

Speech at conference Next Steps for Curriculum Reform and Implementation in Wales, 26 April 2024

Editorial Note: This speech was given by Lucy Crehan on Policy Forum for Wales conference on curriculum in Spring 2024. The Curriculum for Wales is being implemented since September 2022 in all primary schools and since September 2023 for all secondary schools in Wales. The speech reviews a range of recent evidence on curriculum reform, calling for Welsh Government to reconsider the role of knowledge in their new curriculum framework. We are very grateful to Lucy Crehan for permission to publish her text. Its relevance extends far beyond the case of Curriculum of Wales. Last but not least, we consider it important for the current curriculum revisions in our region – in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and undoubtedly in other countries as well.

We have an unusual opportunity in Wales to learn from the past, in a way that helps us to see into the future. We have, if you like, a metaphorical crystal ball. There are two countries that have taken very similar approaches to our Curriculum for Wales (CfW), and which implemented these curricula long before we did. They are purpose-led, they divide the curriculum into areas of learning rather than subjects, and they have moved away from specifying disciplinary knowledge and skills, and instead set out student outcomes which are very similar in their framing and their level of generality to the Descriptions of Learning in the Curriculum for Wales.

Scotland and New Zealand introduced these curricula a few years before the Welsh Government commissioned Professor Graham Donaldson's *Successful Futures* report in 2014, which kicked off the construction of CfW here (Donaldson, 2015). I'm not so interested in revisiting what happened in the first few years of those curricula, as I'm sure Professor Donaldson took all of the relevant evidence at the time into account in his report, and that Welsh Government did the same in accepting his recommendations. I'm going to share with you what has happened in the decade since. Because I think it can, and should, inform the next steps for the Curriculum for Wales.

Before I do that, let me make something clear. Do not think, because I have an English accent, that I am some English policy commentator that has come here to throw stones. Wales is my home. Wales is the land of my fathers. I am the granddaughter of a Welsh teacher and the mother of Welsh children. I've worked with schools across the country supporting them with curriculum design. I care deeply about this

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2 country, its children, and its schools. And I don't want its education system to be like England's either. I agree wholeheartedly with the vision of Curriculum for Wales. I just don't think that the current framework alone does enough to support schools to realise that vision. Let me tell you why.

One of the reasons set out by Professor Donaldson for curriculum reform in Wales was that standards were low. Specifically, he referred to the PISA results as a reflection of those standards, which were then, and are now - in the words of our new Cabinet Secretary Lynne Neagle – disappointing. I think there is more to education than just PISA results, despite my career history. But I do think that these standards in reading, maths and science are an important part of the bigger educational picture. And our metaphorical crystal ball suggests that the current structure of the Curriculum for Wales framework will not support an improvement in these standards.

Scotland and New Zealand have both seen a decline in their mathematics and science PISA results over the decade or more since they introduced their high-level curricula, and New Zealand saw significant declines in reading too (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2023; May et al., 2019). This was the case even before the impact of the pandemic. Of course, this doesn't prove that it was the introduction of these curricula that caused this decline, but it does tell us that at the very least the curricula approach taken did not halt the decline, and it *certainly* did not improve standards. Unlike Scotland and New Zealand when they first introduced their curricula, we don't have room for manoeuvre. Wales can't afford to fall any further (Sibieta, 2024).

Additional pause for thought should come from the fact that both countries are in the process of refreshing or updating their curricula, and in both cases one of the changes they are making, or thinking about making, is reducing the ambiguity of the existing curriculum statements, and being clearer about the learning that cannot be left to chance.

In New Zealand, the government stated that “being clear about the important learning that all *ākongā* need” (which is Māori for learner) was one of the “crucial areas needing the greatest change”¹. And the recommendations of a series of pilot curriculum reviews by Education Scotland, made public by *TES Scotland* in April 2024, included the suggestion that “greater clarity on the knowledge learners should have” is needed “at key points in learning” (Seith, 2024).

Let's take a moment to notice what it is they're changing, and what they're not. Commitment to the purposes of these curricula remains. Their vision, remains. They have learned though, that they need to be clearer about what children need to know in order to help them to achieve those purposes.

Why is it that they've focused on clarity around knowledge, and reducing ambiguity? I'll just share two key problems that the absence of specificity has caused, which have emerged in the past decade, and which are relevant to us here in Wales.

