is acceptable within the new framework. Similar concerns are surfaced by Power, Newton, and Taylor (2020), who noted teachers' "excitement" about the prospect of shaping provision they considered to be more engaging and relevant to their learners, but also nervousness, perhaps fuelled by uncertainty as to how the new curriculum would work in practice. More specifically, the authors warned that the process of curriculum reform 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" (Power, Newton, & Taylor, 2020, p. 331). They add that the move towards greater flexibility could lead to highly differentiated provision and diminished access to so-called "powerful knowledge" for more disadvantaged learners (Young & Muller, 2013).

Connell's (1993) work on *curricular justice* serves as a useful reference point in this regard, albeit that her vision of a curriculum designed with the interests of the least advantaged in mind is predicated on what she calls "social struggle" and genuine deliberation about what knowledge should be given precedence (Connell, 2017, p. 11). A *curriculum for equality*, argues Kelly (2004, p. 217), must be geared towards the development of capacities and capabilities that support all learners in becoming autonomous members of society, and do so in a way that neither favours the privileged nor further disadvantages the under-privileged. At its most basic level, it cannot be assumed that pupils from more deprived backgrounds will have access to and benefit from the same resources, technologies or parental support as their more affluent peers, and so providing access to powerful knowledge in school – whatever that might look like – is considered one way of levelling the playing field. The reluctance of Welsh policymakers to promote a canonical knowledge base, as an extension of the high-level conceptual model that exists currently, has exacerbated unease amongst those for whom subsidiarity is a pathway to further imbalance. And therein lies the curriculum's foremost tension; how best to accommodate the nuance of school context, while at the same time guaranteeing a level of consistency from one setting to the next.

A double-edged sword

In education, perhaps more than in any other public service, equity of opportunity is written in tablets of stone. But there are genuine concerns that the shift from prescription to what Young (2008) calls "genericism", will result in an *even bigger* disparity in

the knowledge and skills available in Welsh schools. The consequence of such polarity is likely to be most keenly felt in schools serving areas of disadvantage, which often struggle to recruit high-calibre teachers and do not necessarily benefit from the same level of parental engagement (Allen, Burgess, & Mayo, 2018; Smith, 2006). Sinnema, Nieveen, and Priestley (2020, p. 184) set out clearly what this new approach to curriculum means for teachers and learners:

> This flexibility is both a gift (for some) and a burden (for others). As a consequence, students' curricular experience is determined very little by what the national curriculum sets out, and is almost entirely determined by what their teachers and leaders of curriculum design in their schools create. In many cases, that leads to quite remarkable, groundbreaking and thoroughly impressive teaching and learning experiences and outcomes. But that is not the case for all…

Sinnema (2017) considers the balance between prescription and autonomy as central to the work of designing a national curriculum. Without sufficient prescription, she argues, learners' curriculum entitlement cannot be assured; conversely, without appropriate freedoms, teacher agency and professional autonomy is put at risk. It is a point supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021, par.6), which in its review of Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE), seen largely as the precursor to CfW, described flexibility in curricular approaches as a "double-edged sword" that can, on the one hand, be used to fashion creative responses to the challenges posed by geography and school size, but at the same time "inevitably gives rise to variation". Sundby and Karseth (2021, p. 438) consider this a dilemma centred around the balancing of explicit guidance with what they call "openness of content choice". Too much of the former, they argue, risks learning by rote without room for critical reflection or innovation.

Early evidence would suggest that these issues are already deeply embedded in the implementation of CfW. A survey commissioned by the Welsh Government and published in January 2022 found that of 567 teachers and leaders who responded, more than two-thirds believed that their school was in need of additional support to be ready for curriculum launch in September 2022 (Duggan et al., 2022). Respondents raised concerns about the amount and clarity of information and guidance they had received in relation to curriculum design, and whilst the vast majority were committed to curriculum change, there were fears "that practitioners lack the expertise to be able to design their own curriculum" (ibid, p.28). In its summary of engagement calls and visits to schools during autumn 2021, Wales' education inspectorate Estyn (2022a, p. 2) said there was "considerable variation" in how prepared schools were for implementation, warning later that "teachers are not supported well enough to develop the skills they need to design a curriculum" (Estyn, 2022b, p. 20). More recently, practitioners interviewed as part of a national project to develop the system's understanding of learner progression and assessment, spoke of the need for consistent messaging to avoid "creating pockets of practice across the country that are not talking to each other" (Morrison-Love et al., 2023, p. 36).

