Where is the 'New'? Teachers' perceptions of the opportunities and challenges for the Expressive Arts AoLE in the Curriculum for Wales (2022)

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ABSTRACT

The Curriculum for Wales officially began its national roll-out in September 2022 after a five-year period of consultation and co-construction. A philosophy of pedagogic flexibility and subsidiarity underpins this ambitious educational reform, giving teachers agency to design a curriculum appropriate to their school context. This paper draws on a dataset gathered between October 2021 and May 2022, utilising online questionnaires (n=62) and semi-structured interviews (n=4), to explore how Expressive Arts teachers perceived the opportunities and challenges presented by the new curriculum prior to its launch. Emergent themes relate to freedom and flexibility of design; cross-curricular learning and collaboration; resistance to change; teacher efficacy and confidence; training and government steer; and time and resource allocation. The data reveal anxieties about curriculum planning and design, with teachers feeling uncertain about where to begin. The perceived tensions between expectations and realities prompted scepticism about the implementation of change versus simply 'relabelling' old practices.

Introduction

The new Curriculum for Wales (CfW) (2022a) officially began its national roll-out in September 2022 after a five-year period of consultation and co-construction, with Welsh Government (2019) positioning it as representing significant 'change'. This ambitious educational reform is underpinned by a philosophy of pedagogic flexibility and subsidiarity, with teachers having agency to design a curriculum appropriate to the context of their school (Welsh Government, 2020). Whilst the CfW offers an opportunity to rethink, reimagine and disrupt the current educational paradigm (Boulton-Funke et al., 2016), its underpinning philosophy prompts questions regarding the extent to which government discourse about and teachers' perceptions of the 'new' curriculum align. The potential for significant variation in the comprehension of policy documents and the ways in which these may be translated into practice is highlighted in an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, entitled 'Achieving the New Curriculum for Wales' (2020). The report suggests that this could result in inertia of practice and may even exacerbate inequalities for learners (cf. Evans, 2023).

Using the tenets of pedagogic flexibility and subsidiarity as a starting point, this article seeks to address a current gap in understanding relating to the perceptions of those who are expected to shape the structure and delivery of the new curriculum in Wales. It aims to explore some of the ways in which Expressive Arts teachers talk about the opportunities and challenges presented by the new curriculum. Little research has so far been conducted on teachers' attitudes about the reforms, especially in subject areas such as the Expressive Arts which are traditionally not regarded as key performance measures for schools, so this article treads new paths towards an appreciation of practitioner perspectives within the compulsory education system in Wales.

A brief account of educational reform in Wales is sketched, before considering how two key features of the curriculum – co-construction and subsidiarity – are framed by Welsh Government. The main characteristics of the Expressive Arts

Area of Learning & Experience (AoLE) are outlined, with some reflections on potential issues of equitability in the design and delivery of meaningful learning experiences for pupils. Original data from a two-stage data-gathering process is then presented, offering unique insights into teachers' perceptions of the new curriculum prior to its launch in September 2022. Finally, some tentative conclusions are drawn, indicating what needs to be done to support teachers through a significant transition-point in their professional practice.

Context: Education Reform in Wales

Historically, processes of education governance and policy-making were similar in Wales and England; the systems in both countries developed substantively in parallel from the first major education act in 1870 onwards. However, since devolution in 1999, responsibility for education policy sits with Welsh Government. Over time, this has resulted in the emergence of different educational agendas in the two countries. The CfW (2022a) arguably represents the most significant policy-shift since devolution, distinguishing the Welsh education system from its English counterpart.

Despite the increasing distinctiveness of the systems in Wales and England, there remains a UK-level political preoccupation with educational attainment and measures of quality. In 2009, for example, when the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) returned poor results for Wales (where education has been under the control of a Labour government since devolution), English ministers in Westminster were quick to disparage the devolved system in a politically-fuelled attack (Power, 2016). Yet, as Power (2016: 10) notes, the significant complexities surrounding the 'layered' governance of a devolved Wales, involving the navigation of local- and national-level issues in the broader context of Westminster legislative controls and funding constraints, make direct comparisons with the other British nations difficult, especially when trying to make sense of data about educational achievement.

Reflecting its use as a political tool in education governance (Grek, 2009), the PISA (2009) data for Wales prompted the then Education Minister, Leighton Andrews, to launch a programme of combative reforms through a series of school improvement measures focusing on increased accountability (Andrews, 2011/2014).

This included the reintroduction of national testing for numeracy and literacy for all learners from Years 2 to 9, and a traffic-light system[1] to rate school performance (Connolly et al., 2018). Welsh Government also underwent some structural reorganisation, with the establishment of a School Standards and Delivery Unit in which four regional consortia were tasked with school improvement and raising standards within their region[2] (ibid., 2018). What followed was a further narrowing of an increasingly prescriptive curriculum and, driven by assessment and data, limited opportunities for teachers to adapt learning to the needs of the pupils within the context of their schools (Donaldson, 2015).

Following another poor PISA outcome in 2012 and with a change in Education Minister in 2013[3], Welsh Government commissioned a review of the school system in Wales. The report, entitled 'Improving Schools in Wales – An OECD Perspective' (2014), identified strengths and challenges, with a focus on supporting equity and quality in the education system. The report also made a number of recommendations about raising the status of the profession through professional development, initial teacher education, and collaboration, to build the infrastructure to enable schools to implement the changes needed, and develop a coherent assessment and evaluation framework (ibid.).

