

School Leaders' Perspectives of Welsh Educational Reform

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Abstract

Education in Wales is undergoing an unprecedentedly ambitious period of reform with the introduction of a new curriculum and assessment arrangements for pupils aged 3-16. Education reform enables the potential for innovation and progression, yet it can also be fraught with complexity around the facilitation of change processes into practice. This study aimed to explore the transitional processes of this educational reform through the realist perspectives of eight school leaders. Data was collated using semi-structured interviews and analysed inductively via thematic analysis. Findings indicated positivity towards the pupil centered stance of the reform and its ambitions in raising the professionalism of teachers, through increased agency and the building of professional capacity. Yet, major concerns were highlighted for the changing professional identity of teachers, with uncertainty around the extent of agency being afforded and diverging perceptions being reported towards capacity building initiatives. Furthermore, the positioning of skills and knowledge within the curriculum raised worrying ambiguity. These findings illustrate the complexity of education reform and highlight significant implications that demand consideration by the Welsh Government.

Keywords: Education; Wales; education reform; curriculum; school leaders; teachers; schools; Welsh education

Introduction

Education is a pivotal force that holds the potential to empower children through the gaining of skills and knowledge that serve them throughout their lives (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2018). Education is also prerequisite to the promotion of equality of opportunity, a fundamental pillar that so many countries have selected in order to build their society upon (OECD, 2015). Contrastingly, it must therefore be acknowledged that education inequality, be that within or between countries, is potentially hugely detrimental to a child's lifetime potential (Schmidt, Burroughs, Zoido & Houang, 2015). Given the magnitude of responsibility facing governments to deliver high quality education, a plethora of debate has arisen regarding the level of effectiveness of countries' educational policy measures in improving academic outcomes and ensuring equality of opportunity (OECD, 2018). Such examination of the education system is currently the topic of much debate in Wales, wherein an ambitious education reform agenda titled 'Successful Futures' is currently underway, with the sole purpose of embodying the entitlement of all children to the highest quality of education possible (Donaldson, 2015).

Deemed pivotal to the success of Wales' education reform is the necessity for a shared ambition amongst educational professionals in realizing the purposes of the new school curriculum and assessment arrangements (OECD, 2017). Central to these processes are school leaders, who are at the forefront of preparing for the transition and implementation of the education reform within their schools (Donaldson, 2015). School leaders are defined as those expected to demonstrate whole school sustained and highly effective leadership for standards in pedagogy, leadership, collaboration, innovation and professional learning, as detailed within the 'Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership' (Welsh Government, 2018). In recognition of the critical positioning of school leaders, a striking feature of Wales' education reform journey is the fact that schools are fundamental in co-constructing the final content of the new curriculum and assessment arrangements (Donaldson, 2015). The use of a 'Pioneer Schools' network was established with the aim of putting school leaders at the heart of the reform design processes (Welsh Government, 2015a). This pivotal positioning of school leaders within Wales' education reform is supported by the observation that school leadership

is a fundamental determiner of how effectively education reform agendas impact upon practices (Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

The Case for Educational Reform

The Welsh Government's decision to embark upon this ambitious education reform journey was catalysed by declining trends in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores (OECD, 2009, 2015), a barrage of critical Estyn (Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales) reports and poorer performances in national qualifications (Donaldson, 2015). A comprehensive analysis of schooling, sparked by Wales' worrying performances in PISA, identified a number of challenges that demanded improvement and greater clarity within educational policy (OECD, 2014). These included the observation that Wales had a disproportionately high number of low performing pupils and a significant lack of coherence in assessment arrangements, that had resulted in imbalances between accountability and improvement (Ibid). The prescriptive nature of the National Curriculum (HMSO, 1988), entrenched by legislative measures of accountability, was also identified as responsible for diminishing the creative roles of schools and resulting in an underdeveloped workforce (Donaldson, 2015). Furthermore, this reductionism of professional capacity was being further compounded by a research and practice implementation gap, wherein there was a major shortfall in the application of research informed teaching strategies and interventions within schools (OECD, 2014). There has been a weighted sense that the task of schools has been to dutifully deliver a prescribed curriculum that affords little recognition for the uniqueness of pupils or the capacity of the teaching profession delivering it (Donaldson, 2015). An issue further exasperated by a lack of research substantiating the plethora of historical reform initiatives or validating what was happening within classrooms (Bennett, 2018). The need for greater research informed practice in teaching was also called for amidst uncertainties about what the world of work will look like for future Welsh generations (Furlong, 2015). There was growing consensus that the National Curriculum (HMSO, 1988), was archaic and failing to deliver children with a relevant and ambitious education (Donaldson, 2015). An argument founded within the observation that many of the jobs being generated by today's technologically rich and precipitously advancing society, require higher levels of education than ever before (Carnevale, Jayasundera & Cheah, 2012).

