

## Curriculum coherence

We have mentioned the importance of curriculum alignment in the first overview ('Approaches to creating curriculum'). Another important concept that underpins the realisation of a curriculum is coherence. This overview discusses coherence in terms of what it is and why it matters to curriculum creation at national and local levels.

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## 1 What is curriculum coherence?

At an overarching level, a coherent curriculum is ‘one that holds together, that makes sense as a whole’: ‘its parts, whatever they are, are unified and connected by that sense of the whole’ (Bean, 1995, in Roehrig et al., 2021, p.4). A coherent curriculum is therefore one that ‘entails unity and connectedness among the aims, content, instructional practices, learning experiences and assessments’ (Sullanma et al. 2019b, p.210).

Porter (in Hewitt, 2006) writes that that coherence is more likely where curriculum policy:

1. Specifies clearly what the curriculum is to be and how it is to be organised.
2. Is self-explanatory: it addresses itself so that participants or stakeholders understand what it is and how it will affect them operationally.
3. Is replicable and feasible: it can be applied in various school settings with a likelihood of success.

## 2 Approaches to creating coherence

There are two main approaches to creating curriculum coherence:

The coordinative approach	The integrative approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum is driven by standardisation and system perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coherence is a question of how aims, content, approaches to knowledge, skills etc, and approaches to pedagogy and assessment are consistent across the intended and taught curriculum.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coherence is considered in terms of linking materials, teacher preparation etc to national curriculum. Coherence seen as an objective outcome.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coherence is considered in terms of harmonising/aligning curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Coherence rests on teachers professional knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional role is curriculum delivery: coherence is driven by the national curriculum.</li> <li>• Clear, efficient communication top-down drives the implementation process and teachers’ understanding of the curriculum and what it means for teaching and learning.</li> <li>• Tends towards an obligatory approach to implementation: teachers obliged to teach to the national curriculum.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers are active agents in curriculum making: coherence is created by teachers’ interpretations of curriculum guidelines.</li> <li>• Translating curriculum into practice relies on ground-up sensemaking processes. Reforms may involve teachers rethinking or reappraising their ways of thinking and working, their personal and professional principles, and their professional identity (Sundberg, 2022).</li> <li>• Tends to take a ‘purposive’ approach to implementation: asking teachers to transform curriculum ‘into meaningful lessons by relying on their own professionalism’ (Haapaniemi et al. 2020, p.547).</li> </ul>

See Haapaniemi et al. (2020); Soini et al. (2022), Sundberg (2022) and Sullanmaa et al. (2019a)

### 3 Curriculum frameworks as guide for coherence

Hewitt (2006) states that a curriculum framework has two 'essential' purposes:

1. to act as a guide for discussing the curriculum based on a clearly articulated perspective;
2. to help identify and set up activities relating to curriculum work (e.g. development of curriculum and assessment, maintenance of curriculum, evaluation etc).

According to Hewitt, the curriculum framework assists curriculum design by creating the mental map through which teachers interpret and respond to the curriculum as they realise it in practice.

#### 3.1 Thinking points

- What mental map do you have of Curriculum for Wales?
- To what extent is this the same mental map you began with before engaging with the practical support materials? If not how has your mental map changed?

### 4 Realising curriculum policy in classroom practice

Priestley writes that curricular frameworks 'will lack coherence if teachers don't understand them' (p.9), so processes of sense-making to support shared understanding are important. Sense-making refers to 'a dynamic and interactive process through which both individuals and groups of people construct meaning' (Pietarinen et al. 2017, p.26). Collective sense-making supports curriculum reform by supporting shared interpretation of the reform and what it means in practice, and so supports curriculum coherence (Pietarinen et al. 2017, p.26).

Sense-making is particularly important where a system is taking an integrative approach to curriculum coherence. However, sense-making processes are complex and take time: policy implementation 'is never simply a matter of executing prescriptions and procedures' (März et al. 2013, p.13). In addition, policy implementation depends on 'dynamic' sense-making among multiple stakeholders in an education system (Tan 2019, p.537).

#### 4.1 Thinking points

- What 'sense' are you making of Curriculum for Wales as a practitioner?
- How does this sense influence the practical approaches you are taking to realise Curriculum for Wales?
- How has your sense of the curriculum support you to create curriculum locally that is coherent in terms of aligning with the curriculum framework?
- How might you create even better alignment and coherence in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment?

## 5 References

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