¹ This quote was from the NZ government website accessed in 2021 and has since been changed. The following page expresses the same sentiment though – <https://ncea.education.govt.nz/have-your-say>.

The first is inequity. When the curriculum contains only high-level, somewhat ambiguous statements, it leads to variation in interpretation that doesn't only lead to differences in taught content (which needn't be a problem), but to different standards in different schools. I'll quote from a study from New Zealand in which Wilson and colleagues looked at different interpretations of the same high-level literacy standards in different schools serving different demographics.

Unequal opportunities for minority students and those from economically disadvantaged communities are a well-recognised and documented problem [...]. What our findings point to is the extent to which the problem not only persists in New Zealand secondary schools but is aided by the unintended consequences of the flexibility of the curriculum and assessment systems. (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 222)

In subsequently announcing the refresh, the former New Zealand Associate Minister of Education stated:

It is critical that our national curriculum is fit-for-purpose, and that there is a coherent system of supports for its delivery by *kaiako* and teachers across Māori and English medium pathways. The variability, inconsistency and inequity that is characteristic of our system shows that we haven't got this right yet. (Tinetti, 2021, para. 5)

Our own academics here in Wales warn of a similar risk with Curriculum for Wales. Professors Sally Power, Chris Taylor and Nigel Newton wrote:

Without wishing to question the good intentions of the government or undermine the efforts of the many schools and teachers who are pioneering the new curriculum, we fear that – somewhat paradoxically – far from reducing educational inequalities, the new Curriculum for Wales may actually exacerbate them. (Power et al., 2020)

There is currently very little knowledge that all children in Wales are entitled to.

The second problem thrown up by a lack of specified knowledge and skills is felt at transitions. Even if every primary school had high standards and high expectations for their pupils, the lack of commonality across them leads to a lack of coherence in curriculum between primary and secondary, leading to the problems of repetition and boredom for some children, confusion caused by gaps in learning for others, and disengagement for all. This lack of a common base was the cause of a recommendation by the OECD in Scotland to “consider how the design of CfE can better help learners consolidate a common base of knowledge, skills and attitudes by the end of broad general education” (OECD, 2021, p. 13). Similarly, Education Scotland reported from their pilot reviews that

participants also identified potential consequences of a lack of clarity for the position of knowledge on transitions from primary to secondary... Differing interpretations were felt to create variations in the knowledge base of learners moving to secondary from feeder primary schools. This, it was postulated, then undermined confidence of secondary staff who then responded to the lack of a common base of knowledge by ‘starting again’. This was viewed as a potential barrier to progression. It was felt that problems

4 such as these could be addressed by providing greater clarity (and thus consistency) of what learners would be expected to know by the end of the primary stage.²

The introduction in Wales of 27 very high-level statements of what matter (Education Wales, n.d. – b) will not overcome this problem. None of this was known to be the case in 2014, or, indeed in the case of that last quote, even two weeks ago. Before I close with some suggestions about what we might do with all of this new information, I'd like to address two more fundamental reasons why a lack of specified knowledge has been problematic in these countries, and why it will be problematic in Wales – if we don't bring some in. These are the downgrading of knowledge in practice, and the importance of young people having webs of connected knowledge for 21st century skills and for reading.

Way back in 2014, so in this case, before the publication of *Successful Futures*, Professors Mark Priestley from Scotland and Claire Sinnema from New Zealand warned that these new curricula could lead to a downgrading of knowledge (Priestley & Sinnema, 2018). Their analysis found that while both curricula place a strong emphasis on the importance of acquiring knowledge in their guidance, as does CfW, they are less clear in specifying what knowledge is to be acquired, nor are they clear on the processes which practitioners might follow in order to specify such knowledge. Fast forward a decade, and in a recent paper, Priestley and colleagues write,

in the lack of central specification, research in Scotland suggests that teachers fall back on instrumental... rather than educational rationales for selecting content... This in turn can lead to an enacted or experienced curriculum that lacks coherence and any sense of connection with educational purposes. (Priestley et al., 2024)

Already in Wales, before the introduction of the new curriculum, we had many primary schools selecting and organising knowledge from the curriculum based on the degree to which it linked to a whole-school topic. Now, these topics continue to drive content selection, but this time, it's the descriptions of learning that are being linked in and labelled as the knowledge in topic planning, even though in many cases, these include no disciplinary content.