Wales' Educational Reform: Successful Futures

Given the scale of improvement warranting change, the Welsh Government commissioned Professor Graham Donaldson (an expert in educational leadership and policy), to conduct an extensive review of curriculum and assessment arrangements for 3 to 16-year olds (Donaldson, 2015). The review process drew upon the views of school leaders, teachers, parents, pupils and various stakeholders in education, as well as an extensive range of international and national research (Ibid). The resulting report was titled 'Successful Futures' and identified sixty-eight recommendations for ensuring a clearer vision for education in Wales, as well as a strategic plan for its implementation (Ibid). Huw Lewis, the former Minister for Education and Skills accepted the report in its entirety (Welsh Government, 2015a); a critical first step towards the ambitious reform journey now underway and due to be fully implemented in all primary, secondary and special schools by 2022 (Williams, 2019).

The Key Features of 'Successful Futures'

A primary feature of 'Successful Futures' is its emphasis on four purposes that underpin all decisions about its pedagogy, structure and assessment (Donaldson, 2015). These four purposes were established with the intention of ensuring a transparent focus and steady reference point throughout the evolution of this emerging and co-constructed reform (Donaldson, 2016). These four purposes specify that all pupils are afforded an education that enables them to develop as:

- Ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
 - Enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
 - Ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
 - Healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilled lives as valued members of society
- (Donaldson, 2015: 29)

Significant to the fulfillment of these four purposes and in recognition of the call for increased teacher agency (Donaldson, 2015), a broader and more thematic approach to teaching was proposed via six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE). The six AoLE are as follows:

- Health and Wellbeing
- Expressive Arts
- Language, Literacy and Communication
- Humanities
- Science and Technology
- Mathematics and Numeracy

(Donaldson, 2015: 39)

These AoLE are a measured effort to move away from the traditional, subject specific model existent within the National Curriculum (HMSO, 1988) and move towards a more interconnected vision of learning wherein subject knowledge serves, but does not define the curriculum (Donaldson, 2015). This thematic approach to the curriculum is also intended to afford schools and teachers the opportunity to be more personally responsive to the needs and interests of their pupils in terms of the experiences and activities that they provide them with in order to address the AoLE (Ibid). Steering the development of the AoLE are a network of 170 Pioneer Schools, tasked with the responsibility of working co-constructively with Welsh Government, regional consortia, other schools (pioneer and non-pioneer), Estyn, higher education, further education, employers and other educational stakeholders on the curriculum design and development (Welsh Government, 2015b). This co-construction approach was designed in response to the historical issue of top-down reform processes, perceived as hindering progress and undervaluing educational professionals (Donaldson, 2015). The rationale behind the Pioneer Schools Network resides within the perceived necessity to manage Wales' curriculum reform through a re-balancing of top-down and bottom-up reform processes, so that a shared reform narrative and 'intelligent accountability' can be created amongst all invested in the education of children and young people (Hopkins, 2016: 106).

