

A Systematic Approach to Curriculum Reform in Wales

PROFESSOR GRAHAM DONALDSON
University of Glasgow

ABSTRACT

The school curriculum in Wales, as in England and Northern Ireland but not Scotland, has been statutory since 1988. Successive adjustments over the succeeding twenty-six years have given rise to concerns about the relevance and workability of the framework such that, by 2014, it was clear to the Welsh Government that a fundamental review of curriculum and assessment arrangements was required. It therefore decided to establish an independent and fundamental review of curriculum and assessment arrangements led by the author of this article, Graham Donaldson. His report, *Successful Futures*, published in February 2015 and accepted in full by the Welsh Government, recommends a radically different direction for curriculum and assessment arrangements together with advice on a systemic approach to implementation. This article explores the rationale for the Donaldson proposals and outlines their key features. It also considers implementation issues against the proposed systemic approach recommended by the review.

Key words: Donaldson review, curriculum, reform, Wales

Background

Prior to 1988, the curriculum in Welsh schools (and those in the rest of the United Kingdom) was determined largely by schools themselves, influenced in some cases by the local authority and, in secondary schools, also

by the requirements of the national examination system. National government could provide broad direction and advice but did not determine the precise nature of what should be taught. Increasingly, this high degree of freedom was perceived, not necessarily accurately (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992), to have led to ideological experimentation and to wide and unacceptable variations in the curriculum in schools across the country, culminating in a groundbreaking speech on the need to make education more relevant by the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan (Callaghan, 1976). Over the next decade, the political debate moved towards increasing government interest in the nature of school education, reflecting concerns about school autonomy and about the relationship between education and economic performance (Wyse et al., 2008). In 1988, the government in Westminster¹ took the radical step of introducing a nationally specified curriculum as part of a wider set of reforms associated with the 1988 Education Reform Act.

The 1988 National Curriculum (HMSO, 1988) established an entitlement for all children to experience a curriculum consisting of specified subjects together with defined programmes of study in each subject. Children were to be assessed against five level descriptors, and national tests at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 were introduced to allow a more rigorous evaluation of outcomes. These requirements were defined in statute and were intended to create a common entitlement across Wales and to provide a more predictable basis for resource development and inter-school comparison.

Over time, notably following devolution of education to the Welsh Assembly in 1999, the original framework was subject to a series of revisions in order to meet changing requirements, fresh aspirations and growing concerns about standards in literacy and numeracy. In particular, the review highlights the significant social, economic and technological changes that have taken place in Wales since 1988, noting that the original national curriculum was conceived in a world that pre-dated the World Wide Web. Most recently, the Government commissioned a number of 'Task and Finish' reviews on specific aspects of the curriculum in response to growing pressure for reform. These reviews covered the place of arts and culture, physical activity and sport, ICT and computing, and Welsh language and culture in the secondary curriculum. Perhaps unsurprisingly, each of these reviews made recommendations that stressed the central importance of their area of focus, and that in turn created further pressure on an already extensive and complicated national curriculum.

Devolution had given rise to an increasing focus on the extent to which Welsh education should be distinct from that in England. The place of Welsh language and culture was a particular concern, but there were also wider issues about how far arrangements developed for a country the size of England should automatically apply in Wales, with its own distinctive culture and characteristics. In recognition of these issues, a review of qualifications (Evans, 2014) had made important recommendations about how qualifications at the age of sixteen might be made both more relevant to the needs of all learners and more distinctly Welsh, including improvements to the already distinct Welsh Baccalaureate.

Concerns about the relative performance of Welsh pupils in international surveys such as PISA were also fuelling calls for action on educational standards more generally. Wales's performance in PISA had fallen in successive surveys, culminating in an invitation from the Welsh Government to the OECD to undertake a country review in 2014. The report of that review (OECD, 2014a) identified important strengths in Welsh school education, but also confirmed concerns about the performance of the system and made a series of policy recommendations that included the need for a clearer national vision for school education in Wales.

The Welsh Government responded to this concatenation of pressures by initiating separate reviews into systems of improvement and accountability, teacher training and curriculum and assessment arrangements.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review

The independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales was led by Graham Donaldson, the author of this article. The remit of the review was wide-ranging and fundamental. It covered the 3–16 age-range and gave the review the licence to be radical in its thinking. In essence, it was asked to 'take a fundamental look at the ways in which today's schools can prepare young people for an exciting but uncertain future' (Donaldson, 2015).

