

Tensions in current curriculum reform and the development of teachers' professional autonomy.

Dr Sioned Hughes* Dr Helen Lewis **

**Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Wales*

***School of Education, Swansea University, Swansea, Wales*

External Funding: There was no external funding.

Disclosure Statement: No financial interest or potential conflict of interest have arisen from the direct application of our research.

Biographical Note:

Sioned Hughes is a Senior Lecturer in Initial Teacher Education in Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Her background is in primary and initial teacher education, and she has previously worked as a primary school teacher. Her main research interests lie in assessment and the humanities and she has co-authored textbooks for student teachers and teachers, for example, *Teaching Primary Humanities*.

Helen Lewis is Director of Initial Teacher Education at Swansea University. Her background is in primary, initial and continuing teacher education, and she has previously worked as a teacher and Local Authority curriculum adviser. Her main research interests lie in the principles and pedagogies relating to the development of children's thinking skills and metacognition, and she is also interested in exploring approaches to reflective practice, animal-assisted interventions and close-to-practice research.

Data Availability Statement: No data set was associated with the paper.

Data Deposition: No data has been made available or deposited in a recognized data repository prior to or at the time of submission.

Geolocation Information: The research work was collected in Swansea, United Kingdom.

Tensions in current curriculum reform and the development of teachers' professional autonomy.

Current curriculum reform in Wales provides an opportunity for teachers to have greater freedom to develop pedagogical approaches that meet the needs of their pupils. The *Successful Futures* report (Donaldson, 2015) recommends that teachers should have a greater autonomy in choosing how to deliver the curriculum, and ensuring it is done so in a manner that is meaningful and relevant to their pupils. Strengthening teachers' agency in relation to pedagogy, however, can sometimes be difficult to achieve because, for example, of perceived issues around workload and accountability. There are many 'off-the-peg' or ready-made solutions to the challenges of curriculum reform, and in many cases, schools are responding to such challenges by using ready-made or bespoke approaches. This paper explores the nature of the tensions between the drive to empower professional contributions to curriculum reform, and increase autonomy for teachers, and the existing professional practices. In particular, as an example of the tensions, the paper considers how and why one school selected a commercial mindfulness package to contribute to the newly defined Health and Wellbeing Area of Experience, and the implication of this choice on teacher autonomy and pedagogical practice.

Keywords: curriculum reform; teacher agency; pedagogy; professional development

Introduction

Internationally, new forms of curriculum and processes of curriculum design are emerging. These have an increasing expectation for teachers to act as agents of change, actively engaging with curriculum design and delivery (Alkan & Priestley, 2018). For example, Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* places an explicit emphasis on the teacher's role as an active curriculum maker (Scottish Government, 2017). In Wales, the direct engagement of teachers to generate curriculum development is one of the main aspirations of current reform (Welsh Government, 2019).

Inevitably, notions of empowerment bring new challenges for teachers. Contextual, socio-cultural and structural factors may act as constraints or enablers, shaping how and to what extent curricular flexibility is applied and by whom (Lasky, 2005; Basica et al, 2014). Where teachers perceive themselves to be in a situation of turmoil around curriculum reform, the extent to which they are able and willing to change their practices and responses can differ quite widely (Alkan & Priestley, 2018). For instance, although professional autonomy sounds an attractive proposition, understanding how to embed core concepts and policy intentions without clear and grounded guidance is both daunting and challenging (Pietarinen et al, 2017). Teachers may, therefore, opt to seek solutions by selecting 'off-the-peg' schemes to support the design and delivery challenges they face (Priestley et al, 2015). This may appear to be a tension, whilst in fact it is possible that this is a more efficient and equitable approach to a curriculum delivery.

