Teaching and the Curriculum

The majority of schools and non-maintained settings have continued to develop and refine their vision for curriculum and teaching. In around half of cases, they have considered well what this vision should look like in practice and how it can support pupils to improve their knowledge understanding and skills.

Sgwrs Podcast: Exploring the Curriculum for Wales

Listen to our podcast, Sgwrs, where we explore the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales and how schools are shaping innovative and impactful learning experiences. This episode includes practical examples from schools implementing a dynamic and engaging curriculum and advice for educators on successful curriculum planning.

The panel includes Claire Morgan (Strategic Director, Estyn) Tony Bate (HMI, Estyn) Amy Newton (Co-Acting Head, St Julian's Comprehensive School) and Judith Russell (Headteacher, Langstone Primary).

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High quality teaching

Where curriculum implementation has been most successful, leaders have kept an unrelenting focus on improving the quality of teaching as fundamental to helping teachers understand how to effectively develop and deliver their curriculum. In these cases, leaders have ensured that professional learning responds well to findings from schools' evaluation processes, in particular the aspects of teaching most in need of improvement.

In the more effective schools, leaders worked with staff to set high expectations for the quality of teaching. These schools placed a clear emphasis on engaging pupils in learning experiences that are most likely to accelerate their progress. A few schools were beginning to develop clear strategies for supporting pupils to become more independent problem-solvers by encouraging them to consider their thinking and reflect on their work critically. For instance, they promoted high-quality classroom discussions that help pupils verbalise their thinking and work through tasks collaboratively with their peers.

Cyfarthfa Park Primary

Spotlight – Effective Approaches to Oracy and Its Impact on Developing Critical Thinkers

Leaders and staff ensure that there is a shared approach to developing pupils' speaking and listening skills. This approach is well integrated into teaching in nearly all classes. Staff equip pupils with the language and vocabulary they need to become reflective learners, fostering their confidence to respectfully challenge each other's thinking. This approach is deeply rooted across many areas of the curriculum; for instance, pupils use their language skills to evaluate their own learning, engage in purposeful discussions about their reading, and articulate their ideas for solving mathematical problems.

In schools where leaders have been most successful in securing improvements in the quality of teaching, they:

- Ensured that all staff understand the importance of planning for learning in pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding
- Developed a culture of high expectations where all staff enjoy discussing teaching and curriculum development
- Supported staff to develop a clear understanding of progress in all aspects of pupils' learning
- Encouraged staff and allow them to make informed professional choices
- Created a culture where teachers frequently receive feedback about strengths and areas for improvement in teaching
- Regularly placed teaching and pedagogy as agenda items on all staff meetings
- Ensured that professional development is planned strategically
- Used research sensibly to inform the decisions and strategy for their school

In schools where teachers planned carefully for learning, they designed learning activities that are engaging and aligned with intended learning outcomes. A majority of primary schools and a minority of secondary schools have balanced the systematic development of pupils' knowledge and understanding together with their application. This has helped them to make meaningful links, where appropriate, both within and across Areas of Learning and Experience (AOLEs).

Leaders and practitioners in many non-maintained nursery settings have made strong progress in implementing the Curriculum for Wales. In these settings, staff engaged well with professional learning and developed a good understanding of child development and effective teaching in the early years.

Little Lambs Emmanuel

Spotlight – _Responsive Planning in Action_

Staff plan effectively and carefully to ensure that children's learning experiences align with the principles of the Curriculum for Wales. Practitioners have developed a strong understanding of child development and use this to respond adeptly to each child's individual needs.

For example, practitioners use the developmental pathways in the Welsh curriculum to plan carefully for learning opportunities that develop children's skills, while maintaining the flexibility to adapt to children's evolving interests. This approach ensures an effective balance between focused skill-building and ample opportunities for free play for children to develop their perseverance and confidence.

A notable strength of the setting is the way practitioners continuously adjust their curriculum to keep it engaging and accessible for all children, fostering an inclusive and stimulating learning environment.

However, in a minority of schools, curriculum design was still at an early stage of development. In these cases, there was often a weaker understanding of progression or teachers' expectations were too low. In addition, these schools have often made superficial links between subjects or AOLEs. In a minority of cases, leaders have not secured a sufficient focus on enhancing the quality of teaching and did not use evaluation and improvement processes rigorously enough to identify strengths and areas for development. In these schools, opportunities for professional learning, particularly to improve teachers' understanding of effective teaching, were underdeveloped. As a result, teachers tended to focus on planning activities without ensuring that they had a clear picture of how pupils' learning will progress. In addition, expectations of what pupils can achieve were often too low.

In a minority of schools, teachers were not supporting pupils in developing their ability to think independently well enough. In these cases, pupil engagement was often limited by adults who overly directed the learning process. This reduces opportunities for pupils to practise and apply their knowledge in more challenging contexts. However, where this was done well, staff guided pupils skilfully to apply their knowledge to solve problems with growing independence when they encounter difficulty.

In schools where the quality of teaching has not been effective enough, generally leaders:

- Have not ensured that all staff have high enough expectations of pupils
- Have not ensured that curriculum design and teaching is centred on planning for pupils' learning
- Have not prioritised the development of teaching alongside curriculum design
- Have not ensured that pupils have access to the broad range of curriculum experiences

The purpose driven curriculum

There remains too much variation in schools' understanding of the purpose driven curriculum. In the best cases, staff understood that the purpose driven curriculum is about ensuring that all learning experiences have a clear purpose in supporting pupils to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills, which in turn supports their development towards the four purposes. In these schools, staff worked collaboratively to develop a shared understanding of curriculum design and the most effective teaching approaches to support pupils' sustained progress over time. Where this was well understood, leaders and staff thought carefully about their curriculum design and constantly challenged each other to consider how all learning experiences are benefiting their pupils and supporting them to make meaningful progress.