The methodology adopted by the review, as well as drawing on evidence from research and from international practice, sought to secure broad engagement in its work from individuals and organisations across Wales. The review lasted from March to December 2014 and the report, *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015), published in both English and Welsh, was launched in February 2015. The eight chapters of the report describe

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the approach taken to meeting the remit, analyse the evidence and draw out main themes, clarify the review's approach to curriculum design in terms of ten design principles, propose four broad purposes for the curriculum, detail proposals on a new structure, outline principles for pedagogy and assessment, draw out implications for implementation, and list conclusions and sixty-eight recommendations.

Publication of the report was followed by a period of national consideration of its proposals that was described by the Welsh Minister of Education, Huw Lewis, as a 'Great Debate'. Following this period of deliberation, the Minister announced on 30 June that the response to the report from across Wales had been very positive and that he accepted it in full. He said, 'I was heartened by how the people of Wales engaged with the Great Debate ... after consulting with them, I am accepting Professor Donaldson's recommendations in full' (Lewis, 2015). He also indicated that he would publish a framework for the implementation of the new curriculum in autumn 2015 and that implementation of the report on teacher training and education by Professor John Furlong (Furlong, 2015) and the outworking of the Welsh Government's New Deal for the Education Workforce would also fall within the remit of the implementation framework. An Independent Advisory Group (IAG), to be chaired by Graham Donaldson and including Professor John Furlong in its membership, would offer guidance and support throughout the period of implementation.

The report's main themes

Successful Futures proposes a number of radical changes in philosophy, structure and practice to curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales. It follows a line of argument that begins with a critique of current arrangements and an analysis of trends in thinking internationally about the curriculum. The review's definition of the curriculum, 'The school curriculum in Wales should be defined as including all of the learning experiences and assessment activities planned in pursuit of agreed purposes of education' (Donaldson, 2015: 6), sends important signals about its approach. In particular, the definition is broad in its scope, identifies the importance of being clear about the purposes that any curriculum structure should serve and includes assessment as being integral to the curriculum.

The evidence gathered by the review included extensive engagement with schools, teachers, young people, parents, and major Welsh

organisations and individuals. It also initiated a formal call for evidence, the results of which were collated and analysed by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISERD, 2014). The review also drew on emerging trends internationally where, for example, a review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in high-performing countries commissioned by the Welsh Government had concluded that, ‘there is a common general aim to develop in ... learners the necessary attitudes, values, skills and knowledge they need in order to achieve success and fulfilment as engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit’ (NFER and ARAD, 2013). Notably, the review drew on experience in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where earlier curriculum reviews had taken those countries in broadly similar directions.

The review recommends that four curriculum purposes should drive decisions about structure, pedagogy and assessment. The proposed purposes were described in the report as follows:

The purposes of the curriculum in Wales should be that children and young people develop as:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilled lives as valued members of society

Donaldson (2014: 29)

The purposes are presented in a form that is intended to provide clarity and transparency and thus help to provide a direct reference point for decisions about ongoing practice. In particular, the report sees such an approach as helping to provide a continuing focus on what matters in school education and inhibiting the kind of reductionism whereby short-term pressures reduce stated intentions to a much narrower set of experiences for young people.

The report then goes on to look at the implications for the structure of the curriculum in terms of its four defined purposes. Its analysis of current arrangements leads to the stark conclusion that the curriculum ‘has become overloaded, complicated and, in parts, outdated. Assessment arrangements are not making the contribution they should to improving learning. The ability of schools and teachers to respond to changing needs is constrained ... The case for fundamental change is powerful’ (Donaldson, 2014: 11).

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The report stresses the need to match structure to purpose and to establish an entitlement for all children and young people to receive a high-quality, broad and appropriately balanced education that is coherent, promotes progression in learning, encourages depth and challenge, and is engaging and stimulating. Curriculum structures should be simple and straightforward and should be explained in ways that command the confidence of parents and carers as well as teachers.