Current trends in curricula reforms

Approaches to curricula reform have tended to be dominated by curriculum making amongst policy-makers whilst the role of teachers and leaders in schools is

implementation ‘from’ policy ‘to’ practice. Teachers are expected to deliver policy, deliver learning outcomes and deliver curricular entitlements (Kelly, 2004). Recent international trends in curricula reform, however, recognise the need for teachers to have greater freedoms to develop pedagogical approaches (Priestley et al, 2015). Such freedoms may prove challenging, since there is a continuum in the degree to which teachers can mediate, translate and enact a curriculum (Priestley & Philippou, 2018). Schools are complex, social organisations, set within larger complex systems. Aspects of agency involve a dynamic interplay between routines, motivating forces and judgement. Since agency is influenced by past experiences, orientations to the future and engagement with the present, if teachers do not fully comprehend the goals of new policy, then their efforts to ‘implement’ will invariably fall back on existing practices and way of thinking (e.g. Emirbayer & Mische, 1988; Pietarinen et al, 2017).

Several studies in education have highlighted how the manner in which the curricula are implemented does not always reflect what the curricula designers had in mind (e.g. O’Sullivan, 2002). Neglecting to consider how teachers make sense of new and often complex ideas enshrined in curriculum policy often inhibits successful curricula reforms (Priestley & Philippou, 2018). Literature in the field of curriculum change documents how teachers adapt curriculum materials, and refine them, as they enact them (e.g. Remillard, 2009). Teachers’ decision making is shaped by factors related to the teachers themselves such as knowledge, beliefs, goals and identities; their curriculum materials, for example how inquiry-orientated they are; and the context, for instance how supportive they are of innovative teaching approaches (e.g. Davis et al, 2017).

In the context of current curriculum reform in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015), teachers are increasingly seen as agents of change and are expected to actively

engage with curriculum making and design decisions. Such reform is often assumed to offer schools and teachers autonomy at the school level, thus enabling them to develop a school-based curriculum and pedagogies to better fit the particular needs of their students (Biesta, 2014). Successful curriculum making requires skilled teachers, with a firm grounding in professional knowledge and professional dispositions, an ability to envision alternative future trajectories, and contexts that offers affordance for agency whilst maintaining constraints (Priestley et al, 2015).

However, changing teachers into curriculum makers, rather than curriculum mediators or deliverers, thus strengthening teachers' agency, can be a difficult process to achieve in practice. Whilst agency is culturally situated, with teachers holding differing attitudes towards autonomy (Priestley et al, 2015), individual agency also operates within a broad network of socio-structural influences. People are producers as well as products of social systems (Bandura, 2001). There are different factors that affect this gap, such as teachers' beliefs relating to the reform, their capacities such as professional knowledge and skills, existing school cultures, school catchment area, and the nature and extent of teachers' networks (Alkan & Priestley, 2018). Research indicates that changing the existing mindset, the 'accountability' culture and the beliefs of teachers is not an easy process (e.g. Wilkins, 2011). In this paper we explore some of the decisions that teachers make when given opportunities to actively develop their school-level curriculum.

Curricula reform in Wales

The new Curriculum of Wales is currently under development to be implemented in 2022 (Education Wales, 2017). Current curriculum reform in Wales is enacting a reform model based on the principle of subsidiarity, whereby policy is created from the bottom up (Donaldson, 2015). Emphasis has been placed on professional collaboration through

a ‘Pioneer’ school model, where Pioneer schools hold a collective responsibility for developing the curriculum framework, and the subsequent dissemination of their approaches (Welsh Government, 2015). This approach to the design and ongoing development of the curriculum is consistent with the philosophy of trusting and empowering professionals (Schleicher, 2010). During different stages of the development work, teachers are provided with more freedom to use their professionalism and knowledge (Education Wales, 2017).

The new national curriculum (macro-level) is a broad framework of domain knowledge organised by ‘big ideas’ and ‘what matters statements’ (Welsh Government, 2019, p.3). The domain knowledge is located within six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE). Teachers will be required to undertake work on a school-level curriculum (micro-level), where the broader categories of knowledge described by AoLE guidance and refined by the teachers.

This paper describes a research project that took place in one primary school in Wales. We explore the lived experience of teachers in responding to curriculum reform. The school adopted mindfulness as its main focus of pedagogical innovation in response to one AoLE: Health and Wellbeing.