This formed the catalyst for more extensive curriculum reform, leading to the launch of Welsh Government's five-year education improvement plan, 'Qualified for Life: An Education Improvement Plan for 3 to 19 Year Olds in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2014), as well as a series of independent reviews into various aspects of Welsh education (Donaldson, 2015; Furlong, 2015; Smith, 2013). Graham

1 This was dissolved ahead of the launch of the new Curriculum for Wales in September 2022 and, at the time of writing, has not been replaced.
2 Four regional consortia: GwE, covering the North Wales region; ERW, covering Mid and South West Wales; EAS, covering South East Wales; and CSC, covering the Central South region. In 2020, Neath Port Talbot withdrew from ERW, with Ceredigion and Powys following suit. As a result, *Partneriaeth* (transl: 'Partnership') was set-up by the three remaining local authorities from the original ERW consortium (Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Swansea). Ceredigion and Powys created an informal partnership of their own, whilst Neath Port Talbot is currently not working alongside any local authority or consortium (Estyn, 2022).
3 Leighton Andrews stepped down in 2013, and Huw Lewis subsequently held the post of Education Minister from 2013–16.

Donaldson, former Chief Education Advisor to the Scottish Government[4], was commissioned to review the system in Wales. His seminal report, 'Successful Futures' (2015), established the long-term vision for the future of the system. Huw Lewis, the then Education Minister for Wales, accepted all of Donaldson's recommendations for curriculum and assessment frameworks, which were set out in Welsh Government's (2015b) response, 'Curriculum for Wales – A Curriculum for Life'.

This document outlined the fundamental principles that would shape the process of educational reform and underpin a purpose-driven curriculum. Emphasis was placed on ambition and inclusivity, co-construction and subsidiarity, manageability, and unification, with each of these elements being evidence-led (Welsh Government, 2015b). A National Mission was published two years later (Welsh Government, 2017), which further detailed the breadth of the ambitious and complex curriculum reform agenda. This included establishing schools as learning organisations (cf. OECD 2016), and raising the status and quality of the profession by, amongst other things, reviewing the professional standards and building capacity through professional learning.

Developing the new Curriculum for Wales: Co-construction and Subsidiarity

Co-construction and subsidiarity emerged as two key philosophical underpinnings of the new curriculum. A pioneer model was adopted to promote curriculum co-construction (Welsh Government, 2015a). Participating schools were selected by Welsh Government based on their previous contributions to curriculum development and evidence of innovative practice (Kneen et al., 2023). Over 200 schools were engaged in The Pioneer School Network, collaborating with Welsh Government[5], the regional consortia, Estyn[6], local authorities, and other key

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4   Donaldson has significant impact on the process of Scottish curriculum reform as a result of his report, 'Teaching Scotland's Future' (2011).

5   From 2016–21, Kirsty Williams was at the forefront of the curriculum reform processes, as Education Minister.

6   The schools' inspectorate for Wales.

experts and government officials. Together, they constructed the frameworks for curriculum and assessment, a Digital Competence Framework, and a National Approach to Professional Learning (OECD, 2020). However, Duggan et al. (2017) suggest that a number of pioneer schools lacked clarity about their roles and responsibilities within these processes. Further, a lack of strategic direction, clear timeframes, and awareness of available professional learning activities arguably contributed to the participants' varied experiences (Arad Research & ICF Consulting, 2018; Duggan et al., 2017).

In addition to co-construction, subsidiarity within the CfW framework was intended to give schools and teachers the agency to design a curriculum suited to the needs of the learners within a local context. However, whilst dynamic in principle, a less prescriptive curriculum that focuses on meaningful, experiential learning for all pupils can result in varied perceptions and interpretations (Welsh Government, 2020). The OECD (2020) note that relative freedom can impact on curriculum implementation, whilst generating different interpretations and even contradictions. Such freedom also provokes levels of anxiety for teachers in terms of planning and decision-making processes, and may ultimately result in disparate provision (Evans, 2023; Wavehill, 2019a).

The Expressive Arts AoLE: Continuity and Equity?

The Expressive Arts is one of six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE)[7] within the Curriculum for Wales (2022a), and comprises 'broad and balanced opportunities for art, dance, drama, film and digital media, and music' (Welsh Government, 2020). As a starting point, it is useful to locate this new provision in the context of what was previously in place, to ascertain the extent of curriculum reform in this area.

Its predecessor, the Art and Design National Curriculum (Welsh Government, 2008), was organised around three key principles for learners, as follows:

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7 The other AoLE are: Humanities; Health & Well-being; Science & Technology; Mathematics & Numeracy; Language, Literacy & Communication.

1. *Understanding*: Exploring the work of other people, places and times, and considering the intention of the work.
2. *Investigating*: Emphasising the visual organisation and generation of ideas and response to stimuli.
3. *Making*: Opportunities to explore, experiment, design, make and experience a wide range of materials, techniques, processes and contexts.

The framework for the new Expressive Arts curriculum adopts what is arguably a similar approach, referring to three What Matters Statements around which the AoLE is structured (Welsh Government, 2020), as follows:

1. *Responding and reflecting* (as artist and audience): Emphasising the importance of developing resilience and deepening an understanding of 'how and why creative work is developed and produced' (ibid.).
2. *Exploring*: Developing an understanding of the world in which we live, and exploring how the arts communicate, how ideas and feelings are communicated, and how techniques can be selected and manipulated to realise intentions.
3. *Creating*: Emphasising the application of knowledge and skills, where 'Creating combines skills and knowledge, drawing on the senses, inspiration and imagination' (ibid.).