Continuity in Learning and Assessment

A further feature of the education reform resides within its eagerness to remove the distinction around key stages of learning in favour of a continuous model of learning, focused on progression steps to be achieved throughout the entire 3 to 16-year old span (Donaldson, 2015). This continuous, progression model of learning was substantiated through the finding that high levels of achievement are attained when focus is sustained on progression (Hattie, 2015), rather

than seeing pupils as moving through discrete, non-continuous stages of learning typified within the National Curriculum (HMSO, 1988). Indeed, an absence of cohesion in learning was deemed responsible for the variations in school performances at transitional points between key stages of learning (Estyn, 2015, 2016). A significant polarisation had emerged in recent years, with the improving performances of primary schools being juxtaposed by the declining performances of secondary schools (Ibid). To counteract this disparity, progression steps and achievement outcomes have been proposed, whereby pupils are assessed per progression steps (broad expectation points at ages 5, 8, 11, 14 and 16), that have been defined by achievement outcomes within the AoLE (Donaldson, 2015). Emphasis is also placed on three cross-curriculum responsibilities for literacy, numeracy and digital competency skills (Ibid). These cross-curriculum responsibilities (in addition to a retained commitment to the Welsh language and bilingualism), form an integral feature of the education reform and build upon the premises of the National Literacy and Numeracy Programmes (Welsh Government, 2013). The added impetus for developing pupils' digital competency skills resides in the demand from employers who that require a workforce capable of being digital creators and not mere digital users (Taylor & Downey, 2018).

Creating a Learning Culture

Fundamental to the education reform is its emphasis on building the professional capacity of school leaders and teachers, via twelve pedagogical principles (Donaldson, 2015: 63). The importance of these principles resides in the view that for the reform to be a success, there needs to be strength in school leaders and teachers' abilities to combine theoretical and practical knowledge of high quality teaching practices with judgements about what is needed to ensure effective learning (Donaldson, 2015). These pedagogical principles seek to establish an education model and education profession committed to a continually self-improving system (Donaldson, 2015). In recent years, the quality of teaching and leadership in Wales has been a topic of debate with concerns raised for the huge variability in competencies reported (OECD, 2017). This observation was ratified by observed inadequacies in the quality of initial teacher training education (Tabberer, 2013) and a recruitment shortfall of trainee teachers with the highest qualifications (Estyn, 2013). Subsequently, a parallel reform of the initial teacher education was commissioned by the Welsh Government in attempt to raise the capacity of the profession, whilst remaining aligned and preparatory to the teacher professionalism advocated

by the new curriculum and assessment arrangements (Furlong, 2015). In keeping with this commitment to raising the capacity of school leaders and teachers, the ‘Schools as Learning Organisations’ model (SLO) was also commissioned by the Welsh Government and aims to establish a learning culture within schools that supports the rebalancing of professional agency with the strengthening of the professions’ capacity (OECD, 2016). The reasoning for this model resides in the demand for an education workforce able to draw upon research driven, pedagogically sound, adaptive teaching and assessment practices for the betterment of learning afforded to pupils (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). Furthermore, new ‘Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership’ were introduced that align with the new curriculum and reiterate the expectation that school leaders must facilitate the fulfillment of the four curriculum purposes in order to ensure a shared vision of education in Wales (Welsh Government, 2018).

This demand for a shared vision of education is thus critical and illustrates the positioning of school leaders as powerful agents of change (Hopkins, 2016). Yet, given the scale and complexity of this co-constructed education reform, questions have arisen about the readiness of schools in ensuring its effective transition into practice (National Assembly for Wales, 2017). Professor Graham Donaldson has persistently stated that central to the successful delivery of the reform, will be school leaders able to steer through these emerging difficulties with a steadfast commitment to the four purposes (Donaldson, 2015, 2016). Yet, there exists a fundamental lack of research to date about the ongoing developments of this reform (OECD, 2017). Subsequently, there is growing urgency that research needs to be undertaken throughout the transitional reform journey, in order to ensure that all educational professionals are prepared for the forthcoming changes (Children, Young People & Education Committee, 2017). This study therefore aims to examine the realist perspectives of school leaders at this transitional midpoint within the implementation journey of the education reform. To address this aim, the research questions that this study seeks to answer are as follows:

- How is the structure and purposes of the new curriculum perceived?
- What impact has the educational reform journey had on school leaders’ practices thus far?
- How adequately prepared do school leaders feel they are for this educational reform

Materials and Methods

Sample

Data was obtained from face to face, semi-structured interviews with eight school leaders from a single locality in South Wales. Participants were recruited from one of four schools that varied in size from 144 to 737 pupils, and with catchment areas representing a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The four schools consisted of: a community primary school; a primary church school; a mainstream secondary school; and a special-needs, pioneer secondary school. Five participants were recruited from primary schools, two participants were recruited from the special-needs, pioneer secondary school and one participant was recruited from the mainstream secondary school. Convenience sampling was used, with the researcher being employed within one of the primary schools and known professionally as a teacher within the same locality as the other participating schools. This places the researcher in a subjective context and risks compromising their ability to maintain a detached reserve (Hermanowicz, 2002). However, this dynamic also allows for the accelerated establishment of trust and rapport between interviewer and interviewees, deemed paramount to the participants openly sharing their perceived experiences and held realities (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Furthermore, reflexivity was a fundamental pillar of this study, with the researcher actively engaging in critical reflection about their role in the production of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee within the College of Human and Health Sciences at Swansea University and access to the participants was preceded by the gaining of written informed consent from the gatekeeper Head teachers of each school. Participation was on the basis of voluntary, written informed consent with participants informed of their right to withdraw at any point up until the interviews had been transcribed and anonymised. All data was processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016).

Procedure

Interviews were conducted between April and May 2019 in a quiet room devoid of disturbance, on the school premises where the participants were employed. The use of school premises was

due to the convenience and familiarity that this context afforded the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Open-ended questions were used and designed on the premises underlying this study's aim and research questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The decision to use open-ended questions was due to the inductive stance of this study and the need for flexibility, as well as opportunities for unanticipated responses. The interviews were analysed using the six phased approach to thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). Throughout the thematic analysis, an inductive approach was adopted whereby the codes and themes were directed by the content of the data itself.

Results

Three overarching themes and corresponding sub-themes were identified within the data corpus, as visible in Figure 1 below:

{insert figure 1 here}

Figure 1: Thematic map

Our Values are the Child

‘Our values are the child’ captures a construction of the education reform as pupil centered, with many participants identifying this as a defining feature of the new curriculum. There was a sense that the education reform was enabling the opportunity for a ‘bespoke curriculum’ focused on the betterment of the pupils as individuals, not only in the short term, but in relation to their future lives. The emphasis placed on the future potential of the reform is significant as it suggests a moral duty, as well as a firm belief in the longitudinal impact of education on the lifespan of pupils. Many participants also spoke about the reform as being an opportunity to support pupil learning in the context of their educational journey and ensuring a ‘successful future for every child’. One primary Head Teacher stated:

It needed to come away from a content overloaded curriculum, to a curriculum that was um, based on the needs of the learner and to be open enough to meet the learner where they are and to then work out what the learner needs to do next, rather than to um, have a linear curriculum which just, um looked at children moving through a curriculum. Whereas this way I started to see it as a curriculum that had an end purpose.

The statements ‘linear’ and ‘without purpose’ suggest the perception that the National Curriculum (HMSO, 1988) is generic and structured akin to a conveyor belt of ‘children moving through’ the education system. The participant’s optimism for the education reform filters through in their statement about an end purpose, through a focus on the needs of the learner, rather than the perceived needs of the educational system itself. There was also a sense that this shift towards a pupil centered education system was necessary for ensuring greater inclusion and equality, with a secondary Deputy Head Teacher stating, ‘it enables everyone to

succeed. Rather than children who are just going to get A's to C's'. Here, the reform is perceived as valuing something beyond the reduction of learning to examination results and instead, values achievement for the pupil in a far broader sense. These wider reaching benefits were highlighted by many participants who pointed out the uncertainty within the future world of work. There was a strong sense that the reform was taking place within a complex time, whereby 'life has broadened' and the needs of society are particularly complex.