Context

The study was located in one urban primary school in South Wales. The school was a Pioneer school, focused on developing the Health and Wellbeing AoLE, trialling new initiatives as possible ways of planning and enacting a new school-level curriculum. The school has approximately 350 pupils on roll, of whom 35% are eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM), which is higher than average for Wales (21%) (Welsh Government, 2019). Recent inspection report judged teaching and pupils’ learning to be ‘good’ (Estyn, 2017).

The school identified ‘mindfulness’ as something that they wanted to develop to promote pupil wellbeing. The school staff decided to adopt an ‘off-the-peg’ scheme and the associated pedagogical materials to approach this, and chose a commercial mindfulness package called ‘Paws B’ (<https://mindfulnessinschools.org/teach-paws-b/paws-b-curriculum/>). The materials were initially developed by primary school teachers and researchers at the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice at Bangor University, Wales. Materials include lesson plans and resources. Contents includes learning about the brain, recognising the choices that can be made in daily life, and learning about attention, as well as guided practices that include focusing on breathing or noticing feelings.

The school adopted a ‘cascade’ model of implementation where one member of staff was trained to deliver the programme to other teachers as well as pupils. As the school’s mindfulness’ expert, she trained other staff to use the programme and then these teachers used the materials to teach their own pupils. The mindfulness package was delivered to all pupils aged between 7 and 11 years-old in the school on a weekly basis for twelve weeks. The school gave the teacher ongoing support for her role, equivalent to one day non-teaching a week. An additional professional development opportunity was offered for all the staff to participate in an after-school training sessions and over three quarters of the staff chose to have this, completing the series of lessons themselves.

Methodology

The approach taken was a case study using mixed methods, positioned towards a qualitative, interpretive stance. It formed part of a larger research project entitled ‘Successful Futures for All’ (SF4All) in which a survey was sent electronically to all Pioneer schools in Wales, and was open to all teachers in these schools to complete.

Over 600 teachers completed the survey from over 80 schools across Wales. Respondents were reasonably distributed in terms of geographical location, type of school and role and responsibility. Approximately 35% of respondents were from a primary school context, and 65% from a secondary context. The survey included questions relating to how schools were approaching the development of wellbeing. We used the survey data to gain a 'big picture' in terms of how many schools across Wales were adopting mindfulness practices. The case study aspect of the project involved interviews with teaching staff. The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to collect staff views about the curriculum reform and how they began to enact the school-level curriculum.

Data Collection

Interviews

Seven members of staff (approximately 20% of the total staff population) participated in the interviews. They were selected because they represented a range of experience and responsibility within the school. For ease all have been described as 'teachers' although in fact only four were classroom teachers. Three respondents had been directly involved in 'Pioneer work', such as attending external AoLE meetings, and four had no direct involvement. Table 1 gives more detailed information about participants.

Teachers are referred to as T1, T2 etc in the findings section.

Insert Table 1.

The participants took part in individual semi-structured interviews, with each interview lasting up to 40 minutes. Responses were digitally recorded, then transcribed before being coded and analysed. Ethical approval was given by the Higher Education

Institution's Ethics committee, in line with the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines.

Findings

The interview and survey data yielded information, regarding teachers' views about the new curriculum, their autonomy and their perceptions of responding to the curriculum reform using 'off-the-peg' schemes and pedagogical materials. The data identified possible tensions between the concept of teacher agency and the use of pre-packaged schemes. Three themes are used to discuss the findings: (i) perceptions about the new curriculum; (ii) perceptions about using a commercial mindfulness package (an 'off-the-peg' scheme) to respond to curricula reform, and (iii) perceptions about professional development model and existing practices.