The proposed structure describes the curriculum in relation to six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) rather than discrete subjects:

- Expressive Arts
- Health and Wellbeing
- Humanities
- Language, Literacy and Communication
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- Science and Technology

Each AoLE should make a distinct contribution to developing the four purposes of the curriculum, be internally coherent, employ distinctive ways of thinking and have an identifiable disciplinary and instrumental core. The intention is to encourage more connections in learning and to avoid the direct translation of subjects into a timetable. Subjects remain important, but the report avers that they should serve, and not define, the curriculum.

The report stresses the need to promote sustained attention to literacy and numeracy, but also includes digital competence as fundamental to learning across the curriculum. It therefore recommends that, in addition to the AoLEs, there should be three cross-curriculum responsibilities: literacy, numeracy and digital competence.

Hattie argues that the way to achieve high standards and high achievement is through a narrative 'focused on progress' (Hattie, 2015: 5). The report proposes such a narrative, recommending that depth and progression in learning should be promoted by moving away from the structure of key stages established in 1988 to a series of progression steps within each AoLE. The report argues that, over time, the key-stage approach had created undesirably distinct transition points, placing an apparent ceiling on learning and inhibiting progression. The proposed progression steps in the report should form a continuum of learning for all young people that relates to the four curriculum purposes. The progression steps should be

defined in terms of achievement outcomes with ‘I have ...’ and ‘I can ...’ stems, allowing the personal achievements and experiences of the learner to be included as evidence of progression in relation to those purposes.

The report also makes a number of recommendations about Welsh language and culture. In particular, it recommends treating Welsh as a functional language with a much stronger focus on its transactional nature in the life of the school and the classroom. It proposes that the contribution of Welsh-medium schools should be enhanced by developing them as hubs for language learning across wider communities of schools.

The importance of pedagogy and the need for high-quality teaching and learning is a very strong theme throughout the report. Chapter 5 is devoted to pedagogy but explicitly avoids providing a detailed prescription of recommended practice. It clearly states that, ‘There is a risk that changes to curriculum structures can be interpreted as implying particular pedagogical approaches ... the recommendations of this review do not imply an emphasis on any particular teaching approaches’ (Donaldson, 2014: 63). Instead it outlines twelve principles that it suggests should be applied when taking decisions about desirable teaching and learning approaches. Each of the principles begins with the stem, ‘Good teaching and learning ...’ and together they attempt to provide a frame of reference for decisions about classroom practice.

The nineteen assessment recommendations focus on simplifying procedures and reasserting the vital role of assessment in supporting learning. They emphasise the need to assess what matters in relation to the four purposes of the curriculum and the revised structure. The report recognises that a wider than normal range of assessment techniques will be necessary and that the implications for teachers’ expertise need to be taken fully into account.

The need for clarity in the uses to be made of the results of assessment is a strong theme, with many cautions about the perverse effects that can arise if this is not thought through clearly in advance. In particular, the report stresses the need to ensure that the requirements of accountability do not compromise the integral role of assessment in learning. The report therefore echoes an earlier call by the OECD for the Welsh Government to establish an assessment and evaluation framework that will provide clear guidance on the various intertwined relationships between assessment for learning and for evaluation and accountability (OECD, 2014b).

Chapter 7 of the report considers in some detail the implications of the recommendations for implementation. The main threads in this set of

fifteen recommendations relate to inclusiveness, pace, subsidiarity, capacity and accountability. It calls for an 'agile change strategy that establishes understanding and support, sets a measured pace, builds capacity and manages dependencies, particularly accountability arrangements' (Donaldson, 2014: 94). It goes on to consider the implications of each these elements in turn.

The report highlights the complexity of educational reform and its relative lack of success hitherto in translating policy intention into classroom reality (Fullan, 2011; Kerr and West, 2010; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). John Hattie, in his meta-analysis of educational research, sums up the issue as follows: 'We have in education a long history of innovation but it rarely touches but a chosen few' (Hattie, 2009: 254). *Successful Futures* suggests that change strategies are highly culture and context specific and that there is a need to learn the lessons from past attempts at reform. In essence, it calls for a systems approach that focuses directly on learning and teaching and is clear about the need to identify and manage interdependencies.

The report recommends that implementation should reflect the inclusive approach adopted by the review. It suggests that the principle of subsidiarity should apply to the process of curriculum development and renewal, and that the freedom of schools and teachers to develop approaches that meet the needs of their pupils should be constrained only where necessary. Thus, central guidance should largely be general in nature and legislation used sparingly. The strategy for implementation should also engage schools directly in shaping the guidance and in exploring creative ways of taking the recommendations forward. While the leadership role of central government remains essential, there should be explicit encouragement of 'local ownership and responsibility within a clear national framework of expectation and support' (Donaldson, 2014: 99).

