

‘There be dragons’: redrawing the curriculum map in Wales

The 2015 publication of *Successful Futures* marked a watershed moment in the history of education in Wales. The proposed new curriculum is a radical departure from recent top-down, teacher proof policy. It moves schools away from prescriptive content-led approaches to teaching, and affords teachers and schools considerable autonomy in developing a school-based curriculum to meet local needs.

The new Curriculum for Wales is typical, in many ways, of recent worldwide ‘new curriculum’ policy. It emphasises the centrality of the learner, and the importance of developing so-called 21st century skills, to equip young people to thrive in modern complex democratic societies and in the workplace. It recognises that subjects, the ubiquitous approach to segmenting the secondary curriculum, may not always be the best way of organising teaching to ensure that young people develop the knowledge required to thrive in the modern world.

Moreover, like other ‘new curricula’ in countries such as Scotland and New Zealand, the new curriculum is open to critique, and faces considerable challenges in its enactment in schools. These curricula have been attacked for downgrading knowledge, blurring the well-established boundaries between everyday knowledge and disciplinary knowledge. Critics have derided their alleged focus on fuzzy skills and child centred learning. They have often attracted the pejorative label ‘progressive’. Furthermore, curricula in Scotland and elsewhere have suffered implementation problems. Andreas Schleicher of the OECD stated in December 2016 that, while Scotland had developed a bold and visionary approach, it still needed to move from an intended to an implemented curriculum. Our research¹ suggests that a major issue lies in a gap between teachers’ prevalent practices and beliefs about education, and the implicit aims of the new curriculum.

Despite these anxieties, I believe that Wales is different. First, Wales is heeding the lessons from other countries, and has solicited the advice of researchers in some of the countries already developing this type of curriculum. Second, the Welsh curriculum developers have actively sought to put in place principles and processes that address some of the criticisms. The importance of knowledge has been foregrounded in the curriculum guidance. An explicit process of developing the curriculum from purposes of education – articulated in the Four Purposes and the ‘What matters?’ statements for each AoLE – has been set out clearly. The role of Pioneer Teachers will prove to be significant – as writers of the AoLE statements, and as facilitators of school-based curriculum development as the curriculum is translated into practice over the coming years. A major source of tension in many new curricula – the practice of defining the curriculum via thousands of learning outcomes – will not happen in Wales, where the *What Matters?* Framework is a far more constructive approach to developing practice in schools.

All of the above should not detract from the challenges faced as schools step into the uncharted terrain of the future. Nevertheless, a few principles should help guide this journey of exploration. First, the starting point for curriculum development is not the content (or subjects) to be taught, but instead should be the purposes of education set out in the curriculum. Sense-making – through extensive professional dialogue – is an essential part of this process; if teachers do not understand the new curriculum, then they will not develop practices that are fit-for-purpose. Knowledge and skills – powerful knowledge – need to be taught with these purposes in mind. Similarly, educational methods need to be fit-for-purpose. Powerful pedagogies are as important for developing

intellectual capacity as is powerful knowledge. The role of the Pioneer teachers and the regional consortia will be vital in developing the infrastructure to support curriculum development. And significantly, Wales will need to develop approaches to accountability and qualifications that serve rather than drive school's practices.

If the above issues are addressed – and I am confident that the will is there to address them – then the new Welsh curriculum may well herald successful futures. The new curriculum is different to what came before, and will require different approaches and working patterns. Because it offers greater local flexibility and autonomy, it will require active engagement by all teachers in Wales. Experience from Scotland suggests that those teachers and schools that engaged early in process, making sense of CfE and developing a vision for it, were the same schools and teachers that made the most of its potential. It is worth remembering the words of curriculum scholar Lawrence Stenhouse – that there can be no curriculum development without teacher developmentⁱⁱ. Both will be required to maximise the opportunities afforded by *Successful Futures*.

ⁱ Priestley, M. & Minty, S. (2013). Curriculum for Excellence: 'A brilliant idea, but. . .', *Scottish Educational Review*, 45 (1), pp. 39-52.

ⁱⁱ Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* (London, Heinemann).