(i) Perceptions about the new curriculum

All of the teachers interviewed expressed positive feelings about the new curriculum framework based on two themes:

1. Benefit to learners.

T1, 2, 4 and 6 saw the proposed curriculum as more meaningful and relevant for pupils. For instance, T1 said that the proposed changes would be '*more purposeful for the learner*', echoed by T4: *I think it's trying to give a purpose to everything the children are doing in school, trying to make connections between the outside world and the education system.* T6 highlighted the importance of pupil agency:

'Children will have more ownership over their learning; the areas of learning and experience seem to have more clarity between subjects and encourage us as teachers to link learning between subjects especially literacy and numeracy

framework and just trying to marry-up so that curriculum and subjects aren't standalone but coming together as more of a whole.... I think it's more purposeful for the children, I think they'll get more enjoyment out of it to see, that regardless of what you're doing, you're using the core LNF and DCF skills"

All interview respondents recognised that the Health and Wellbeing AoLE included the need to reflect mental as well as physical health and mindfulness in particular. Teachers agreed that the new curriculum emphasis on emotional and mental health was particularly beneficial to their context, especially to eFSM learners and those who were vulnerable and lacked confidence. For example, T3 highlighted that:

'Children are under pressure to perform throughout school. To be a healthy, confident individual is not always easy, but simple mindfulness practices seem to help with anxiety and feelings of stress, especially those dealing with more personal pressures, like those relating to home life'.

2. Teacher agency

Teachers 1, 3, 5 and 6 felt that the new curriculum framework would provide greater opportunity for teacher freedom and creativity. For example, T3 suggested that *'teachers have more freedom to choose and plan their lessons'*, and that the curriculum could be shaped and enacted more flexibly since it was *'not prescriptive'*. T1 noted, *'I think it gives a lot more freedom to teach, to focus activities on individual learning needs and to be creative with the curriculum'*.

Several teachers commented favourably on the idea that they would be able to move away from perceived 'prescriptive' lesson planning, with T6 suggesting that they were *'looking forward to teaching the new curriculum as there will be more opportunities for me to be creative and to embed literacy and numeracy in topic work.'* However, when asked to elaborate in more detail on the content of the new curriculum framework not all participants were able to define the content accurately. For example,

T6 commented that, *'I don't know a huge amount about the new curriculum, we have touched on it on INSET day but I think the other teachers know a lot more'*, and T3 said *'I know it was designed by Professor Donaldson and he talks about core purposes, four of them and there will be six AoLE but beyond this, I don't know what else'*. This may suggest that although this particular school was a Pioneer School, information had not yet been cascaded across the whole school. It may also indicate that although individuals felt optimistic about the potential of the new curriculum there was still uncertainty regarding their individual role in enacting this.

Others felt that the new curriculum may not necessarily mean a major change in practice, *'I don't think the planning will be different to what we do know as a school. We do plan in topics now'* (T3). This may indicate the fact that some members of staff are unaware of the need for teachers to write, plan and enact the new school-level curricula. However, comments such as *'it is quite scary'* and *'I am not sure how learners' will be assessed with the new curriculum'* were also made by some. This may suggest that even in a Pioneer school context, the realities of taking ownership of curriculum reform leave some individuals feeling uncertain and uneasy.

(ii) Perceptions about using a commercial package (an 'off-the-peg' scheme) to respond to curricula reform

Although current curriculum reform in Wales intends for teachers to have greater autonomy in choosing how to deliver the curriculum, thus strengthening teachers' agency in relation to pedagogy, this case study school opted to use an 'off-the-peg' mindfulness scheme including a package of lessons. The survey results echoed this, with 65% of schools adopting an 'off-the-peg' teaching programme to respond to curricula reform. The interviews' results also noted that teachers identified benefits and challenges to adopting an 'off-the-peg' approach.

Benefits

Teachers reported a number of benefits to using an 'off-the-peg' scheme. They felt that the materials assisted them with planning and structuring their lessons. Teachers 3,5 and 7 admitted to not being very familiar with the Health and Wellbeing AoLE, and therefore felt that adopting an 'off-the-peg' approach gave them confidence to structure and deliver their lessons effectively. For instance, T3 said that, *'the detailed guidance regarding content and teaching approaches, made me feel confidence in teaching this new aspect'*. T5 shared this view, and stated that the materials provided a useful *'lifeline in a time of uncertainty'*. T7 also felt that adopting that materials gave them confidence when introducing mindfulness for the first time, who stated that, *It reassured me that I was covering the essentials properly'*. Responses suggested that teachers also felt that they were able to deliver and implement the mindfulness intervention quickly, at a time when they were under considerable pressure to evaluate and consider their practices. The structure of the materials also gave them reassurance that pupils were able to demonstrate progress over a relatively short period of time. In this sense, having access to ready prepared materials was seen as a benefit by all the teachers, and none reported that they felt that this meant they were being less creative in terms of curriculum development as a result of this.