All of this implies a level of uncertainty amongst Wales' teaching fraternity that CfW will deliver on its lofty ambitions to achieve "high standards and aspirations for all" (Welsh Government, 2023a, p. 5). There appears general acceptance that for the new

curriculum to be representative of the population it serves, there has to be some level of agreement as to what all teachers and learners do in lockstep. The anxiety however stems from not knowing exactly where the line is drawn and how far teachers are *allowed* to deviate from CfW documentation. This tension is exemplified in the Welsh Government's introduction to CfW guidance, which outlines the curriculum requirements set out in legislation "to ensure all schools cover the same core learning and to secure a consistency of approach for learners across Wales" (Welsh Government, 2020, par.3). Such statements are deeply problematic and to some degree paradoxical in a policy environment that actively promotes and celebrates difference. Neither does it acknowledge the curriculum's basic premise that no school, teacher or learner is the same and that a more bespoke approach to teaching and learning is needed.

Teacher empowerment

This section considers the implications of subsidiarity, and its promise of greater freedom to innovate, for teachers and the extent to which they feel confident and able to respond to the needs of the new policy landscape. I have described in an earlier paper the culture shift required within Wales' education workforce to make good the nation's ongoing reform agenda, as teachers transition from "passive consumers" to "proactive producers" of curriculum content (Evans, 2022, p. 385). Priestley and Drew (2016, p. 2) consider this repositioning of teachers at the forefront of the curriculum design process as manifestation of a wider transnational discourse that "teachers matter", apparently cognisant of the supposition, by Kuiper, Nieveen, and Berkvens (2013), that only trust in teachers guarantees improved educational quality. However, all of this assumes both a willingness on the part of teachers to engage in such transformational practice, and their ability to actually do so successfully; teachers, after all, know only what they know and what their formative training and subsequent professional development have allowed.

Far from empowering teachers, it could be argued that CfW has in fact *de-skilled* those who were not involved in early curriculum co-construction (selected schools having been invited to participate in "pioneering" activity, designed to lay the foundations for a more national, collaborative effort) and have had no prior exposure to curriculum design, which has not historically been a prominent feature of initial teacher education (ITE) in Wales. All of a sudden, and through no fault of their own, teachers in Wales have gone from a position of strength, based on many years' experience of teaching in a certain way in line with a particular curricular framework, to one of relative weakness. This does not mean that good teachers become any less good as a consequence, more that they need additional support – and new skills – so as to be able to respond most effectively to that which is being asked of them. I like to think of this as a form of musical composition – if teachers' score is taken away, they will need absolute confidence that they can play all the right notes together, in the best possible order. The difficulty, of course, is knowing what the "right notes" sound like, a dilemma born out of the vaguity of curriculum documentation.

Drew and Priestley (2016) describe the trend in international curricula as leaning towards those that *guide* educational practice, rather than being seen as prescriptive recipes to be followed to the letter. But the issue inherent in such

models is that some teachers will need more of a menu from which to make their pedagogical choices, and it is fanciful to suggest otherwise. CfW, like so many other curricula bearing the same features (e.g. Scotland, New Zealand, the Netherlands), is not by design "teacher-proof", and imagines instead a "curriculum-proof teacher" (Taylor, 2013, p. 297) who can use any given curriculum in the most effective way. The challenge is how to get there, and by what means all teachers in Wales can develop the necessary knowledge and skills to design, develop and continually renew their own school-based curricula under the banner of a much broader *national* curriculum. The lack of a detailed implementation plan specifically linked to professional learning, setting out roles and responsibilities, and how the different "tiers" of Wales' education system should interact to support schools, appears in hindsight to have impacted negatively on teachers' capacity to meaningfully engage with CfW.