Recognising these challenges, participants spoke about the reform in relation to the skills and knowledge needed by pupils. There was a strong perception that the reform was firmly rooted in the delivery of skills. Indeed, the majority of participants discussed the distinguishing feature of the reform being its emphasis on providing pupils with skills for lifelong learning, thereby empowering more resilient and adaptable pupils that can buffer the uncertainty of future worlds of work. One secondary Head Teacher was firm in this perception, stating that the success of the reform depended upon 'how we interpret that', adding that 'it has to be through a skills based element'. Yet significantly, there was little reference amongst participants to the role of knowledge. This raises an important point of contention within the data, whereby there was notable uncertainty about the role of knowledge, with one primary Numeracy Leader observing 'knowledge and content is important', adding 'you've got to have content to be able to apply those skills to'. This point raises concern that the reform risks the loss of subject knowledge and that skills without knowledge, is potentially devoid of substance. This concern was further highlighted in relation to the assessment of pupils via a knowledge rich GCSE exam system at key stage four. A secondary Head Teacher felt there was a 'disconnect with that' and believed that this aspect had 'not been thought through'. Such disparity about the positioning of skills and knowledge within the reform is critical. Indeed, this lack of cohesion was evident in the reported actions undertaken by participants in their schools, as part of the transitional processes towards the implementation of the reform. Participants experiences at a school level varied greatly, with some transitioning towards the reform through a skills based approach using 'topics', 'themes' and 'rich tasks'. Whilst others had tried 'new ways of teaching', but remained concerned about 'coverage'.

We're Changing the Role

'We're changing the role' was a statement that resonated with comments made by many participants, who drew upon the changing role of the teaching profession. The position of

teachers as co-constructors of the reform was predominantly welcomed as a positive, with talk about it being a 'bottom-up' curriculum, with greater 'freedom'. One secondary Head Teacher stated that 'the shackles are off' and 'you're no longer bound that it has to be specific content'. This evokes a striking image of teachers having been enslaved by an education system, whereby their sense of agency had been removed. A primary Head Teacher supported this stance, stating:

Their bringing the balance back down to um teacher autonomy so that teachers can be creative um...You know, when you're in the classroom you know those children and you know what those children need

Here, attention is drawn to the value of the relationship that exists between the teacher and the child as co-constructors of the child's learning. This views teachers as ideally positioned in understanding the learning needs of their children. Yet a Deputy Head Teacher of a pioneer, special-needs secondary school felt that teacher agency can be misused or misinterpreted whereby, 'some teachers will see it as an opportunity to do what the hell they want'. The extent of risk posed by this potential was shared with a primary Numeracy Leader who commented:

I'm a bit nervous about it if I'm honest, because I think it can be...the words, the words are used I think that 'the school has to come up with its own curriculum' can be interpreted in many ways and I think that if the school doesn't see, or if school leaders don't see it as you know, how we...just see it as um, I think that the school leaders need to be involved in the classroom to understand the prep...

Here, concern is highlighted for the variations that might arise from increased teacher agency, given the differing perceptions and agendas of schools themselves. Reference is also made to the 'prep' that this increased teacher agency may demand. These comments raise consideration for the expectations being placed upon the profession. A point echoed by a primary Deputy Head teacher who said, 'you can't just leave the profession with *that's where you need to be in three years' time* and no sign of how we're going to get there'. This point renders the increased teacher agency as arduous and abandonment. It also suggests a lack of belief in the professions abilities to deliver on the ambitions of a co-constructed curriculum. Yet, a secondary Head Teacher criticised this perception:

Their worried about that, they're worried about how it'll look because previously they had the scaffolding. So when they were moaning like mad about the constraints of it, now they really miss the fact that it's been taken away

Here, frustration is visible and a learned helplessness scenario depicted whereby, neither increased agency or rigid direction will appease the profession. The reference to ‘scaffolding’ also raises consideration for professional capacity within the reform processes. A Deputy Head Teacher of a pioneer, special-needs secondary school shared this concern:

My, my biggest, biggest concern is that the new curriculum will be very good for very good teachers - my biggest worry is that the new curriculum won't be structured enough or scaffolded enough for weaker teachers

Here, the issue of variability in teacher capacity is raised. It points to a sense of divergence, with a perception that the reform is too vague for capacity-poor, ‘weaker’ teachers, yet beneficial for capacity-rich, ‘very good’ teachers. This issue of professional capacity was addressed by all participants in response to two interview questions that sought their perceptions and experiences of the new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (Welsh Government, 2018) and the Schools as Learning Organisations model (OECD, 2016). These initiatives highlighted a major theory versus reality gap, particularly prevalent for the new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (Welsh Government, 2018). These were seen by many as something idealistic, rather than having a firm place within the daily role of teaching:

When people get their NQT are they going to go...do teachers ever look at those things? No they don't. And you know, they're too busy, they're busy doing what they should be doing, which is teaching

(Deputy Head Teacher, Pioneer, Special-Needs Secondary School)

Such comments provide a perception of the new Professional Standards as something removed from the tangible practices of the profession. Reference is made to these standards as being reserved for NQT's (Newly Qualified Teachers), rather than being a professional development tool for all teachers. Notably, not all participants shared this stance with a few participants reported having little or no knowledge of the new standards, whilst others viewed them positively. This disparity in opinions was also evident in the participants' perceptions of the SLO model (OECD, 2016b). Although many agreed with the principles of being actively engaged with research throughout their careers, many highlighted concern for the obstacles preventing them from doing so. In particular, funding was a major point of tension with concerns raised for the impact of ‘reduced budgets’, ‘not having the staff’ and ‘not having resources’. Significantly, no criticisms were noted by any of the participants for the benefits of

the SLO model, but there was a strong sense of it being theoretically well founded, but practically flawed.

We're Trying to Deal with Being Brave

There is a paradox within 'we're trying to deal with being brave', with the reference to 'trying' sitting in opposition to bravery itself. This polarisation defined many interviews, wherein there was a level of cautiousness being counteracted by calls for courage within the reform processes. This cautiousness was evident in comments regarding participants' transitional experiences, with one primary Head Teacher stating that they were 'frightened of going off on a massively complex road that we don't need to go down'. A primary Deputy Head Teacher echoed this cautiousness, stating concern for:

Running before we walk, flying before we crawl and changing things for the sake of change, when we need to think about why we're doing it first um, and not unpacking the...why do we need to do this? What are we trying to do for our children? And getting that right before we actually make those amendments to the way we teach and the way we deliver

The risk of making changes for 'the sake of change' suggests fatigue towards educational reform and depicts changes being made without a clear sense of commitment and consideration of need. This hesitancy towards change as a consequence of reform fatigue, was also visible in the statement made by a secondary Head Teacher who said, 'I worry about initiatives sometimes, where they appear as in everything we've done previously is wrong and now all this is right'. Here, there is a skepticism towards the reform and a sense that immoderate claims about 'wrong' and 'right' in education, are unhelpful. A primary Head Teacher shared this stance, saying 'we do the traditional thing of going from one extreme to the other, rather than just keeping the best bits of a system'. This perspective seeks balance and continuity, refuting the view that educational reform needs to be wholesale change. Reflecting on the extent of change being generated, a Deputy Head Teacher stated:

I think we've got lots of things wrong and we've got lots of things right and I think that it will take time to get it all right. I, I think it'll be...and I think that's one of the beauties of the new curriculum is that you'll never get it all right

This comment reverts towards this idea of 'right' and 'wrong', before stating that the 'beauties' and thus desirability, of the new curriculum is that 'right' is never quite attainable. Yet for some, this aspect of the reform was creating issues around clarity and concerns were raised regarding parental perspectives. A primary Deputy Head Teacher stated:

But ultimately, we are a school and do parents want the same for the children? Say we're spending the same amount of time teaching things that the parents don't value as much and the national government don't value as much – because that's proof in terms of where they put the funding and things – how will we...how will that develop?