The above What Matters Statements are underpinned by a Progression Step framework[8] which lists criteria in the form of 'I can…' statements (Welsh Government, 2020). These could be interpreted as an attainment checklist organised in a linear structure. However, since creative processes are integral to the five disciplines within the Expressive Arts AoLE (Welsh Government, 2020), paradoxical tensions emerge. An authentic, rhizomatic and iterative creative process, fundamental to arts education, (Atkinson, 2012; Biesta & Cole, 2018; Craft et al., 2014; Sawyer, 2021), is arguably at odds with the linear Progression Step framework. As such, measures of attainment could potentially be misinterpreted and poorly applied (Wavehill, 2019a), reducing the process of curriculum design to a tick-box exercise and increasing the risk of divergent practices and inequitable learning experiences for pupils (Power, Newton & Taylor, 2020). Simultaneously,

8 The progression steps operate along a 'continuum of learning' (from ages 3–16).

the overlap within and between each of the strands creates consistency and sets parameters, echoed in the synonymous nomenclature across the 'old' and 'new' curriculum structures (understanding/responding; investigating/exploring; making/creating).

The shift to a curriculum underpinned by four key purposes theoretically creates a shared national vision. It places emphasis on curriculum design that is appropriate to the specific context of a school and its learners, requiring teachers to explicitly consider not only *what* they teach but also *how* and *why* this matters within the purpose of a specific AoLE and the CfW more broadly (Biesta and Cole, 2018; Welsh Government, 2020). An interest in better understanding teachers' perceptions of their subject-areas, at a point of transition from 'old' to 'new' curriculum, prompted this current investigation.

The study

In light of the curriculum reform timeline sketched above and the varying degrees to which schools/teachers contributed to (or were disenfranchised from) the process of co-construction, our study aimed to capture the experiences and attitudes of Expressive Arts teachers across Wales. This paper draws on a dataset gathered between October 2021 and May 2022, utilising online surveys and semi-structured interviews, to explore how teachers of the Expressive Arts AoLE perceived the opportunities and challenges presented by the Curriculum for Wales (2022a) prior to its Wales-wide launch.

Methods and Sample

The study adopted a mixed-method approach (Sammons and Davis, 2017) in order to generate a 'synergy' (Teddlie and Sammons, 2010: 116) between different types of data and thus an enriched understanding of teachers' attitudes and perceptions. The data-gathering process was designed in two stages to generate comparable and interconnected datasets. Stage One involved the design and launch of a bilingual online quali-quant survey to create an initial snap-shot of teachers' attitudes and perceptions. This was followed by Stage Two semi-structured one-to-one

interviews (in the interviewees' preferred language), to facilitate a more in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences.

The survey comprised a total of twenty-four questions, including closed yes/no questions (n=4), option-lists with single or multiple-choice responses (n=6), Likert five-point attitude scales (n=6), and open-ended text boxes (n=8). The combination of different question-types resulted in a rich dataset of quantifiable information and a level of qualitative nuance. After piloting, distribution was managed through a range of online platforms and contacts. Initially, the survey was soft-launched on social media in October 2021. This was then followed by broader distribution through various Wales-wide education consortia, working groups, and organisations that were connected with education in Wales generally and/or the Expressive Arts specifically, to maximise the potential for capturing a good range of teachers from across the country.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in March/April 2022. Following an initial process of survey-data familiarisation (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 6), a set of tentative themes were identified to create a meaningful framework for conversation. This early-stage process enabled the project team to establish a level of data-coding reliability. Initial themes relating to 'continuity and change', 'plans to deliver content/provision', 'planning and design processes', and 'authentic learning opportunities' were used to devise a number of questions to facilitate further exploration. The interviews were conducted online, using MS Teams, and the conversations were transcribed to capture a detailed record.

The survey garnered a total of 62 responses (Table 1), and captured a good distribution of teachers across the Key Stages (KS) (Table 2). The highest concentration of responses (n=26) was from KS2 teachers, which may reflect the relative prominence of the Expressive Arts within the primary school curriculum. Also, since primary schools (n=1,219) outnumber secondary schools (n=182) (Welsh Government, 2021a: 5), more teachers work within the primary sector. Further, all regional areas of Wales were represented in the responses (Table 3). The south east region generated the most responses, mirroring population concentration and, by association, the highest number of schools per Local Education Authority (LEA) area. More broadly, Wales-wide distribution of the survey meant that both urban and rural LEA-contexts were included. The language in which the participants chose to complete the survey (Table 4) reflects the traditional geographical distribution of Welsh and English within and across Wales

(cf. Welsh Government, 2021b). Overall, the researchers were satisfied that the scope and scale of the survey's demographic profile was satisfactorily representative of Expressive Arts teaching in schools in Wales.

Table 1: Summary of Sample – Stages One and Two

STAGE ONE: Online survey		
Combined sample	English-medium responses	52
	Welsh-medium responses	10
	TOTAL	62
STAGE TWO: Semi-structured interviews		
Primary Sector	English-medium responses	0
	Welsh-medium responses	1
Secondary Sector	English-medium responses	3
	Welsh-medium responses	0
	TOTAL	4

Table 2: Summary of survey respondents by level

Level	N=E/m	N=W/m	TOTAL N=
Foundation Phase	7	2	9
KS2	21	5	26
KS3	11	3	14
KS4	13	0	13

Table 3: Summary of survey respondents by region

Region	N=E/m	N=W/m	TOTAL N=
North West	3	4	7
North East	6	0	6
Mid Wales	8	3	11
South West	5	2	7
South East	29	1	30

Table 4: Summary of survey responses by school-type

School-type	N=E/m	N=W/m	TOTAL N=
Welsh-medium	5	6	11
Bilingual	6	3	9
English-medium	41	1	42

The semi-structured interviews were more challenging to arrange, given the disruption caused by the pandemic. A total of four interviews were conducted (online): One urban primary school teacher on partial secondment as strategic lead for Expressive Arts in a schools cluster; one Head of Expressive Arts in a rural secondary school; one Media and English teacher in an urban secondary school; and one Curriculum Leader for Art and Design in an urban secondary school. The participants had either contributed to the survey and indicated a willingness to be interviewed or were known to members of the research team. In terms of sampling, a slight emphasis was placed on interviewing secondary school teachers because the survey data suggested that those working in the sector held particular concerns about the roll-out of the new curriculum which warranted further investigation.