Furthermore, the identification of a key member of staff who took responsibility for the development of the programme was seen as beneficial, and the teachers noted her enthusiasm for the materials. For instance, T3 noted, *'I found her knowledge of the materials very valuable'*. T5 echoed this, stating *'She was very passionate and encouraged us to adopt the scheme quickly.'* The teachers all felt that the materials were useful, and trusted them to deliver the content effectively.

Teachers also felt that the ‘off-the-peg’ approach had value in supporting learning in many lessons across all the AoLEs and in promoting the ‘four purposes’, in particular, ‘healthy and confident individuals’ (Donaldson, 2015). For example, T6 said that the materials meant that ‘*pupils arrive ready and in the lesson rather than dwelling on other issues*’, and T4 felt that they helped the pupils to deal with the challenges and intended purposes of the curriculum. For example, she noted that:

‘Children are under pressure to perform throughout school. To be a healthy, confident individual is not easy, but simple mindfulness practices seem to help with anxiety and feelings of stress, especially those dealing with more personal pressures, like those relating to home life.’

Teachers could give examples in subjects such as Mathematics and English where aspects of Health and Wellbeing AoLE was not being taught they had noted children using mindfulness approaches to focus their attention. In the interviews, examples were also given of situations where they had decided in the moment to use a quick mindfulness activity to calm a situation or re-focus pupils. This indicated a more fluid, ‘on-the-hoof’ approach to using these materials, as and when teacher’s professional judgment warrants it.

Teachers felt that using mindfulness has helped pupils, and certain groups of pupils in particular. For example, ‘*vulnerable and anxious pupils*’ (T3) and those eFSM benefitted more than ‘general’ pupils (Teachers 4 and 6). T5 commented that ‘*mindfulness has increased pupils’ self-confidence in participating in group discussions, whole class activities and playground issues.*’ The survey echoed this, and also identified that more respondents who had received mindfulness training believed that eFSM pupils could be affected by the introduction of the new curriculum than those who had not had training (67% compared to 53%). Reasons why teachers thought that

this might be the case often stated a belief that pupils gain self-confidence and self-belief through the new approaches to the new curriculum framework aims.

Challenges

Teachers reported a number of challenges to writing and enacting a new school-level curriculum. For example, some felt that the pace of change was too great, feeling that the new curriculum *'is being rushed too quickly'* (T2) and *'not fully thought through before it's chucked into schools'* (T1); or that they had already reached initiative overload with *'too many initiatives in the past have been introduced, implemented quickly, and not followed through properly'* (T5). However, whilst this was the general feeling about the new curriculum as a whole, they did feel that wellbeing was crucial to develop, and felt that the expert teacher's enthusiasm for mindfulness was impacting on how positively they approached the implementation.

All respondents were aware of the recommendations for the new curriculum to value flexible teaching approaches. However, these teachers still wanted detailed guidance on how to teach the curriculum and this did produce some tensions and challenges. Whilst T2 noted that, *'the teachers followed the lesson planning guidelines carefully during the sessions and did not deviate from suggested time allocation'*. T6, noted that, *'even when pupils wanted longer sessions to discuss their feelings and opinions and to master some of the techniques, they were reluctant to spend longer than the lesson plan suggested'*. Reasons given were that this was partly due to desire to get the approach *'right'* (T4), and partly because the materials were perceived to be *'very good'* (T5).

