THE CONVERSATION
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In Britain's battle over school curriculum, Celtic nations have got it right

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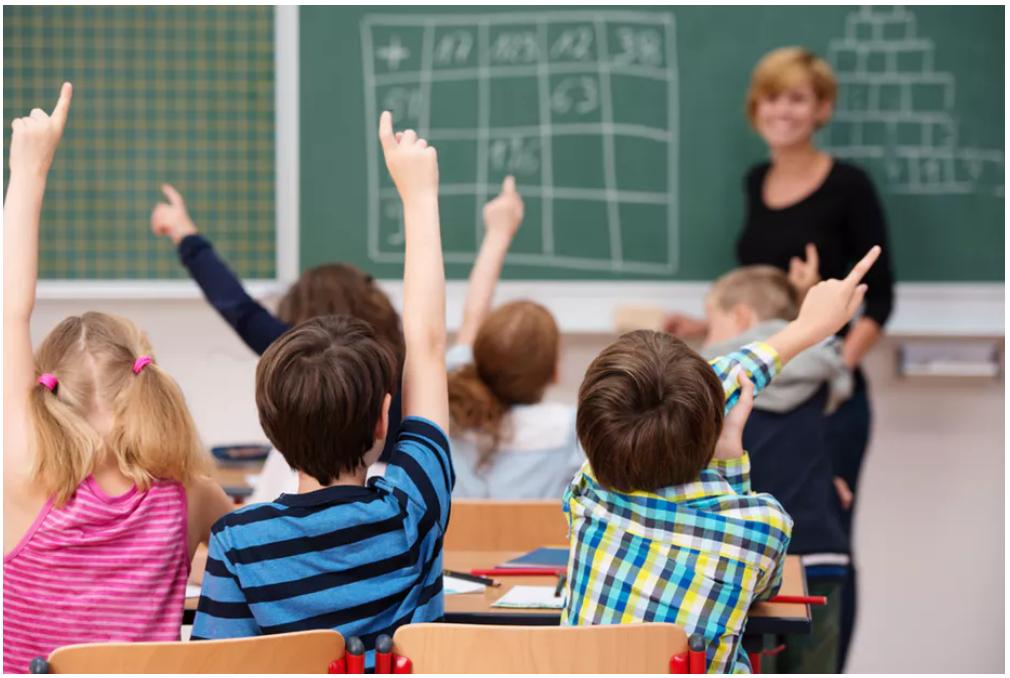

"Peidiwch â cholli!" ESB Professional

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The national curriculum introduced by Margaret Thatcher's governments in the 1980s was a seminal development in UK education history. Applying to England, Northern Ireland and Wales (but not Scotland, which has a tradition of educational independence), the move was highly controversial.

With too much content and little flexibility on what could be taught, it was a teacher-proof curriculum that was widely decried by education experts as badly thought out and damaging to young people. Such criticisms seemed borne out, as it was reviewed and revised throughout the 1990s.

By the new millennium, new curricular forms were emerging – first in Scotland and Northern Ireland in 2004 (education in Northern Ireland and Wales had been devolved). These moved away from specifying in detail what content to teach, shifting towards giving schools and teachers more autonomy.

England appeared to be heading in the same direction under New Labour following a major review of the national curriculum in 2007-08. But after the coalition government was elected in 2010, these reforms were ditched in favour of a more traditional fact-based approach.

Wales, on the other hand, has followed the other Celtic nations. It announced its own new curriculum in 2015.