For example, the Descriptions of Learning do not specify any music (Education Wales, n.d. – a), and the only mention of it in the What Matters Statements is as part of the sentence: "By exploring forms and disciplines in the expressive arts, whether through experimentation, play or formal research and inquiry, learners can develop an understanding of how the expressive arts communicate through visual, physical, verbal, musical and technological means." How then, is a non-music specialist supported to understand what they should, or even could teach in music? At the moment, they do not have that support, that scaffold.

The content taught in schools is therefore to a large extent driven by what resources are already available in the school, in paid-for schemes, or online. Various

² The full reports from Education Scotland are not yet publicly available, but were kindly shared with me by *TES Scotland*.

calls go out on the CfW Facebook group like, “I’m struggling to think of some fun & interesting ideas and activities to teach a Year 2 class around the concept of ‘Adventure’ – does anyone have any ideas?” and “Does anyone have any good planning on Australia they could kindly share please”. In some schools, this leads to an activity-based curriculum where knowledge is downgraded, and those disciplinary ideas which *are* taught are not carefully sequenced, revisited and built on.

This is not a criticism of those schools or teachers, who work bloody hard in an increasingly challenging context, with little time or money (National Education Union, 2023) for resource development or professional learning. This is an invitation to Welsh Government to revisit a curriculum framework that doesn’t currently support non-subject specialists to identify and sequence important ideas and skills in Art, Music, History or Geography, to name but a few; ideas that *can* absolutely be taught as part of a topic, but whose inclusion is currently left up to chance.

Why is this a problem? Why does it matter what children know and understand these days, so long as they have the skills? Because one of the other things to emerge over the past decade has been increasing evidence from cognitive science about the importance of knowledge for 21st century skills, and for reading comprehension (Willingham, 2006).

This isn’t about learning isolated facts; in fact I’m arguing for the opposite. Isolated facts are what you end up with if you don’t deliberately plan a curriculum around progression in knowledge. To think critically about a topic, or to be creative in a domain, you need to draw on connected webs of knowledge and understanding, which students need to build up over the *course* of the curriculum. That means engaging with concepts like democracy, rivers, tempo, colour, tragedy, and trade, and the rich contexts through which these can be taught, starting in primary school, building on that learning in secondary school – not repeating it – and giving students opportunities to make connections and apply their understanding throughout.

Those of you who know the Curriculum for Wales well will know that this is already the intention of the curriculum. The principles of progression (Welsh Government, 2021) include “Deepening understanding of the ideas and disciplines within areas” and “Increasing breadth and depth of knowledge”. But if we are to learn any lessons from our neighbours in Scotland and New Zealand, it should now be apparent that the absence of clarity around what students should know and be able to do in the existing framework undermines these worthy intentions. And given the increasing awareness of the importance of knowledge for reading comprehension (Smith et al., 2021), and the poor reading standards across Wales, we have an opportunity here to solve several problems with just a few moves.

There is one solution to this problem, which is not drastic, and is entirely in-line with the existing framework. Nothing needs to be abandoned, or even changed. As part of the pioneer process, teachers were asked to come up with the knowledge, skills and experiences that underpinned the What Matters Statements. Some groups broke these down, outlining what progression could look like in disciplinary knowledge and skills at each progression step. However, later in the process this valuable

6 work was then collapsed into bulleted lists and some of it put in the ‘Designing your curriculum’ section of the guidance, thereby removing any support for teachers around what disciplinary progression could look like and reducing any commonality of learning across primary schools that could have provided a foundation on which secondary schools could build.

The next logical step for Curriculum for Wales, in the light of what we now know, would be to revisit that decision; revisit the place of knowledge in the curriculum framework, and map out disciplinary progression from progression Step 1 to Step 5, to sit alongside the Descriptions of Learning, and to provide guidance for schools. This could then facilitate the sharing of high-quality curriculum-linked resources between schools and provide a framework for subject-specific professional learning.

Most importantly, being clear about the learning that all children are entitled to would address inequalities, facilitate transitions from primary to secondary school, and support schools to bring the knowledge back in, drawing on learnings from international evidence, eminent academics at home and abroad, and established cognitive science. We did not know all this ten years ago. We do now. We have a moral imperative to do something about it.

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