Steps to the Future for 'Curriculum for Wales': Developing Coherence, Co-construction, and Praxis

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Natalie O'Neill

Introduction

Wales is in the process of major educational reform. The new curriculum (Curriculum for Wales, CfW) commenced in schools in September 2022. CfW differs from the previous curriculum through its focus on four purposes representing a "shared vision and aspiration" for every learner and by articulating learners' progression through six areas of learning and experience. In contrast to the previous performative culture in Wales (Evans, 2022), CfW suggests a more developmental view of learning. Also central to CfW is the principle of subsidiarity. Similar to 'new curriculum' in Finland, Scotland, and the Netherlands, CfW shifts away from top-down policy and gives schools and teachers greater autonomy (Sinnema et al., 2020). Professional understandings of progression in learning, and a recognition that learners start at different points and progress in different ways, are meant to form the basis for schools' curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy arrangements (Welsh Government, 2021).

In support of this, Camau i'r Dyfodol (Steps to the Future) is a three-year project designed to support the realisation of CfW by working with teachers and educational partners across the

system to advance practical understandings of learning progression. This presentation shares some findings from phase one of our project, which aimed to understand where educational partners are in the change process at the start of CfW and supports needed to move forward. We engaged in conversations with professionals from across the system to address the following research questions:

1. What influences are there on current and future curriculum realisation?

2. How are educational partners moving their identified priorities forward for curriculum realisation?

3. How can new knowledge from co-construction activity be fed back into the system in ways that are meaningful?

As a theoretical frame for this work, we bring together the concepts of curriculum coherence, co-construction, and praxis into an adapted Integrity Model of Educational Change for Wales. This model incorporates systemic integrity, personal and professional integrity, and educational integrity, three dimensions essential throughout the change process (Hayward & Spencer, 2010).

Systemic integrity reflects shared commitment and coherence between constituent parts of the education system. Within curriculum reform, coherence is sometimes conceptualised between the intended and enacted curriculum; or between curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy (Jin et al., 2019). Soini et al. (2022) explicate curriculum coherence in Finland along dimensions of the intended direction and goals of the curriculum, an integrative approach to teaching and learning, and alignment between objectives, content, and assessment. Next, personal and professional integrity reflects a belief that what one is doing matters, enabling teachers to develop their own understandings (Hayward & Spencer, 2010). Co-construction has been integral to achieve this in the context of CfW, and was empowering but also challenging for teachers engaged in curriculum design (Hayward et al., 2020). We define co-construction as a process of constructing new knowledge through collaborative practice (Parsons, 2021) and as a disposition towards learning that involves participants actively 'knotworking' together to negotiate solutions (Engeström, 2004, p.17). Finally, educational integrity reflects how change can enhance learning. We draw from the concept of praxis here, whereby teachers enact practice to build theory and reflect upon theory when making practical decisions. Pedagogical praxis can be a challenge in the new curriculum reform as a clear theory of progression in learning is needed to inform practice.

In this presentation, we share findings to the research questions and discuss how these inform phase two of our project. Wales has adopted a number of the OECD's (2018) principles for the future of education systems, and thus insights gained through this research will be of interest to other countries taking similar approaches.

Method

Two data-gathering activities were designed to involve participants from across the system in order to address the research questions. Ethics approval was granted by the researchers' Universities. The first activity involved the National Network Conversations (NNCs), system-wide conversations to support education professionals' reflections on implementing CfW. Fourteen online conversations were held during the May 2022 NNC, with a total of 167 participants. Each had a designated practitioner facilitator, with six groups attended by researchers who acted as participant-observers. Participants were given a pre-session

activity to reflect on curriculum documentation around assessment and progression. The conversations lasted for approximately two-and-a-half hours. Practitioner facilitators and project researchers took notes using a template to capture key points and these notes comprised the data set for this activity strand. Discussion focused on: - How the CfW principles of progression and CfW assessment principles are being used to support curriculum design and the planning of learning and assessment to support learner progression - What approaches to co-construction have been effective in developing practice in these areas - What support would be helpful to further develop professional understanding and build capacity in these areas In the second data-gathering activity during summer 2022, we invited participants from across the system to join focus groups, a method for generating people's collective perceptions and experiences (Nyumba et al., 2018). Participants were purposively selected to obtain views representing local and national contexts across Wales. The resulting nine groups included 22 participants. Three groups involved school staff and six involved education advisers from geographical regions across Wales and the education inspectorate. A researcher facilitated each discussion, which lasted up to 90 minutes, and these were recorded and transcribed. Discussions were semi-structured, with questions and prompts designed to understand: - Where partners are in their current thinking about progression in learning and their CfW priorities - Current understandings and approaches to co-construction - Influences from participants' contexts on their thinking and development work - What approaches or understandings need to be developed further through co-construction The data from each activity was analysed using an inductive approach to thematic analysis, which allows researchers to identify, organise and interpret patterns in data (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.79). Three researchers thematically analysed the NNC notes and two analysed the discussion transcripts. Comparisons showed a close match in the coding across researchers which provides evidence of a robust analytic process. The themes and sub-themes will be elaborated in the presentation.

Expected Outcomes

Curriculum reform involves the complex endeavor of translating policy to practice. Our findings suggest that schools in Wales are working tirelessly in planning curriculum and assessment arrangements to support progression in learning. Participants are drawing from a wide variety of approaches, models, and entry points into the curriculum to shape their practice. Multiple and sometimes disparate educational frameworks and discourses at supra/transnational levels impact national curriculum development (e.g., Hizli-Alkan, 2022; Nordin & Sundberg, 2021), which subsequently may cause some incongruity in praxis. While striving to move away from the performativity culture of the past (Evans, 2022), some are not yet confident in what alternatives may look like. The data gave a strong sense of teachers engaging in different forms of collaborations and placing learners at the heart of their new ways of working, but this work has challenges. These include progression during the transition from primary to secondary, concerns about potential washback effects of secondary exams, and uncertainty about what evidence on progression may be required. While responsibility for curriculum-making is becoming more bottom-up across Europe, some systems are still top-down in accountability (Alvunger et al., 2021). Reflecting this tension, some participants are engaging in substantial efforts to construct new understandings of progression but simultaneously wondering if their approach is 'right' according to external sources. These findings suggest three elements needed for changing with integrity: 1) coherence across the system, and 2) space for educational partners' co-construction, to 3) develop praxis around progression in learning. This research informs our next project phase, where we bring together teachers, educational partners, researchers,

and Welsh Government as a 'Co-Construction Group' to advance practical understandings of progression in learning. Essential to this is critical exploration of discourses across the system to support a more coherent understanding of progression in learning within CfW.

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