Teachers showed some autonomy when deciding where and when to remind children about using their mindfulness practices. T1 noted that, *'I had to ask some of the*

pupils not to use some of the techniques in some of the lessons, for example, in a Maths lesson, as it disturbed their concentration and prevented them from learning new concepts'. Interestingly, this seems to contradict the benefits noted above and may imply that developing mindfulness techniques are only one skillset and pupils need to be equipped with a variety of skills. T3 commented that, *'It is important to have the balance right. If we focus too much on mindfulness then it might actually bore or disengage pupils at the right time. Skilled teachers need to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes.'* This indicates that teacher autonomy, even within an 'off-the-peg' scheme is important. In this case it was not about developing bespoke content, but about choosing when the materials are appropriate to use.

(iii) Perceptions about professional development model and existing practices

The manner in which the programme was implemented was seen as useful in terms of developing expertise and embedding the programme effectively. For example, T6 said that *'Training one teacher to deliver the mindfulness programme, was cheaper and more sustainable than needing to buy in external providers to the school for a day.'* T6, added that, *'this approach allowed teachers lacking in confidence to see and experience the lesson before needing to deliver them for themselves.'*

It was noted that having a familiar teacher deliver the training helped to build confidence in teaching new areas of learning. The expert teacher (T1) felt that *'What is important is that people become confident with change, rather than lose confidence. If one feels confident with change, then they will be able to deliver what is needed and be prepared.'* The model was also perceived to be sustainable as they had internal expert provider. However, in the last term of the study, the expert teacher was absent from school for a prolonged period. Whilst those teachers who had already received the mindfulness training were able to continue delivering sessions, further training of other

teachers was postponed. This highlights the challenge of sustainability of a cascade model where professional learning relies heavily on individuals.

When asked if they would be happy to use this model as a way forward for future professional development to support the enactment of the new curriculum, T2 noted, *'this model would be good because it was led by the school and not from experts outside'*. This was also supported by other teachers who commented that, *'we could use and apply the training immediately to our lessons'* (T4) and *'detailed information was given regarding which skills and concepts should learners' learn'* (T7). This may suggest that although they were aware that the new national curriculum was a framework and it was their role as teachers to write and enact the new school-level curriculum, they would like to have clear guidance and examples of possible lesson plans they could use to develop these skills and concepts of this new curriculum framework.

Discussions and conclusions

International and national trends in curriculum reform recognise the need for teachers to have greater autonomy and freedom in choosing how to deliver the curriculum and be seen as agents of change (Priestley & Biesta, 2013), but this is not necessarily a straightforward process. In our case study, teachers valued the principles of curriculum reform, and were positive about the potential benefits for learners. However, they also valued the scaffolding that published 'off-the-peg' materials provided and did not see this as a tension of their autonomy.

Teachers in Wales are used to the culture of responding and adapting their planning to prescriptive knowledge content curriculum and detailed frameworks, for example the Literacy and Numeracy Framework (Welsh Government, 2013). They are

accustomed to strict accountability processes, including the systematic scrutiny of pupils' books by consortia and inspection body Estyn (Grigg, 2017). They are used to a culture of rapid introduction of different initiatives, often with little time to gain a detailed understanding of the underpinning content, context or philosophy. In such contexts selecting 'off-the-peg' packages, which have received positive reviews, seems a sensible professional decision. The survey and interviews results demonstrated that teachers opted to use 'off-the-peg' teaching programmes to respond to curricula reform rather than 'invent' the curriculum. The interviews suggest that teachers saw this an efficient strategy at a time of great change.

However, research has identified that the real-world success of intervention and prevention efforts cannot be attributed to any given programme *per se*, but rather to the way in which the programme is implemented and embedded in a school that is coping with an extensive set of daily demands and priorities (e.g. Wolpert, et al., 2013). Therefore, to ensure a successful inclusive curriculum reform in Wales, and to increase autonomy for teachers, work on all aspects of the new curriculum, must extend beyond merely delivering a set of lessons in class, if we are to avoid an approach where the work is seen as 'something else' that schools need to do (Banerjee et al., 2016). This may suggest that rather than simply selecting one or more programmes and rolling them out, what is needed now is a carefully and comprehensively supported initiative that enables schools to plan, deliver and review different ways of taking forward work in these AoLEs.