This statement highlights concern that the emphasis on greater teacher agency within the reform, risks sitting in opposition to the schemas of education held by parents. There is also a lack of trust in the government's actual value of aspects of the reform, as identified in funding issues. The concerns for accountability also permeated within many interviews, wherein many participants were concerned for how the profession will be measured in terms of the success of the reform. A secondary Head Teacher drew back to the issue about the weighting of skills and knowledge, stating that whilst a knowledge based curriculum remains, then 'ultimately you sell your soul on the learning to give them the knowledge'. The participant highlighted a perceived lack of synchronicity between current examination methods and the educational reform processes, particularly at key stage four wherein pupils sit GCSE's. The reference to 'sell your soul' is striking and depicts the teaching profession going against their own values, through a reversion to teaching to test. Yet, many participants also highlighted the need for courage in achieving the ambitions of the reform with a secondary Head Teacher stating 'What you have to do is look at it, analyse it, be honest. If you're wrong change it...there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, it's part of the experience of this'. This evolving perception of the education reform calls for teachers to have courage in their abilities to adapt and to evolve their practices throughout the reform processes.

Discussion

In conducting this discussion, it is prerequisite to draw back to this study's aim of examining the realist perspectives of school leaders at the forefront of implementing the education reform processes into practice. Furthermore, this study sought to answer questions pertaining to perceptions of the structure and purpose of the new curriculum; the impact of the reform on practices thus far and the sense of preparedness felt amongst the participants for the educational reform.

Perceptions of Structure and Purpose

The participants' perception of the education reform processes as structurally, more pupil centered is consistent with the vision detailed by Professor Graham Donaldson, who stated that the education reform will require teachers to 'keep track of' each child's individual learning and achievements (Donaldson, 2015: 77). This pupil centered perception was highlighted by participants as a fundamental benefit deriving from the reform and was perceived as marking a fundamental step change from the National Curriculum (HMSO, 1988). Yet worryingly, there was a distinct lack of agreement in relation to the skills and knowledge needed by pupils. This observation is significant, given the fact that the positioning of skills and knowledge was addressed in 'Successful Futures', wherein it states that both remain vitally important within the reform (Donaldson, 2015). Furthermore, within 'Successful Futures' there is a clear warning about the need to avoid a knowledge versus skills polarization, labelling this divisiveness as unhelpful to the reform processes (Ibid). Nevertheless, this divide surfaced within the participants' interviews and raises the question as to whether the replacement of a subject-based National Curriculum for the more thematic AoLE, has led to a misinterpretation that subject knowledge is now of lesser value. Contrastingly, a number of participants warned against an over emphasis on skills and drew attention to the knowledge rich accountability mechanisms that remain existent within formal examinations such as GCSE's. However, if the purpose of education is to prepare pupils for what the world might become, then education must expand beyond the measurability of tests (Kidd, 2018). Further, international comparisons of the highest performing education countries highlight the need for balance, wherein a skills based curricular runs alongside the more traditional, knowledge based curriculum content (NFER & Arad Research, 2013).

The Impact of Reform

A cautiousness towards enacting on the boldness afforded by the reform was evident, with this cautiousness being marred by a lack of clarity about what the curriculum will look like, an exasperated sense of reform fatigue, and concern for the impact on pupils. This cautiousness towards education reform can be understood as a state of hyper-normalisation, whereby the participants have become so entrenched in the historic challenges of the education system, that they now have difficulty in seeing progress beyond them (Yurchak, 2005). Consequently, a number of participants were keen for greater clarity around the new curriculum and assessment arrangements. A point mirrored in a joint review by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW), who noted

inadequacies in the communication and dissemination of the curriculum developments, as well as confusion around accountability mechanisms (National Assembly for Wales, 2019). Yet notably, a co-constructivist model of education reform will inevitably cause tension around clarity as it was never intended to provide a linear pathway for implementation (Donaldson, 2015). Instead, its impact resides in the perception that ‘teachers must become a profession for themselves’ and predominantly, by themselves (Bennett, 2018: 8). That being said, achieving this movement from historic prescriptivism to a new era of professionalism is hugely complex and requires high levels of professional capacity throughout the system (Hopkins, 2016).

