

Curriculum realisation: international perspectives

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International evidence tells us about the importance of practitioner sensemaking as part of curriculum realisation. Evidence tells us that sensemaking takes time – but that sensemaking builds confidence in creating curriculum through dialogue and through shared understanding developed and reflected on over time.

In this input, we discuss some of what international evidence tell us about the process of curriculum realisation and educational reform and relate this to some of the experiences of those who were involved in the co-construction group. We finish by introducing some of the key ideas discussed by three international curriculum and assessment specialists who were interviewed as part of Phase 2 of the Camau i'r Dyfodol project.

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The publication of Successful Futures in 2015 ushered in a radical curriculum reform in Wales. The new curriculum that emerged from the recommendations of this review is very different to the previous curriculum in Wales – described by Sinnema et al (2020) as ‘a bold new vision for curriculum, teaching and learning.’ It invites practitioners and education professionals to think very differently about learning, teaching and assessment and it shifts the role of the teacher/practitioner to one who creates rather than simply delivers the curriculum.

As noted by Bradfield & Exley (2020), the idea of foregrounding teachers or practitioners as ‘curriculum makers’ is a reflection of wider trends we see in contemporary curricula. This shift from something delivered to something created means that the curriculum realisation is no longer simply a top-down process: it is not the case that the curriculum is a finished product to be implemented. As noted by Sinnema et al (2020), the Curriculum for Wales framework instead provides a starting point for professional decision making with respect to curriculum, teaching and learning.

In this sense, the curriculum framework provides guidance for curriculum making at local levels: a type of curriculum making that is iterative, responsive and flexible, and which is shaped by on-going reflection and review. We know from the experiences of other countries that have undergone similar curricular and educational reforms, that a shift from top-down implementation and an increased role for teachers and practitioners a curriculum makers, rests upon the development of shared understand and sense-making.

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One example of where core curriculum guidelines have been implemented through local curriculum development is found with Norway. Although Norway has a different type of

Curriculum to Wales, it still foregrounds teachers' role in ground up curriculum development.

As Rød & Bæck write, the Norwegian curriculum is adapted by teachers to local contexts, needs and priorities that allow for regional geographical and contextual variation. Teachers therefore play a crucial role in developing and enacting local curricula: schools and teachers choose the content, teaching materials and learning activities, within an overall national curriculum framework. As Rød & Bæck discuss, this introduction of content at local levels can make schooling more meaningful and relevant to pupils, but it relies upon a shared understanding of the curriculum.

To help to develop shared understanding and curriculum making, we also find examples of countries taking similar participatory approaches to those in Wales. In the case of curricular reform in Finland, Soini and colleagues (2021) wrote that: 'Finnish curriculum reforms are carried out via a participatory approach, engaging a wide range of different stakeholders from the different layers of the school system into collaborative building of the new core curriculum.'

The process of sense-making and of developing shared understanding, while necessary for any complex curricular reform, can take a long time and can sometimes feel challenging for those involved.

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As Haapaniemi observes about curriculum reform in Finland, the process of interpreting curriculum reform in a school is a complicated process. For those practitioners, and other education professionals in the system, there is an emotional dimension to reform which, as acknowledged by Antilla et al, can involve a mix of both positive and negative feelings at different times and in different ways.

Things can sometimes feel more challenging the more radical the shift in curriculum and practice is. Part of the reason that this can sometimes feel challenging is that practitioners may have to rethink and reappraise their own practice, their own ways of working, their personal and professional principles and their professional identity, in light of the reform. In his interview with the Camau i'r Dyfodol project, Chris DeLuca, discusses the idea of practitioners negotiating and deciphering what a new framework or reform is about, how it relates to existing practices and what it is that they will need to change. He argues that this takes time to wrestle with and requires both time and community to figure out.

Rethinking and working through challenges is a necessary part of advancing curriculum reform.

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This was something experienced by members of the co-construction group. As discussed previously, they found it helpful to think of challenges as 'knots' to be unravelled to allow thinking to move forward. Untangling these knots involved critical reflection and discussion, as well as professional learning and engagement with policy and research. Even partially resolving different aspects of a challenge allowed participants to move forward in their own thinking and practice.

During phase 2, it became clear that how participants approached and thought about challenges was important – and that challenges sometimes even ignited curiosity in the process of rethinking and re-appraising. Participants recognised that this process could lead to them moving outside of their comfort zones and some found that the idea of sitting with discomfort was helpful for discussion and to deepening their own understanding. One participant said: 'don't produce the same. Don't do what we've always done... when you're holding those conflicting ideas in your head, just go for it... And there was this passion in me, you know, let's just try something'

The process of sense-making and unravelling knots supported co-construction participants to engage in what was referred to by one participant as 'the hard thinking' to help build confidence.

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In reflecting upon the co-construction process, one participant said:

'And I suppose some of the things that we've done in terms of the conversations and the inputs that we've had along the way has kind of given us a bit of a research base to say, you know what? We're not the only ones struggling with this. And that's OK. And just because you don't have a definitive answer, doesn't necessarily mean that that means you're getting anything wrong. I think that's the bit we quite often hear people saying, "I don't want to get it wrong", and I suppose that comes back to that practical care bit, we wanted to give confidence into the profession that it's OK to do the hard thinking and the learning - that's valuable.'

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Going forward, the exploring further element in this section contains the full interviews with international curriculum and assessment specialists that we refer to at various points throughout these materials. During the co-construction meetings, participants mentioned that they were interested in Curriculum reform in other countries, particularly those where teachers created curriculum locally. The project team therefore asked Jenny Poskitt, Chris DeLuca and Kari Smith to talk with us about curriculum and assessment in their own nations and how reform was supported in their education systems - and how the experiences in these nations might support thinking about curriculum realisation for other practitioners.

Chris de Luca discusses the change to assessment policy in Ontario that was introduced in 2010. Jenny Poskitt discusses the New Zealand curriculum introduced in 2007 and which is currently undergoing a refresh. Kari Smith talks about curriculum and assessment in Norway and how schools realise these in practice.

To conclude, there are some key take-aways about education reform processes that the interviews highlight.

Chris talks of the importance in Ontario of recognising that professional learning about new reforms is not linear: building practice communities to support shared understanding and shared vision of reform helped with professional learning and realisation in the province. Jenny discussed the iterative nature of curriculum change and the importance of communication and collaboration to support curriculum change in New Zealand: 'having conversations and sharing, seeing what others are doing'.

Kari talks from experience in Norway about how time is needed for any reform 'to settle'. She also mentions the importance of action research to support practitioners to make change their own, working cooperatively with other practitioners and with learners to explore new ways of teaching and learning in their own classrooms. (Kari Smith)