According to the participants in this study, using the mindfulness package to support the development of healthy and confident individuals was a success. Factors such as accessible, useful and detailed information about planning, delivering and evaluating the sessions were listed among the benefits. Teachers felt that the structure of

the package gave the confidence, especially as teaching health and wellbeing was a new and unfamiliar aspect of the curriculum to them. This may initially seem to contradict the concept of teacher autonomy. However, interviews suggest that the use of these materials enabled teachers to make professional decisions relating to when to use the approaches. In turn, this led to teachers making flexible decisions about when to use the approaches in other areas of the curriculum, to support pupils become more confident, independent or focused on a lesson. In this sense, teachers did have and exercise their agency, responding as needs arose.

The professional learning model of one teacher initially being trained externally to deliver the course and then acting as the school expert, training other members of staff within the school was seen as an effective and sustainable model by those interviewed. Teachers felt that they could ask questions and share their knowledge and understanding of the package with the expert teacher in a supportive atmosphere. Therefore, in terms of the wider enactment of the new school-level curriculum, consideration should be given to the requirement for schools to have some degree of expertise relating to selected approaches amongst their teams. However, in this case study, teacher absence highlighted challenges relating to sustainability of the model of professional learning adopted by the school. The expert teacher was absent from school for a term, which meant that the approach did not get cascaded into Foundation Phase (the younger-aged classes) as planned, nor did new members of staff receive training. In terms of the wider enactment of the new curriculum, professional learning models should consider continually up skilling and developing expertise in their school – ensuring that all teachers develop confidence, skills and knowledge to enact approaches.

Claims about the extent to which the practices highlighted here recur more generally in other schools cannot be made in such a small-scale study. Nonetheless, this

study extends our understanding of the tensions and challenges faced by teachers directly involved in responding to curriculum reform. Such challenges will exist even where innovations are introduced gradually, sensitively and with appropriate support for teachers and staff. Although there are no easy answers to these tensions, acknowledging potential challenges is an important step in considering how they might be addressed. Therefore, we offer two broad suggestions.

Firstly, curriculum reform at the school level should be focused on evidence-based pedagogical practices suitable for the needs of the pupils and teachers in a school. To develop their confidence and understanding of these new, unfamiliar areas, it might also be useful to provide guidance with some examples of how to enact new school-level curriculum at the beginning of the curriculum reform, but allow teachers the autonomy to decide when to use these. In this study, as confidence grew teachers were able to use new approaches flexibly, once they had explored them with the perceived support of an ‘off-the-peg’ scheme.

The second suggestion, is to provide continuous professional learning opportunities through which teachers are supported in writing and enacting the new school-level curriculum (micro-level). Again, such support would need to promote changes in both instructional practices and teachers’ beliefs. It would also need to support teachers in making the curriculum work within the contextual constraints they face. The implementation of the new curriculum should not be rushed, because this means that teachers may be working ‘on-the-hoof’ rather than in a considered manner. Curriculum implementation needs to be the focus of on-going and periodic review (Wallace & Priestley, 2017). This can involve, among other strategies, classroom observations and conversations with teachers and would allow gaps between curricular plans and instructional realities to be monitored, responsive forms of support to be

provided, and any necessary adjustments to the curriculum to be made. In this case study, teachers felt that off-the-peg materials were a useful addition to their pedagogy, and did not see these as a tension in developing their agency. Rather they provided a useful scaffold, which then enabled them to use mindfulness approaches flexibly, where and when they deemed them appropriate.

Although this was a small-scale study, with a limited number of participants, it poses questions as to whether teachers in other schools are responding to the curricula reform using similar methods. If this is the case, the findings in this study strengthen the rationale for adopting a rigorous professional development model to the development and enactment of the curriculum-making (micro-level curriculum). The Pioneer Schools Network, working with local authorities and their regional consortia, need to provide practical support and expertise for all schools to develop the pedagogical and leadership skills crucial to successful implementation of the new curriculum. Therefore, the core of professional learning should include the following: (i) providing clear guidance to teachers about the subsidiarity curriculum reform model and their role in enacting the curriculum; (ii) provide practical support and expertise to develop new pedagogical approaches; and (iii) allowing time for teachers to adjust and possibly change the mindset, culture and beliefs with on-going support. This may ensure, not only a successful curriculum reform but also a successful future for all learners.