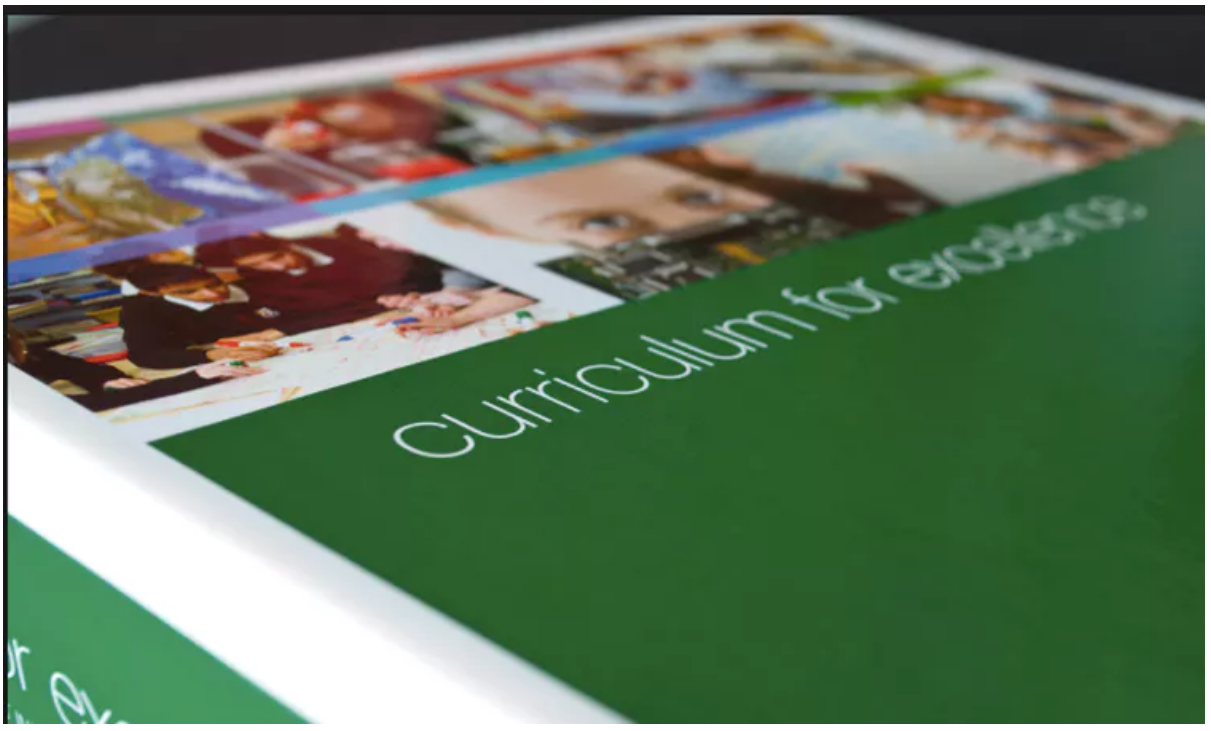
Curriculum wars

The new Celtic curricula have been widely attacked. Critics claim they downgrade knowledge – effectively dumbing down learning – and overemphasise skills, particularly those required for the workplace.

They are often derided as "progressive", apparently a pejorative term – and arguably an inaccurate description in any case. They blur the boundaries between subjects, say critics, and devalue knowledge from academic disciplines in favour of everyday knowledge.

While such criticisms invariably contain some truth, they are not helping improve British education. They have created unhelpful dichotomies of traditional versus progressive, knowledge versus skills, and the teacher as a "sage on the stage" versus the teacher as a "guide on the side". A good, balanced education should attend to all these dimensions.

The new Celtic curricula are grounded in specific purposes of education, which provide a clear starting point for schools to develop a curriculum. In Scotland these are articulated as attributes and capabilities, set out under four headings: successful learners, responsible citizens, effective contributors and confident individuals.



Scotland's reforms. CC BY-SA

Northern Ireland has three overall learning objectives, developing young people as: individuals, contributors to society, and contributors to the economy and environment.

Statements of purpose like these describe what an educated young person should look like at the end of a stage of education. They should allow schools to choose suitable content themselves; and teach it in ways that enable children to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for successful lives – as critically engaged citizens with successful careers.

I believe that this is greatly preferable to a curriculum apparently devoid of purposes and framed primarily around content decided by national policymakers.

English schools, though in many cases they will teach similar things to their Celtic counterparts, face overcrowded syllabuses which leave insufficient time to focus on teaching for understanding. Schools potentially start their curriculum development with questions of what to teach without necessarily asking why teach it.

Critics do have a point when they say the progressive Celtic curricula lack attention to knowledge, but I think this is largely a problem with implementation – particularly in Scotland. As the OECD's Andreas Schleicher stated on BBC News in December 2016, Scotland needs to move from an intended curriculum to an implemented curriculum.

Historically, progressive approaches to education placed a high value on knowledge. Indeed the father of progressive education, the American philosopher John Dewey, emphasised the importance of engaging with the accumulated wisdom of mankind.