Writing in his curriculum paving document, *Successful Futures*, Donaldson (2015, p. 10) noted that the high degree of prescription intrinsic to the preceding national curriculum, together with powerful accountability mechanisms, had created a culture "within which the creative role of the school has become diminished and the professional contribution of the workforce underdeveloped". This is an important observation, as it suggests an untapped potential amongst teachers that has to some extent been stifled by years of government control and regulation. The potential for professional renewal is perhaps most accentuated within the more experienced teaching populace, given the propensity of prescribed curricula to narrow opportunities for innovation and creativity (Bloom & VanSlyke-Briggs, 2019). It would appear logical that more novice and emerging practitioners would find the transition to new working arrangements easier to manage, given they have not been fully exposed to the debilitating culture described by Donaldson, particularly in light of associated changes to ITE in Wales (although their capacity to exercise such agency can become compromised when encountering established thinking).

Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers (Furlong, 2015, p. 7) was published shortly after *Successful Futures* and outlined a vision for ITE that would "encourage the achievement of a new kind of teacher professionalism", based largely on schools playing a more leading role in key aspects of programme design and delivery, and a more systematic integration of the professional knowledge gained in different settings. Subsequent reform of ITE, involving the transition to a new national accreditation process (Griffiths et al., 2020), has centred around preparing teachers for CfW, although the challenges presented in this article and pertaining to subsidiarity and teacher confidence are as much an issue for teacher education providers as the system more generally. So too could it be argued that instead of consolidating ITE provision, recent developments have in fact led to a saturation of teacher education in Wales, with duplication of programmes and a comparatively high number of staff supporting smaller numbers of student-teachers (provision being spread across eight universities, rather than five as was the case a decade ago). Nevertheless, there is recognition that in journeying towards a *new kind of teacher professionalism*, Wales must seek to support teachers at all stages of their careers; CfW does not discriminate by age and demands the same of those who are starting as those nearing the end of their professional lives. Indeed, the suggestion by Stenhouse (1975) that there can be no curriculum development without teacher development seems entirely apposite in this context.

A national entitlement

The OECD in its 2017 review of Welsh policy developments made clear that the new curriculum aimed to "significantly raise the bar in terms of what Wales expects of its teachers", albeit many teachers were struggling to adequately assess pupils' learning and differentiate their teaching accordingly (OECD, 2017, p. 25). The OECD (2020) would later recommend that in order to realise CfW across all schools in Wales, the Welsh Government would need to invest in the development of teachers' capacity to be the main drivers of the curriculum by enhancing their skills and competencies. The extent to which this has actually been achieved is highly questionable. Teachers have reported feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of guidance and documentation circulating within the system, and expressed concern that what is available does not necessarily equip them with what is needed to do the job (Morrison-Love et al., 2023). A review of educational leadership, commissioned by the Welsh Government and published in 2022, found that the quality of support available to leaders was variable, and training opportunities tended to be complex, convoluted, and at times, confusing (Harris et al. 2022). A statement issued in response by the National Association of Head Teachers in Wales (Doel, 2022, par. 5), warning that "schools are being left to do this (curriculum reform) alone", is symptomatic of the frustration that continues to rankle amongst practitioners, particularly those facing significant funding cuts (Wightwick, 2023).

The underlying problem, it seems, is that the professional learning on offer is currently of variable quality and, like curriculum documentation, light on detail; this has in turn led to mixed messaging, misinterpretation and, in some cases, the adoption of approaches that do not align with CfW principles. The issue appears to stem, somewhat ironically given the decentralised approach to curriculum reform, from a lack of mandated developmental support; there is no national professional learning programme endorsed by government, nor a coherent suite or package of resources for teachers to draw upon when they come unstuck. Instead, teachers are expected to navigate a messy and poorly choreographed landscape of professional support, with little or no direction; a predicament seemingly confirmed by Wales' education minister Jeremy Miles in a headline address to the nation's headteachers in early 2022:

> I am not yet convinced our professional learning offer is as accessible and useful as it could be. There is lots of it, but do you know what's there, what you should be looking for, where to look for it, and is it is easy to find? I think the truth is that there is too much variation and despite the volume of material, too many gaps. So we will change that. (Miles, 2022a)

Miles' solution to the professional learning quandary was the development of a new "National Entitlement" that every teacher would be entitled to and benefit from (Welsh Government, 2022c). Among other things, the entitlement promised a new validation process to ensure all professional learning is quality assured and recognised, in order to give confidence to practitioners that what they are being told is secure and rooted in evidence; an inadvertent acknowledgement of the Welsh Government's failure to authenticate and thus legitimise professional learning resources. The problems identified by Miles are doubtless exacerbated by the adoption of different approaches by Wales' regional education consortia, bodies working in the so-called "middle-tier" and on behalf of the nation's 22 local authorities to support curriculum implementation in

schools. Miles confirmed in May 2022 that officials were in the process of "strengthening and clarifying the nationally available resource-base for professional learning" and working with middle-tier partners "on a clearer understanding of the impact of professional learning support and provision" (Miles, 2022b). This work was ongoing at the time of writing.