The qualitative data were analysed using a process of inductive coding (Krippendorff, 2013) within a framework of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) to identify and map response-patterns within the data. A descriptive, phenomenological approach was adopted in order to gain some understanding of teachers' 'lived experiences' during a process of navigating curriculum change. The data presented in this article will focus on the patterns that emerged in relation to the teachers' perceptions of the opportunities and challenges within and across the Expressive Arts AoLE.

Findings

Given this article's emphasis on the perceived opportunities and challenges of the new curriculum, data were drawn predominantly from the teachers' responses to seven questions in the survey (see Appendix), together with relevant extracts from the semi-structured interviews. Emergent sub-themes were identified from within

Table 5: Summary of core questions and emergent sub-themes

Core Questions	Emergent themes
Question 17: Managing the rollout of the new curriculum.	A. Curriculum structure and school context B. Collaboration C. Training D. Year 7 as a test-ground E. Thematic approaches and project work F. Other
Question 18: How to enable learners to gain first-hand experience of the arts.	A. Extra-curricular activities B. Curriculum-based opportunities C. Learning design D. External support E. Other
Question 20: Drawing on the expertise of others.	A. Organisations B. Individual artists C. Trips D. Pandemic-related disruption
Question 24: The main priorities for curriculum delivery.	A. Presentation / Packaging / Pedagogy B. Learner-centredness C. Resources / Time D. Training E. Collaboration / Networking
Question 25: Any further / final comments.	Treated as standalone narratives, to capture individual teachers' voices.

these patterns, to create a snap-shot of the teachers' perceptions. These are summarised in Table 5 for clarity.

For the purpose of creating a coherent narrative around the teachers' perceptions, the sub-themes in Table 5 were re-organised into the broader categories of 'perceived opportunities' and 'perceived challenges', allowing for layers of micro/macro discussion to emerge around the implementation of the new curriculum. Perceived opportunities focused on two themes: 'freedom and flexibility of design', and 'cross-curricular learning and collaboration'. Perceived challenges focused on four themes: 'resistance to change'; 'teacher efficacy and confidence'; 'training and government steer'; and 'time and resource allocation'. Each of these will be explored, in turn, below.

Emergent themes [1] – Perceived opportunities

Freedom and Flexibility of Design

A key feature of the CfW (2022a) is predicated on subsidiarity and increased agency for teachers, with a degree of freedom for schools to meaningfully tailor their curriculum design and decision-making processes to their specific contexts. This approach was flagged in Donaldson's (2015: 15) 'Successful Futures' report, which noted a perceived desire 'for schools and teachers to have more (but not complete) autonomy'. 'Freedom' was clearly recognised by the respondents in this study, and was regarded as one of the most exciting and positive elements of the new curriculum. The respondents not only referred to the flexibility inherent in the diverse affordances of the subject area, but also the creative scope for devising workable infrastructures for measuring and tracking the development of skills along a continuum [Q17/A/9[9]].

Within the new curriculum, content design is intended to operate at both subject- and cross-curricular levels. Acknowledgement of this was apparent in responses that recognised the importance of striking a balance between the two levels [Q17/A/11]. Some respondents referred to starting with 'Big Questions' [Q17/A/14] in order to establish a broad framework before developing content details. Others referred to adopting thematic approaches, particularly around project work, to initiate the planning process [Q17/E/1; Q17/E/6]. This indicates that the teachers in the sample were thinking about curriculum design in different ways and that, in an active demonstration of the philosophical underpinning of subsidiarity, recognised the scope for developing bespoke approaches that account for the specific characteristics of a given school context.

Alongside broader questions of curriculum-planning were those of learning design. The respondents were concerned with how specific lessons and experiences would work, and how these should connect in tangible/measurable ways to the

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9   This code relates to a questionnaire response and denotes the question, sub-theme, and response number. In this case: Question 17, Sub-theme A, and Response 9.

requirements of the curriculum[10]. The respondents flagged key considerations around learning design, noting that lessons need to be 'practical' [Q18/C/4], 'hands-on' [Q18/C/14], 'meaningful' [Q18/C/15] and 'authentic' [Q18/C/7], framed in relation to 'topic work' [Q18/C/10] or 'themed work' [Q18/C 21] and 'workshops' [Q18/C/8; Q24/A/4; Q24/A/10]. Learning design was also connected with the knowledge and skills of subject-specialist teachers [Q18/C/19; Q18/C/22], emphasising the importance of design decisions being made by those with the relevant expertise. This was seen as particularly critical in the secondary sector, acknowledging the tradition of subject-specificity at that level of education [Q18/C/22]. As one respondent noted: 'The expressive arts curriculum could be great – as long as distinct specialisms are maintained. There must be a balance between exploring the creative process and learning sufficient breadth of skills…' [Q25/2].