References

- Alkan, S. & Priestley, M. (2018). Exploring Teacher Mediation in Curriculum Making: Scotland and Wales, *paper presented at the European Conference for Educational Research, Bolzano, 4-7 September 2018.*
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1-26.

- Banerjee, R.; McLaughlin, C., Cotney, J.; Roberts, L.; and Peereboom, C. (2016). *Promoting Emotional Health, Well-being and Resilience in Primary Schools*. University of Oxford: Public Policy Institute for Wales.
- BERA (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. London: BERA.
- Davis, E.A., Palincsar, A.S., Smith, S., Arias, A.M., & Kademian, M. (2017). Educative Curriculum Materials: Uptake, Impact, and Implications for Research and Design. *Educational Researcher*, 46(6), 293-304.
- Donaldson, G. (2015). *Successful futures: Independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales*. Cardiff: Crown Publishing.
- Education Wales (2017). *Education in Wales: Our national mission*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.
- Emirbayer, M. & Mische, A. (1998) What is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103, 962-1023.
- Grigg, R. (2017). Leave me alone and let me teach. Teachers' views of Welsh Government education policies and education in Wales. *Wales Journal of Education* 19(1), 64-86.
- Kelly, A.V. (2004). *The curriculum. Theory and practice*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lasky, A.V. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(8), 899-916.
- O'Sullivan, M.C. (2002). Reform Implementation and the Realities within which Teachers Work: a Namibian case study. *Comparative Education*, 32(2), 219-237.
- Pietarinen, J., Pyhältö, K., & Soini, T. (2017). Shared sense-making in curriculum reform: Orchestrating the local curriculum work. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 63(1), 1-15.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G.J.J. & Robinson, S. (2015). 'Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter?', in R. Kneyber and J. Evers (eds), *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Bottom Up*. London: Routledge.
- Priestley, M. & Philippou, S. (2018). Curriculum making as a social practice: complex webs of enactment. *The Curriculum Journal*, 29(2), 151-158.
- Remillard, J. T., Herbel-Eisenmann, B. A. and Lloyd, G. M. (eds) (2009). *Mathematics Teachers at Work: Connecting Curriculum Materials and Classroom Instruction*. New York: Routledge.

- Sawyer, S.M., Afifi, R.A., Bearinger, L.H., Blakemore, S.J., Dick, B., Ezeh, A.C., & Patton, G.C. (2012). Adolescence: a foundation for future health. *Lancet*, 379, 1630-1640.
- Schleicher, A. (2010). Is the sky the limit to educational improvement? *An International Summit of Education Experts*. September 13– 14, 2010, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- Scottish Government (2017). *Education governance: Next steps. Empowering our teachers, parents and communities to deliver excellence and equity for our children*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- Wallace, C.S. & Priestley, M. (2017). Secondary science teachers as curriculum makers: Mapping and designing Scotland's new curriculum for excellence. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 54(3), 324-349.
- Wilkins, C. (2011). Professionalism and the post-performative teacher: New teachers reflect on autonomy and accountability in the English school system. *Professional Development in Education*, 37, 389-409.
- Welsh Government (2013). *National Literacy and Numeracy Skills*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.
- Welsh Government (2015). *Education in Wales: Our national mission. Action Plan 2017-21*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.
- Welsh Government (2019). Curriculum for Wales 2022 - *Draft Curriculum for Wales 2022*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/draft-curriculum-for-wales-2022/a-guide-to-curriculum-for-wales-2022>
- Wolpert, M., Humphrey, N., Belsky, J., & Deighton, J. (2013). Embedding mental health support in schools: Learning from the Targeted Mental Health in Schools (TaMHS) national evaluation. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 18(3), 270-283.