Policy paralysis?

A possible way through the flexibility-prescription tightrope explored earlier would be the commission of a genuinely *national* programme of professional learning. An evidence-based resource for all teachers in all settings, it could take the form of a mandatory module or "starter kit" for schools to share with their staff at the earliest convenience. An "introduction to curriculum design", co-constructed with all key stakeholders (a pre-requisite of all such resources), would help cut through the noise and ensure teachers at least *start* on an equal footing. Then again, the Welsh Government might simply begin by asking teachers what they need and what they are not getting at the moment. The potential for entry points into the new curriculum, based on individual practitioner proficiency and experience, is worthy of exploration, although it assumes at least a basic understanding of CfW and does not necessarily respond to the need for more standardised information that is applicable to all. In the absence of a core curriculum that would see every school in every part of Wales teach the same things (an idea too closely associated with more "traditional" curricula), it is imperative one would imagine that all teachers and leaders have the requisite foundational skills to go about designing their own curricula. This though brings with it its own set of challenges.

On the one hand, there are those who reason that an overly prescriptive and consistent professional learning offer will go against everything that the curriculum stands for, and end up clawing back agency from the very people the new made-in-Wales curriculum seeks to empower. Conversely, many believe that leaving teachers to "do their own thing" and grapple with curriculum design unaided leaves too much to chance. I have come to the conclusion, based on a number of discussions with teachers and leaders, that Wales needs something in between; a halfway house that respects both viewpoints, and is cognisant of their inherent strengths and weaknesses. In short, the Welsh Government must find a way of bridging the old world with the new, and it cannot be expected that teachers at any stage of their professional career will jump seamlessly from one way of working to the next, single-handed. After all, curricula such as that being developed in Wales expect more from teachers, and their important role in shaping and influencing the curriculum (Kneen, Breeze, Thayer, John, & Davies-Barnes, 2023) should not be underestimated.

That Wales has not sought to respond more decisively to this predicament suggests to me a level of policy paralysis. It could be argued that Welsh policymakers are wedged between a rock and a hard place; frozen by fear of overstepping the paper-thin line between subsidiarity and specification. After almost a decade of preaching "more power to teachers", the Welsh Government appears all too aware of the potential to overstep the mark and retract from the promise to enable more localised decision-making. There is a vigilance amongst policymakers that any further intervention, over and above the

loose curriculum framework that exists currently, could impinge on teacher agency and lead to accusations of *recentralisation* linked to the recouping of newfound teacher freedoms. I note with some trepidation the suggestion by Nieveen and Kuiper (2012, p. 358) "that pendulum swings between government steering and control, on the one hand, and school autonomy, on the other, can be violent". There is no suggestion at the present time that the Welsh pendulum swing will be anything other than serene, albeit there appears some scope for recalibration. Indeed, Donaldson (2016, p. 14) himself recognises that with greater freedom and responsibility brings with it major implications for capacity "in the skills of teachers, in the nature of leadership and in the support mechanisms that will be needed to facilitate implementation".

Bernbaum (2011, p. 8) reminds us that even when national governments decide to decentralise functions, "they retain significant responsibility for developing appropriate and effective national decentralization policies and strengthening local institutional capacity to assume new responsibility". Sleegers and Wesselingh (1993), on the other hand, link decentralisation to the policy-making capacity of schools, defined as the extent to which schools can independently perform their tasks in policy-making. Together, these ideas raise important questions for Wales; most notably, as to whether or not the actual mechanics of decentralisation have been strongly enough supported, and teachers' capacity to assume new responsibilities in "policy-making" – or in this case *policy interpretation* – at a local level, sufficiently developed. The answer appears at best uncertain and is not helped by the lack of external evaluation of what Wales is doing. Aside for the OECD, which visits periodically and at the government's request, there is no obvious and truly *objective* validation, outside of academia and interested commentators, for the current reform agenda. In fact, it could be argued that the exact opposite is true, and Welsh reforms are threatened by the potential for groupthink, given the active involvement of *all* prominent stakeholders (including, e.g. schools, government, regional consortia, universities, etc.) in the reform process. In its long-term strategic plan, the Welsh Government (2017, p. 36) advocates a self-improving system in which "all parts of the education system become participants". As appealing as this sounds, it by its very nature limits the space for constructive challenge and creates instead a cloak of self-congratulation that masks the sorts of questions posed in this paper.