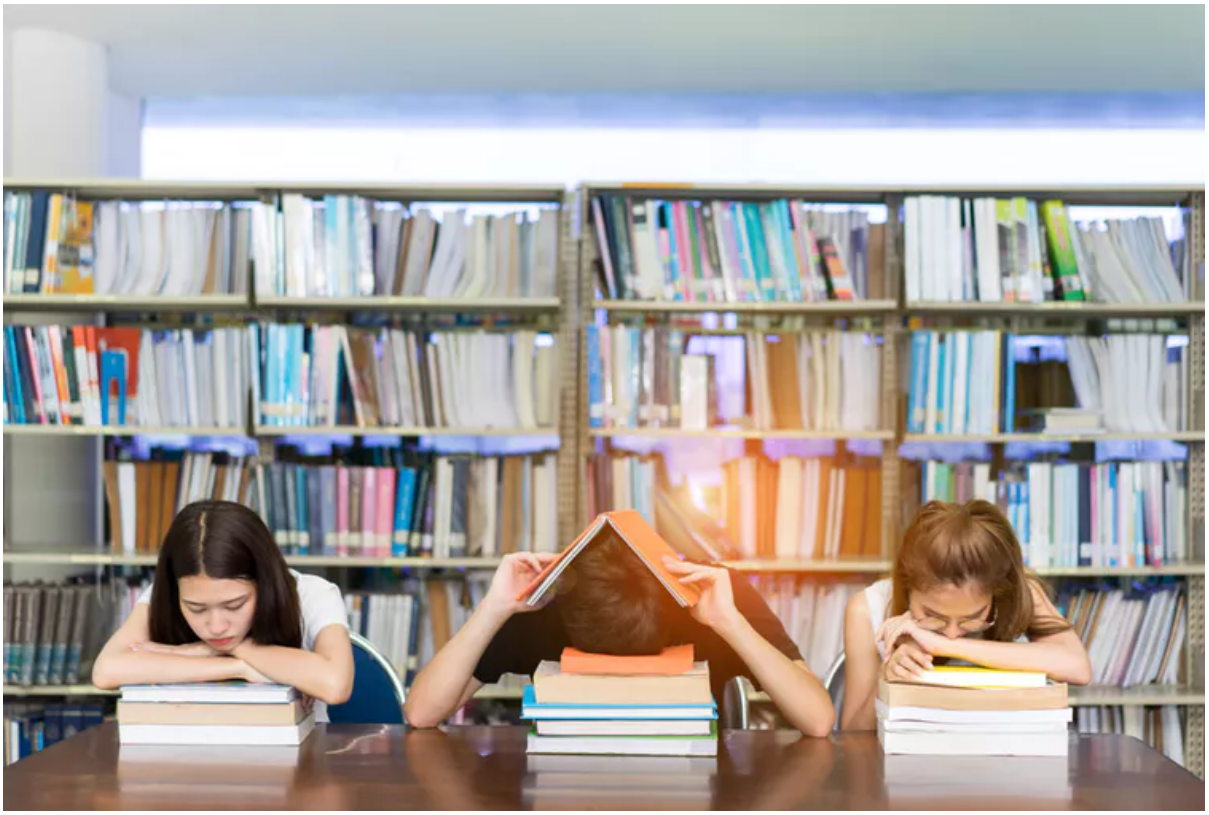
Could do better

How then to explain Scotland's implementation problem? A decade after the launch of the Curriculum for Excellence, Scottish education has been undergoing a substantial review and has become a weak flank for the government's opponents.

I would argue that the non-progressive elements of this curriculum have contributed to schools' struggles to bring the vision to life – above all framing the curriculum as detailed learning outcomes.

These hundreds of statements arrayed into hierarchical levels are a throwback to England's original National Curriculum, which simplistically saw learning as a neat linear progress to be measured at every stage, not a messy and emergent developmental process that varies between individuals.

Learning outcomes have been associated with a tendency for schools to track their performance against predetermined statements. They can make teachers risk-averse and inclined towards a bureaucratic tick-box approach to the curriculum.



Learning difficulties. Klattisak Lamchan

So it's really interesting to see the latest iteration of this sort of curriculum emerging in Wales. The developers of the Curriculum for Wales seem cognisant of the problems afflicting these curricula elsewhere.

Development materials emphasise the importance of clearly identifying and making sense of educational purposes. They stress that knowledge – as well as skills – need to be prominent in teachers' thinking as they enact the curriculum.

Yet they recognise that traditional subjects are only one way of articulating this knowledge. Though knowledge shouldn't be handed down as if to Moses on tablets of stone, subjects are still seen as a useful means of dividing the curricular cake. They can sit alongside more integrated approaches such as having learning themes that cut across subjects or offering hybrid subjects such as social studies.

Some critics have suggested there are problems with implementing this new system, too, but it's far too early to make judgements. The system doesn't have to be fully operational until 2021.

Crucially, teachers are to be involved in all stages of developing the curriculum. They're being given a vital role in making sense of the curriculum's purposes, as well as the mechanisms and processes that support this. It will be a question of first getting the curriculum right, then thinking about how accountability processes can be best developed. Judging schools by narrow measures of attainment will not be the order of the day.

The report launching a Curriculum for Wales was called Successful Futures. Hopefully this will turn out to be prescient.

Education Schools England Curriculum Northern Ireland Teachers Scotland Margaret Thatcher Wales michael gove Curriculum for Excellence