The report recognises that greater freedom and responsibility for schools 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. It cites the recommendations of a report by Professor John Furlong on teacher training and education (Furlong, 2015) and the Welsh Government's 'New Deal for the Education Workforce' as vital elements in building that capacity.

The report stresses the importance of strong accountability in all areas of the public service and sees the need for strengthened and enhanced arrangements to help embed its recommendations and drive improvement.

However, it cautions against the distorting effects that can be created by high-stakes external evaluation and reporting, and states that, ‘Accountability systems can be the Achilles heel of curriculum reform’ (Donaldson, 2014: 112). It echoes an OECD report on Welsh school education (OECD, 2014a) by signalling the importance of focusing accountability on improvement. It sees the work of the school inspectorate, Estyn, as being particularly important in helping to embed the purposes of the curriculum in the day-to-day work of schools. It also recommends the introduction of annual cohort testing on a sampling basis as the means of evaluating improvement at the national level, allowing the Welsh Government to stop gathering information about young people’s performance on a school-by-school basis.

Implications

Successful Futures represents a radical change of philosophy and direction for curriculum and assessment policy and practice in Wales. Translating the review’s vision and related broad ideas into a functioning set of curriculum and assessment arrangements that will in turn bring about ‘better learning and higher standards’ (Lewis, 2015) for young people across Wales will inevitably pose many complex challenges. While it has received a broad initial welcome, issues associated with, for example, the apparently less prominent role of subjects, the move away from key stages or the place of religious education are likely to become more prominent following detailed consideration of its implications.

Biesta and Priestley (2013) describe two broad tendencies in curriculum design. On the one hand there is a focus on what young people should ‘learn *from* education’, while on the other the focus is on what they should ‘become *through* education’ (Biesta and Priestley 2013: 40). Arguably, the 1988 National Curriculum, with its delineation of subjects and the acquisition of knowledge together with a stronger focus on testing outcomes, was firmly based on the former approach. *Successful Futures* stresses the need to be very clear about the purposes of school education and defines those purposes in terms of broad characteristics and competencies. While it proposes that schools should seek to shape young people as rounded individuals during their time at school, the acquisition of knowledge and skills remains as a central feature of the review’s proposed purposes. The need to ensure that the full implications of this significant philosophical shift are

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understood and accepted by all stakeholder groups will need to be fully accommodated within the overall change strategy.

There are also a number of technical aspects of the proposals that will require detailed study and creative solutions. Time will have to be allowed and expertise will need to be applied to issues such as determining the nature and scope of the areas of learning and experience, developing the proposed digital competence framework, and thinking through the new approach to progression with the creation of progression steps and achievement outcomes.

Assessment will also pose major challenges to development as the focus on its role in progression in learning is strengthened, new approaches and techniques relevant to the four curriculum purposes are developed and the nature and role of testing is revisited. Critical relationships to accountability will need to be teased out and potential perverse effects identified and resolved.

While many of these matters may be regarded as largely technical in nature, the ways in which they are addressed will have profound implications for the ultimate success of the reform process. They are by nature complex, but the solutions should not be over-complicated if they are to allow schools to focus on the quality of learning rather than the intricacies of over-elaborate planning.

The development process will also raise many issues relating to the willingness and capacity of the system to respond. Success will in large measure depend on the extent to which teachers and other educational practitioners, school leaders, local and national officials and inspectors feel committed to and confident in their own understanding of the new approach and in their ability to translate an ambitious philosophy into high-quality learning and teaching. The Welsh Government's proposed implementation strategy will involve 'active participation of the profession with the detailed development of the new curriculum' (Lewis, 2015). Such an approach has the potential to harness creativity and test ideas in ways that develop deep understanding of the implications of the change of direction and build a sense of common ownership across the education system. It will require clear communication and careful management of the overall environment if the potential benefits are to be fully realised.