In the short-term, time-poor teachers and leaders need belief that the guidance that arrives on their desks is worthy of investment and responds to a genuine need. In my view, Wales' failure to set sufficient parameters for curriculum innovation (in relation to e.g. curriculum design and professional learning) has inhibited the very practices it is seeking to propagate. Ministers must build confidence in the profession and its capacity to transform itself; to do so requires clarity, coherence and trust. Mixed messaging, the cause of considerable consternation amongst teachers (Morrison-Love et al., 2023), breeds uncertainty but can be put right with clearer direction and all-party buy-in. This does not mean that teachers should be held by the hand and walked across the metaphorical bridge between old and new one by one, as perhaps might have been done previously; more that the bridge is lit, paved and its foundations reinforced, so as to reassure teachers they are working on solid ground. This requires a coherence in the nation's professional learning offer, and a promise that wherever you are in Wales, you will be shown the right path.

Final thoughts

It is important to acknowledge in the drawing of conclusions, that the curriculum itself remains very much in its infancy and many thousands of pupils have yet to be exposed to its new ways of working. Nevertheless, there are still key learnings that can be taken from the Welsh experience to date and used to inform similar curricular developments in other jurisdictions. The first relates to the need for a coherent, well-coordinated and sustained professional learning programme, the like of which was recommended by Donaldson (2015) in *Successful Futures*. That Wales neglected to support teachers in this way has in my view cost its education system valuable time; time that would have been much better spent testing new arrangements, and deepening understanding amongst those charged with operationalising the new curriculum. Golding and Place (2023) consider trust in the profession central to the realisation of CfW. I would not disagree, only it is important to remember that trust in this context is reciprocal and works both ways; in other words, it matters as much if not more that teachers have faith in their elected members to see through and deliver what was promised at the ballot boxes, than government having trust in teachers to put reforms into practice. Humes and Priestley (2021, p. 198) argue that "effective and sustainable curriculum development has to win the hearts and minds of teachers". There is nothing to suggest that teachers in Wales are not suitably enthused by the ongoing reform agenda, and recent research implies a level of contentment with early curriculum roll-out (Thomas et al., 2023), but there can be no room for complacency and it is crucial that concerns related to, e.g. professional learning and equity, are properly acknowledged and acted upon.

The experience of curriculum reform in Scotland can be considered a cautionary tale of how not to overwhelm teachers with inordinate amounts of guidance and documentation which, according to the OECD, have actively contributed to the growth of overly bureaucratic approaches to planning and assessment in schools (OECD, 2021). The complexity of materials related to CfE has given rise to criticism amongst practitioners that the curriculum is cluttered, over-accessorised and laden with unnecessary jargon (ibid). In its review of Wales' curriculum development, the OECD (2020, par.45) noted with some conviction that "the quality, wide availability and consistency of support materials, and of professional learning, are the highest priorities to guarantee that the curriculum fulfils its ambitions". The Welsh Government's National Entitlement and promised validation process give cause for optimism that the challenges encountered in Scotland, and shared by Wales, can be overcome. However, the idea that curriculum resources will be quality assured brings with it a whole new set of questions; for example, who decides what is recognised and what is not, and on what basis will they make their decisions? Frequency of review is another important consideration, as is the value of recognition by government and, with it, the expectation on schools to employ centrally-approved resources. These and other socio-political considerations will require careful thought and negotiation.