Cross-curricular learning / Collaboration

Embedded within the new curriculum are mandatory cross-curricular skills relating to two frameworks: 'Literacy and Numeracy' and 'Digital Competence' (Welsh Government, 2022b). Whilst these frameworks were seen as provoking interesting cross-pollination between subject disciplines within the Expressive Arts AoLE, to enrich and anchor children's learning experiences, the perceived challenges of a cross-curricular approach were mooted by respondents in relation to the importance of designing meaningful and convincing (rather than tenuous and tokenistic) connections between subject areas [Q17/A/2]. For some respondents, a 'targeted' approach to planning within the AoLE was perceived as being easier to design and implement than thinking in broader terms about cross-AoLE provision [Q17/A/3]. Some respondents talked about maintaining cross-curricular elements (at subject-area level), with 'links made where appropriate' [Q17/A/2]. However, there was some concern that cross-curricular approaches would dilute learning experiences when thinking about different requirements at year-group and/or school-level, especially in the secondary sector where KS4 (GCSEs) often means 'keeping subject areas distinct' [Q17/A/2].

10 These include: Three Cross-curricular responsibilities, Four Purposes (underpinned by Integral Skills), Five Development Pathways, Five Principles of Learning, Six Areas of Learning, Twelve Pedagogical Principles, Progression Steps, a 3–16 Continuum of Learning, and a range of What Matters Statements.

Schemes of Work were seen as a nicely structured way to conceptualise how the new curriculum could look/work [Q17/A/5], with strong hints that it was more feasible to maintain subject-specificity within the AoLE [Q17/A/6] rather than attempting to expand into other areas of provision. One respondent usefully flagged the importance of taking a longer view of the design process, by placing decisions along the continuum of learning techniques and processes (skills), and conceptual and theoretical understanding (knowledge) that build over time and often overlap, noting that 'There needs to be an understanding of the core knowledge in the primary sector that will enable learners to specialise' at later key stages [Q25/16].

Interestingly, references to cross-curricular provision were subsumed into explorations of collaboration, indicating that teachers regarded the latter as being key to the success of the former, with some expressions of genuine enthusiasm and excitement about how this might facilitate engaging content design. Collaboration both within and across year-group provision emerged as a desirable approach to the new curriculum, and appeared to be characterised in three ways. Firstly, at a micro-level, contained and manageable collaboration primarily happened within the AoLE team [Q17/B/3]. Secondly, at a meso-level, whole-school approaches were adopted [Q17/B/4; Q17/B/9]. Interestingly, in this respect, those working in all-through (3–18) schools appeared to be at an advantage where the continuum of learning could be genuinely planned-out across all key stages in a single setting [Q17/B/9]. Finally, at a macro-level, collaboration extended beyond the school and into the LEA context [Q17/B/10], through officially constituted schools-clusters or, in the case of one special school, informally 'buddying-up' with other teachers in the LEA [Q17/B/10].

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the subject-specific approach to GCSEs, some respondents hinted at the ways in which the new curriculum may be better suited to KS3 and below where the emphasis is still on the 'general' [Q17/D/1]. Indeed, the gradual roll-out of the curriculum from 2022 may present some particular issues for the secondary sector, at least until decisions have been made about the re-design of GCSEs[11]. 'Themed multi-discipline projects' [Q17/E/2] were seen as one way of

11 Qualifications Wales opened a period of consultation in the autumn of 2022 and published their 'Made-for-Wales GCSEs' report on June 2023, with the aim of introducing the new qualifications in 2027. Details available online: https://qualifications.wales/regulation-reform/reforming/qualified-for-the-future/made-for-wales-gcses/

adopting a more holistic cross-curricular approach incorporating more than one AoLE [Q17/E/3; Q17/E/5; Q17/E/8], with themes operating as cross-curricular organising agents [Q17/ E/4]. One respondent mentioned the idea of a two-year rolling programme of project-work themes for Years 7 *and* 8 [Q17/E/5] as a streamlined way to organise, develop, and resource Expressive Arts provision. Only one respondent [Q17/E/7] flagged concerns about the potentially limiting and restrictive nature of adopting a thematic approach.

Cluster-level approaches to project-work, in close collaboration with LEAs, were perceived as being a good way to broaden the scope of what could be achieved with the available funding, resources, and expertise [Q10/A/18], and to share ideas and workload [Q24/E/1-4]. However, the authenticity within meaningful, co-constructed and collaborative learning, along with creative curriculum design, can be compromised when teachers are constrained by imposed timeframes for the implementation and facilitation of such opportunities (Hadaway & Richards, 2020; OECD, 2021). Extending collaboration to include organisations with an education remit (such as Wales's network of national museums) was seen as an excellent way to enrich content delivery [Q20/A/21] and ensure a level of authenticity. On the whole, many of the respondents were mindful of needing to think in creative ways and to develop cross-curricular content [Q24/A/9; Q24/A/12; Q24/A/13; Q24/A/17; Q24/A/19], but were uncertain about how this would work in reality.

Emergent themes [2] – Perceived challenges

Resistance to Change

Whilst there was genuine, if measured, enthusiasm for the perceived opportunities of the new curriculum, many of the respondents expressed reservations. The perceived challenges appeared to be underpinned by a degree of resistance to change and a sense of ambivalence about the degree of 'new' within the new curriculum. Research indicates that change is often difficult to navigate, with education being no exception (Gouëdard et al., 2020; Jónasson, 2016; Sinnema, Nieveen and Priestley, 2020). In the case of this study, resistance to change related to a broader expressions of inertia and reticence about (or even absolute rejection of) the Welsh Government's approach to curriculum reform.

At a basic level, some respondents hinted at processes of 'relabelling', to satisfy the requirements of the new curriculum, with 'old' practices simply being retained within the 'new' curriculum [Q17/A/2; Q17/A/6]. One respondent noted that, 'Some schools are going to re-word what they do and still do the same old stuff' [Q25/19]. In other cases, respondents struggled to see what they needed to do differently. One secondary school teacher, for example, indicated that, 'I still do not know what "difference" this curriculum means for us in secondary. We do all this – I don't want to change all my lessons for the sake of it […] Please someone tell us in secondary how this "new" curriculum is different and new!' [Q25/1].