The underlying philosophy of the report requires strengthened teacher agency supported by changes in the system and school environments in order to establish the context for such agency to be effective (Priestley et al., 2015). It also sees the need to develop the kind of professional capital

described by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) that goes beyond the training of teachers as individuals who are able to implement externally determined changes to the strengthening of teachers' collective ability to engage with shaping the nature of change in their own context. Donaldson's earlier review of teacher education in Scotland (Donaldson, 2011; 2014) sought to relate the development of individual and collective teacher capacity directly to the realisation of the putative benefits of the Scottish curriculum reform programme. The Furlong report (Furlong, 2015) on Welsh teacher training and education takes a similar approach and has the potential to build the capacity of the teaching force in the longer term. Similarly, the Welsh Government's 'New Deal for the Education Workforce' is also very much in keeping with the broad philosophy of the review, as it signals the government's intention to work in partnership with practitioners and to create the conditions for necessary professional development. The Minister's commitment to engage teachers directly in the development will be a potentially important means of creating a cadre of schools and individuals with the insight and expertise to support their colleagues as the impact of the reform becomes more widespread.

Evaluation and accountability systems need to be finely attuned to the developmental process. If approaches geared to previous policy and practice remain, or are perceived to remain, in force, schools may be reluctant to risk an apparent disconnect between their new practices and the criteria being employed by evaluation. Similarly, if evaluation systems move too quickly to reflect the new environment, they may be perceived to be pressing too strongly for quick implementation. Fine judgement and clear communication will be required if either of these two possibilities are not to become reality.

The role of the national school inspectorate, Estyn, will be of great significance. Inspection has been an important dimension in the accountability system in Wales and the inspection framework will have to take full account of the process of development. Indeed, the expertise embodied in Estyn is arguably the most powerful concentration of professional resource in the country. Using that resource to best effect will be one of the key determinants of the success of the reforms. Michael Fullan refers to a likely dip in the early stages of innovation as the system adjusts to a new approach but has not yet fully come to terms with its implications for effective practice. He suggests that,

the implementation dip is literally a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings. All

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innovations worth their salt call upon people to question and in some respects to change their behaviour and their beliefs – even in cases where innovations are pursued voluntarily ... People feel anxious, fearful, confused, over-whelmed, deskilled, cautious, and – if they have moral purpose – deeply disturbed. (Fullan, 2001: 40)

There are likely to be a number of such vulnerable points for developments in Wales. While the report has received very broad support in principle, inevitable shorter-term pressures will have to be reconciled with the putative longer-term gains of the reform. The extended period of development and implementation will therefore require sustained and focused leadership if apparent difficulties and setbacks are not to lead to a loss of confidence in the reform process as a whole.

There is also the risk that inevitable pressures will lead to incremental additions to the curriculum that will revisit the negative experience of earlier reforms. Necessary flexibility and adaptability in taking forward the original concept will have to take into account inevitable calls for the issue of the moment to be made an integral part of the new curriculum.

The broad endorsement of the proposals, coupled with strong initial enthusiasm from a wide number of stakeholders, provide a solid platform upon which to build. However, it will be important to sustain that consensus and enthusiasm over the extended period of development that the report recommends and the Minister has endorsed. It may also be necessary to hold some of that enthusiasm in check if the desire to make things happen is not to run ahead of the period of consideration and reflection needed for everyone involved to come to terms with the nature and implications of the review's proposals.

Conclusion

Wales has embarked on a very radical reform of its curriculum and assessment arrangements. Ultimate success will be strongly influenced not just by the quality of the development of the ideas in the report into workable curriculum and assessment arrangements, but also by fresh approaches to leadership, evaluation and accountability. Building on experience in other countries, Wales has recognised that the greatest likelihood of success lies in working systemically, addressing necessary interrelationships and dependencies. The extended period of development, the significant change in culture and the not inconsiderable professional implications of *Successful*

Futures will have major consequences for leadership at all levels in the system. Inevitable pressures, political and professional, will present real challenges for ongoing decision-making. Such leadership will need to maintain a clear focus on the vision of what is to be achieved, communicate that vision regularly and in a compelling form, build the confidence and capacity of staff, and be nimble in adjusting to evidence about what is and is not working well.

Successful Futures and the approach to implementation announced by the Minister attempt to cover the complex range of interdependencies. The ultimate test of success will be that the children and young people of Wales experience a rich educational experience that will lead to the better learning and higher standards that the Minister has called for.

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Note

- ¹ Devolved responsibility for education was not introduced until 1999 and legislation in the Westminster Parliament applied to Wales as well as England.