There is in my view another consequential, yet no less significant threat to successful curriculum realisation of which Wales must be acutely mindful. As explored earlier, central to the current reform agenda is the notion that in shifting from curriculum prescription to flexibility, teachers will be more empowered and their professional status as key decision-makers in the educational process suitably respected (Evans,

2022). The net effect, argue Sinnema & Aitken (2013), is that teachers' sense of control increases, and with it, their commitment and satisfaction to be able to respond to local needs and interests. A recent study into school leaders' perception of curriculum implementation would appear to support that view, having noted a greater sense of practitioner autonomy and enthusiasm emerging within the Welsh workforce (Duggan et al., 2022). However, the enthusiasm emanating from Wales' new approach to curriculum is not guaranteed, and some teachers have reported feeling frustrated at the levels of professional support available. This appears to manifest most prominently in two ways; first, from a lack of guidance and inconsistency in messaging that results in teachers doubting whether they have understood the curriculum in the "right way" (Morrison-Love et al., 2023). Nieveen and Kuiper (2012) recommend specified educative materials that illustrate and support the essentials of curriculum reform and are adjustable to local aims as providing a possible solution here, albeit they are conscious of the potential for over-specification becoming a prescriptive straitjacket that works against the desired trust in teachers as professionals. Pascal and Bertram (2012, p. 481) consider the idea of "wise practice", that acknowledges the practitioner as the expert within their own context, as being preferable to "best practice" in this context.

The second frustration threatening to erode teacher confidence in Welsh curriculum development relates to the wider socio-economic forces that determine what a school and its staff can realistically achieve. In their paper on the role of teachers in curriculum-making, Priestley and Drew (2019, p. 156) warn that the development of aspirational policy to promote teachers' professional agency has not necessarily been accompanied by a cultural/discursive environment conducive to such aspirations. They cite performativity and the professional language used to describe and define educational practice as contributing to this tension. In Wales, the rowing back from more punitive forms of accountability (Evans, 2023) and a more concerted effort to develop research capacity within the education workforce (Evans, Llewellyn, & Lewabe, 2022) has tended to some of these concerns; nevertheless, matters pertaining to school funding and the money available to support teachers' professional learning remain a live issue for many.

Budgetary constraints

A review of school spending in Wales, published in 2020, revealed a 6% real-terms fall in education spending per learner over the preceding decade, with extra funding for schools serving deprived communities significantly lower in Wales than in neighbouring England (Sibieta, 2020). Audit Wales, the body responsible for overseeing public finances, has since warned that direct spending on the curriculum may be at the high end, or more than, the Welsh Government's 2021 estimates and that there will be "significant opportunity costs to schools until at least March 2026" (Audit Wales, 2022, p. 5). It laid bare in its own review of CfW expenditure that the Welsh Government had not assessed the likely costs when it first set out on its journey of curriculum reform. Both reports warned of the ongoing influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on school funding. More recently, in October 2023, Welsh ministers announced a £74 m reduction in education spending for 2023–2024 as part of a wider efficiency review triggered by high inflation and increased public sector pay (Welsh Government, 2023b).

Wales' challenging budgetary context feels all the more significant, given the well-documented detrimental impact of the global financial crisis on Scotland's CfE roll-out from 2010 (Donaldson, 2014; Livingston, 2012; Minty & Priestley, 2012). Whilst no doubt hamstrung by events, the Scottish experience serves as a salutary reminder that reform of this nature and on this scale cannot be done on the cheap. And so in Wales, the issue is not so much of the cultural or discursive environment in which teachers work, as the day-to-day functionality of the environment itself, with schools having to manage curriculum design, and protect the time and space needed to undertake such activity, against the backdrop of a punishing fiscal climate. This, together with an assumption that teachers will engage fully in curriculum reform is, in my experience of working with schools, proving extremely difficult to reconcile; the roll-out of CfW is being directly impeded by a scarcity of resource that endangers not only curriculum realisation in a more practical sense but also the motivation and goodwill of teachers to make it work. It is not that they do not *want* to engage in curriculum reform, more that they feel they cannot do it justice.

So where, some eight years after the publication of *Successful Futures*, does all of this leave CfW? The answer is hard to ascertain with any level of confidence given Wales' journey of transformation is far from complete, and there is no surety of a long-term funding settlement over and above a political commitment to "staying the course" (Evans, 2022). However, there appears good grounds for summation that if the new curriculum is to deliver for the children of Wales, knotty issues relating to subsidiarity and teacher empowerment must be addressed. The worry is that failure to do so could lead to CfW working contrary to that which it set out to achieve, by actively contributing to a widening of the attainment gap and a more frustrated profession unable to benefit fully from the purportedly advantageous position it has been granted.

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