Teacher Efficacy and Confidence

Alongside the perceived freedom and flexibility of design was evidence of confidence crisis (cf. Wavehill, 2019b: 15). Concerns about teacher efficacy emerged as a possible explanation for resistance to change. Questions 9 and 10 of the questionnaire were Likert scales designed to measure the respondents' confidence-levels in relation to their ability to teach the Expressive Arts. Overall, confidence levels about teaching the subject-matter (in general terms) were strong-to-very-strong across the sample. However, there was a subtle drop in confidence when the respondents were asked specifically about teaching the Expressive Arts subject-areas within the *new* curriculum, arguably reflecting the trepidation that is often experienced when navigating change.

Teacher efficacy and confidence-levels varied within the AoLE as a whole. The traditional core of the discipline area, especially art and music, garnered the highest confidence ratings. However, much lower levels of confidence were expressed in the newer areas of provision. For film and digital media, for example, the teachers felt they lacked training in the use of technical equipment. Dance, which achieved the lowest confidence score of all, was a cause of particular consternation because the subject had been incorporated into the Physical Education strand of the old curriculum. Previous experience and perceived expertise underpinned teachers' attitudes about certain elements of the AoLE.

Interestingly, the Welsh-medium respondents indicated higher confidence-levels across the board when compared with their English-medium counterparts, especially in relation to film and digital media. Indeed, Welsh-medium schools arguably have a closer relationship with Welsh-medium creative industries in Wales

[Interview 1], which often undertake no-cost 'outreach' and creative production projects in schools (e.g. Welsh College of Music & Drama; Boom Cymru) (cf. Griffiths, 2014). This may serve to reassure Welsh-medium schools that meaningful exposure to the Expressive Arts can be achieved through interactions with various external organisations.

Part of the uncertainty relating to curriculum design appeared to hinge on how to go about balancing breadth ('opportunities to experience all subject areas' [Q18/B/2]) with depth ('delivering various 'skills' [Q18/B/3]), given the diverse range of possibilities in relation to teaching the Expressive Arts. At the time of data-collection, the teachers were understandably anxious about getting the framework right, before considering the detail, which meant that there was less focus on thinking about the learner experience and more attention paid to finding ways of appropriately responding to the requirements of the new curriculum frameworks. Efficacy, in this sense, was purely surface-level and functional.

Training and Government Steer

In light of some of the concerns raised by the respondents regarding their ability to teach the full range of Expressive Arts subject-areas, many of the teachers referred to the need for training and greater clarity from Welsh Government. At a fundamental level, the teachers' comments in response to Question 24 (about design priorities) focused on the need to better understand the technical elements of the new curriculum, in terms of structural design, assessment, and progression. One respondent [Q17/A/12], for example, hinted at needing greater clarity about what cross-curricular approaches could look like. Others [Q24/A/1; Q24/A/5; Q24/A/6; Q24/A/15] were hoping for examples of lesson plans and broader schemes of work, or even 'a list of things that we need to do/teach and examples of these and then we could tick them off when we do them' [Q25/5]. Overall, levels of uncertainty, confusion and a lack of clarity were captured, with the year ahead described as 'vague' [Q17/F/2].

INSET[12] days were regarded as key for many of the respondents, with some training having already been provided by LEAs [Q17/C/1]. These were seen as an excellent opportunity to collaborate and actively 'get work done' [Q17/C/2],

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enabling schools to share ideas and develop initiatives suited to local-level contexts. Some respondents also referred to 'twilight' INSET events [Q17/C/3; Q17/C/8], designed to maximise scheduled training-time for teachers whilst minimising school-closure days. Arguably, this provision may help to negate the teachers' perceptions about being unsupported.

Perhaps the most surprising response to the perceived lack of Government steer related to some of the teachers inventing their own 'tools' to support elements of the new curriculum, where previously these would have been designed centrally by the Government. For example, National Curriculum subject guidance used to contain programmes of study for each Key Stage, with detailed descriptors, exemplar, and ways to measure and track progression (Welsh Government, 2008). One respondent [Q17/A/13], for example, used the What Matters Statements and progression steps to underpin an inquiry-based approach that was used to create a 'progression tool' for the Expressive Arts in their school. Whilst offering greater autonomy and avoiding tick-box approaches to curriculum design may be liberating, our participants frequently suggested that Welsh Government could reasonably be expected to develop a new set of standard tools for them to deploy in schools. Duplication-of-effort and variable approaches were identified as a consequence of trying to plug perceived gaps. Social media were mentioned as spaces where teachers sought advice and built supportive professional networks, as explained by Interviewee 4: 'Well, we are part of a regional working party, actually it's not a working party it's a WhatsApp group. So a lot of it is just through conversation there and what other people have tried. I don't think anyone knows at the moment if they are doing the right thing'. These informal platforms appeared to substitute for official guidance.

The open-ended survey responses to Question 25 were particularly insightful in terms of the respondents' sense of being somewhat adrift. Overall, concerns were expressed about assessment procedures, general lack of support, and the need for more time to facilitate collaboration. As one respondent noted, 'The delivery of a quality curriculum for Expressive Arts is a mammoth task that needs to support teachers in confident delivery. It certainly isn't stand alone and needs a collaborative response to ensure success' [Q25/14]. Finally, another respondent nicely captured the general feelings of unease by noting that the 'new curriculum is too open', making it difficult for schools to forge a clear path [Q25/6].