Perceptions of Preparedness

Participants drew attention to the impact of increased teacher agency on their feelings of preparedness. Reflecting on the positioning of teachers as co-constructors of the reform, attention was drawn to teachers as better placed to know what works for pupils than external authorities. This supports the view that educational reform is heavily dependent upon the successful implementation and embedding of education strategies by individual teachers and school leaders (Day, 2002). A few participants also drew to this increased teacher agency as a significant opportunity to re-professionalise the role of teachers and affording teachers permission to take the lead in their schools (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015). However, concerns were raised for the heightened expectations that this placed on the profession. A concern convoluted by the perceived risks of variations in teachers’ abilities, individual school agendas and external measures of accountability. This risk-aversion towards increased teacher agency can be understood as a consequence of the plethora of education reforms that have preceded the current reform and served to intensify the sense of risk felt (Connolly & Haughton, 2017). Counteracting this risk-averseness is challenging, particularly when teachers are often, more rehearsed in a deficit model of teaching and learning (Peacock, 2018). The movement towards increased teacher agency is also, intrinsically linked to professional capacity and teacher research engagement (Firth, 2018). Yet the practicalities of teachers actively engaging within research was called into question, with some participants referencing heavy workloads, limited time and a lack of resources preventing them from doing so. The impact of austerity has indeed, been particularly hard hitting for schools (NAHT, 2019). This creates a paradox, whereby the aspirations for the teaching profession have never been higher, whilst simultaneously, efforts are being impeded by declining financial mobility.

Conclusion

This study has yielded a number of poignant observations, with perceived strengths residing in the structure and purpose of this education reforms commitment to all pupils achieving through a pupil centered paradigm. The education reforms ambitions in raising the professionalism of teachers through increased agency and the building of capacity was also acknowledged. Yet, the need for greater clarity was voiced, particularly in relation to the positioning of skills and knowledge within the curriculum. This observation is fundamentally significant, as a failure to address the balancing of skills and knowledge risks the allowance of damaging variations in how schools approach the implementation of the reform itself. This need for consensus was also identified in relation to the precise levels of teacher agency afforded, with a balanced approach needed in understanding the expectations that this changing identity has on a profession still encroached in cautiousness derived from reform fatigue, funding deficits and accountability regimes. Furthermore, the varying perspectives towards the capacity building SLO model (OECD, 2016) and new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (Welsh Government, 2018), necessitate careful consideration about how recent initiatives are being perceived in relation to the actual practices of schools. Indeed, a strong moral purpose demands that sights remain firmly fixed on ensuring the successful embedding of an education system in Wales, that is tenacious in its resolve to provide all children with the highest education possible.

Limitations and Recommendations

Firstly, the small sample utilised for this study cannot be regarded as representative of school leaders beyond the participants. The decision to target school leaders is also compounded by issues of power and position. As school leaders, the participants are in a powerful stance of authority and it is reasonable to accept that their reported perceptions and experiences may have been suppressed or heightened in order to be in line with external expectations (McConnell-Henry, James, Chapman & Francis, 2010). Yet notably, the sampling choices made for this study were never intended to be representative of the wider education population. Instead, the strength of this study was deemed as residing within its ability to provide explanatory depth and reach conclusions specific to the reported experiences and perceptions of the participants themselves (Davies, 2007). Furthermore, the qualitative paradigm of this study accepts that the

findings reported here, tell only one narrative amongst many that could have been told about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In light of these constraints, and given the pivotal positioning of co-constructivism within the implementation of the reform, future research is needed that explores the ongoing perceptions and transitional experiences of the wider school community. This need for larger scale research is particularly critical given the extent of change warranted by the reform, and the need to sustain widespread momentum and alignment to the vision proposed.

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