In a minority of schools, there has been too strong a focus on the four purposes during planning for daily teaching, rather than prioritising the specific learning outcome they want pupils to achieve. This sometimes led to teachers planning individual lessons only to 'meet' the four purposes or planning a range of activities for pupils to complete that do not progressively develop their knowledge, understanding or skills.

The development of skills

In a majority of primary schools, and a minority of secondary schools, staff planned well to develop pupils' literacy, numeracy, and digital skills across the curriculum. In the best cases, there has been a strategic approach where staff worked purposefully together to plan these skills progressively.

In many non-maintained settings, staff planned well to develop children's skills holistically across the curriculum. However, in too many schools the planning for the progressive development of pupils' skills was more limited. In these schools, teachers did not provide enough opportunities for pupils to use their skills in increasingly challenging contexts or at a high enough level. As a result, opportunities were often missed for pupils to deepen their understanding and skills. For example, opportunities for pupils to apply the full range of numeracy skills across the curriculum in schools were often limited. In addition, there were regularly not enough opportunities for pupils to develop more sophisticated reading skills in a range of areas across the curriculum.

Developing a sense of Cynefin and engaging with the community

Overall, a majority of schools and settings made good use of their community. For example, staff in non-maintained nursery settings considered carefully the learning needs of the pupils and worked closely with parents to provide support for their child's learning at home. Schools often used resources in their locality and external organisations thoughtfully. In a minority of instances, schools and settings provided beneficial opportunities for pupils to develop a sense of 'Cynefin' by incorporating the history and geography of the local area, Wales and the wider world into their teaching.

A majority of secondary schools in Wales offered a broad and balanced range of Key Stage 4 courses, including both GCSE and vocational options. However, in a minority, there was a more limited range of subjects on offer, which restricts pupils' ability to pursue their interests. A few schools were continuing to implement a three-year period of study for GCESs, despite the recent statutory guidance from the Welsh Government not to do so. This means pupils drop a broader range of subjects at the end of Year 8, limiting their exposure to a wider curriculum. This reduces their opportunities to sufficiently explore various subjects before making better-informed choices at any appropriate age in Year 9.

Supporting pupils' transition

Leaders and staff in non-maintained settings worked well with parents to support their children's early education. For example, most settings invited parents into settings during initial settling in periods. Generally, many settings and primary schools worked together appropriately to ensure a smooth onward transition. A minority of secondary schools were beginning to work with their partner primary

schools to develop a shared approach to curriculum design and teaching. These schools were beginning to consider the progress they want pupils to make in their knowledge and skills and worked together to identify how pupils' learning can be built upon as they move from primary to secondary schools. However, overall, the transition from primary to secondary education often lacked consistency, and staff across both sectors did not always work well enough together to share approaches to improving teaching and curriculum development to ensure a purposeful continuity in pupils' learning.

Developing approaches to assessment and progress

The majority of teachers used formative assessment approaches to understand how well pupils were progressing and to adapt their teaching. Where teachers have clear learning intentions, they often planned questions carefully to check pupils' understanding and develop their thinking. In a majority of cases, teachers gave useful verbal feedback during lessons to support pupils, and a majority provided helpful written feedback to guide pupils in understanding their next steps. In the best cases, teachers planned effective follow-up tasks for pupils to act on this feedback. However, in a minority of schools, teachers did not ensure that pupils had sufficient opportunities to respond well enough to feedback and make meaningful improvements to the quality of their work.

Troedyrhiw Primary School

Spotlight – The progress of learners as a result of robust assessment strategies and monitoring of pupils' achievements and next steps in learning

Quality time is spent ensuring that all staff have a clear and accurate understanding of progression in each area of learning. Staff and leaders triangulate date from feedback in pupils' books, cohort progress reviews and 'Pupil Meets' where time is spent with each pupil to discuss what they are doing well, what their next steps in learning are and how they will be supported. As a result, feedback to pupils is effective. There are timely opportunities for pupils to build on prior learning and a clear understanding of what the pupil is achieving in lessons and what they need to do to improve. This in turn informs the next steps for teachers' planning.

A minority of schools have worked well to develop staff understanding of progress across all age ranges. However, overall, across Wales schools were finding it difficult to develop a shared understanding of progression and plan precisely to support pupils' progress. Leaders indicated that they would welcome further clarification from the Welsh Government about what minimum expected progress should look like at different stages of pupils' learning and development.

Questions for reflection
- How well do our staff understand the importance of high-quality teaching and its impact on their pupils' progress?
- Have we as leaders developed a culture of self-evaluation and professional learning, where improving teaching is a high priority?
- How effectively do our teachers plan for learning, designing tasks that are both engaging and aligned with intended learning outcomes?

- How well do our staff carry out their role as enabling adults, understand pupils' needs, and skilfully adapt their teaching to support and move learning forwards?

- How well do we plan for the progressive development of pupils' literacy, numeracy, and digital skills across the curriculum?

- How effectively do we make use of their community, locality, and external organisations to enrich learning experiences?

- How well do we work in partnership to ensure that transition arrangements develop a shared approach to curriculum design, improve our understanding of effective teaching and develop a shared understanding of progression?

- How well do teachers support pupils to develop their independence?

- How effectively do teachers use formative approaches to assessment to understand how well pupils are progressing and adapt their teaching in lessons and over time?