Time and Resource Allocation

The final perceived challenge, which underpinned all others, related to the allocation of time and resources. When the survey data were gathered in October 2021, most schools across Wales were still in the planning phase of the new curriculum rollout. Whilst the planning work in many schools had been derailed by the disruption of the pandemic and other pressures, general consensus suggested that eleven months was sufficient to prepare for the September 2022 launch. However, below this macro-level timeline, concepts of and issues relating to time allocation were far more nuanced.

Time for genuine, meaningful collaboration and to 'do things properly' was mentioned repeatedly [Q24/C/2; Q24/C/3; Q24/C/4; Q24/C/11]. The respondents indicated that there was plenty of good will to engage with the new curriculum, with 'expert teachers in all disciplines but no time to liaise and plan together as an AoLE' [Q25/8]. Elements of disconnect between senior management teams and AoLE teams were also mooted, especially in terms of creating space to do the work needed 'to produce a fantastic curriculum' [Q25/4], with one teacher commenting that they felt 'dictated to by SLT and never given time to plan together' [ibid.]. Some respondents referred to adopting a bite-sized approach to their planning, using 'half-termly focuses' [Q17/A/7; Q17/A/10] to create opportunities to reflect, evaluate, and tweak whilst still aligning with the structure of the school year.

Timetabling emerged as a major concern, with the Expressive Arts seen as especially vulnerable within a packed curriculum. One teacher explained that, 'At present our KS3 timetable for art, music and drama is five lessons per fortnight (10 per cent of teaching time). If it is to be valued and engaging pupils need more time' [Q25/2] [cf. Interviews 2 and 3]. For some respondents, the AoLE was perceived as being side-lined within the new curriculum. To address this deficit and lack of subject-status, extra-curricular opportunities were used as a way to ensure that children gained a broad range of experiences. However, since these activities are not part of formal assessment frameworks/processes, they are at risk of being viewed as less important. Whilst many schools have an annual cycle of in-house performances (e.g. orchestra, plays, and choirs) that are regularly 'visible' throughout a typical school year and often have a fund-raising element, these require participation outside the formal timetable which can present time-management challenges.

The study prompted discussions about resource allocation, focusing specifically on the range of available learning supports (external organisations and specialists, peripatetic staff, and online resources), and infrastructure/facilities (space and equipment). The Arts Council of Wales' 'Lead Creative Schools Scheme'[13] featured heavily in responses, as a way to both access and fund professionally-delivered workshops, projects, and visits. This connected to comments about having to seek-out 'grants' [Q17/F/3] because it may not always be possible for schools to deliver all elements of the Expressive Arts AoLE in-house. However, the availability of additional funding was described as patchy and sometimes dependant on the location of the school [Interview 2], which reflects the extent of Europe-wide erosion within and across every level of creative education (Lilliedahl, 2023; Lucas, Claxton and Spencer, 2013). Where respondents referred to external input, the same organisations and specialists were mentioned repeatedly, indicating that LEAs may hold lists of 'approved' providers (cf. DBS certification). Finally, mention was made of available online resources to support learning design processes. One participant referred to the materials available on Hwb[14] [Q18/C/17], whilst another referred to an independent, not-for-profit website called *Mantle of the Expert*[15] which, whilst interesting, is not specifically designed with the Curriculum for Wales in mind.

The final considerations flagged by the respondents related to the availability of equipment and space within schools. Traditional art supplies topped the list of 'most important resources', followed by digital technology for creating and showcasing artwork. Some specific subject-areas within the AoLE (e.g. Film and Digital Media) were identified as needing to be better resourced and developed [Q24/C/6; Q24/C/8; Q24/C/12], together with 'Funding for musical instruments and SLR cameras' [Q25/7]. Specialist spaces tended to be the reserve of the secondary sector, where individual subjects are often taught in dedicated classrooms (i.e. an art studio, a drama space, or an IT suite with video-editing software).

Given the timing of the survey, many respondents referred to the disruption caused by the pandemic, suggesting that the Expressive Arts had been

13 https://arts.wales/funding/get-started/creative-learning/lead-creative-schools-scheme
14 Hwb is the Welsh Government's virtual learning environment, containing resources for teachers and pupils.
15 https://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/

disproportionately impacted by restrictions (especially in terms of gallery and theatre visits): 'Covid has affect(ed) EA more than most' [Q18/E/8; Interview 2]. Whilst the majority recognised the pandemic as a temporary blip, some respondents openly admitted that the Expressive Arts needed work and attention to address the limitations imposed by issues such as timetabling, narrow priorities (e.g. GCSEs), and general trends in marginalisation of the subject-area [Q18/E/5]. Overall, it was seen as a complex AoLE that may require additional funding when compared with other subject-areas, because it is difficult to authentically deliver a full-range of experiences from within a school setting.

Discussion and Conclusion

The perceived opportunities and challenges identified in our data arguably equate with the 'double-edged sword' alluded to by Evans (2023). The teachers who participated in this study articulated the relative pros and cons of the new curriculum in the context of their Expressive Arts AoLE, sketching a complex portrait of interlocking factors that are held in dynamic tension. The teachers' thought-processes ranged from buoyant optimism and enthusiasm (cf. Thomas et al., 2023) to paralysing anxiety and confusion (cf. Morrison-Love et al., 2023; Power, Newton and Taylor, 2020), with concerns about 'doing the right thing' at the heart of their decision-making (cf. Evans, 2023).

The new curriculum's emphasis on subsidiarity and teacher-agency appeared to present an interesting set of dilemmas for the respondents. On the one hand, the prospect of having the freedom and flexibility to design a bespoke curriculum within a school was an exciting prospect. However, many appeared to be demotivated by anxieties rooted in a lack of appropriate training and time to undertake the work (Evans, 2023). Such a response is understandable, given the prescriptive, pre-packaged nature of the 'old' curriculum (cf. Evans, 2022), and the varied and at times insufficient subject support available from local authorities and regional consortia (Estyn, 2022).

The expectation that teachers simply become 'curriculum designers' underpins much of the worry that was expressed by our respondents. The apparent lack of confidence to design the basic curriculum frameworks within school and/or LEA settings indicates that teachers in Wales may not yet be at a stage where they can

consider the deeper philosophical underpinnings of the curriculum reform (subsidiarity and co-construction), because their energies are being sapped by the structural details of term-by-term delivery. Encouragingly, since our data collection, Welsh Government (2022c) have responded to Estyn's (2022) report, increasing opportunities for professional learning, networking and collaboration through local authorities and regional consortia, with targeted emphasis on curriculum design and coherence.

The 'openness' that characterises subsidiarity could arguably lead to divergent interpretations and understandings of what is expected within the new curriculum (cf. Wavehill, 2019a). This is a particular concern where the equity of educational experiences is already subject to enormous pressures as a result of socio-economic disparities (cf. Newton, Power and Taylor, 2019; OECD, 2019/2020). The wider concepts and big ideas being championed by the new curriculum may ultimately result in learning and teaching experiences of variable quality for both pupils and teachers. The ways in which the Expressive Arts AoLE is seemingly underrepresented within school timetables, particularly in the secondary sector, could potentially further exacerbate inequalities. Importantly, the findings of this study indicate that the new curriculum may give insufficient address to the various constraints that exist within the wider education system in Wales, most notably in relation to country-wide socio-economic disparities (cf. Newton, 2020).

The caveats flagged by the teachers counterbalance their optimism. Whilst they are given a degree of autonomy to design schemes of work and new content from scratch, they may not necessarily feel able to do so. Jónasson (2016: 8) suggests that this connects with teacher training programmes that often restrict practice to a narrow set of approaches and therefore 'stifle change' through an inherent lack of innovation and agility. As such, teachers may feel ill-equipped to autonomously 'create' an interpretation of the new curriculum to maximise the affordances of their unique school context, and will instead stick with what they know.

Whilst the INSET and other training opportunities being provided by LEAs were appreciated, more needs to be done to support teachers. One aspect of this relates to the Welsh Government's communication around the key elements of the new curriculum. The multiple frameworks, to which curriculum-design decision-making processes must respond, create confusion (cf. Footnote 11).

Monitoring progression emerged as one of the key concerns for our respondents, with some teachers referring to designing bespoke approaches and solutions for their own school contexts. Since such 'tools' would potentially prove useful and ensure a level of consistency, we recommend that Welsh Government should provide clarity around what is expected. School-level autonomy could then focus on content-level design decisions, which are already comfortably within the skillset of most teachers.

Certainly, there is a case for arguing that greater investment and more support and training are needed to promote consistency (cf. OECD, 2014), beginning with Initial Teacher Education programmes and filtering through the 3–16 continuum, but this needs to be accompanied by a much clearer, practical steer from Welsh Government. A two-pronged approach of this kind would help to support not only curriculum design processes but also improved understandings about the philosophical underpinnings of the new curriculum, to truly realise the vision behind what purports to be radical reform (cf. Welsh Government, 2019).

The findings of this study indicate that meaningful collaboration is seen, by the teachers, as key to the success of the new curriculum. Indeed, the quality of collaboration impacts in both practical terms (minimising duplication-of-effort, and facilitating the sharing of ideas and resources) and in relation to broader cross-curricular thinking. Our data indicate that the perceived lack of space to collaborate, at LEA-level, is hindering opportunities for critical reflection and consistency (cf. Power, Taylor, and Newton, 2020). Intriguingly, too, the new curriculum (with its emphasis on designing a continuum of learning) may advantage all-through (3–18) schools, where collaboration can be more easily facilitated across all key stages due to the single-site infrastructure.

One final point of note relates to the tension that exists between expectations and reality, and, by association, the meaning of 'more (but not complete) autonomy' (Donaldson, 2015: 15). Despite the narrative of a 'new' curriculum, the teachers in this study identified that very little has changed within the content of the Expressive Arts AoLE. This implies that, without an appreciation of the broader philosophical underpinnings of the new curriculum, properly communicated by those responsible for the reforms, the anticipated design-processes could become little more than relabeling exercises that undermine the overarching drive for change.

Appendix

	Survey questions from which data are drawn
Qu. 9	In the context of the forthcoming *new* curriculum, how confident do you feel, *in general*, about being able to effectively deliver the Expressive Arts? [Likert scale: Not at all confident – Slightly confident – Moderately confident – Very confident – Extremely confident]
Qu. 10	Please indicate on the scale how confident you feel about teaching each of the Expressive Arts listed in the new curriculum [Sliding scale: 0 = not at all confident; 10 = extremely confident]: • Art • Dance • Drama • Film & digital media • Music
Qu. 17	Has your school started to plan for the roll-out of new Expressive Arts curriculum? • Yes • No If Yes, how does your school plan to manage this process? [_____]
Qu. 18	In what ways does your school curriculum (current and/or planned) enable learners to gain first-hand experience of the arts? [_____]
Qu. 20	Has your school drawn on the expertise of others e.g. artists, museums and galleries, the Arts Council of Wales? • Yes • No • If Yes, please specify [_____]
Qu. 24	What do you consider the priority in terms of training needs for successful delivery of the new Expressive Arts curriculum? [_____]
Qu. 25	Finally, please use the box below if you would like to add any further comments [_____]

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