4 Ensuring a conducive policy context

This chapter looks at some of the key institutional, policy and societal conditions that have and will likely continue to shape the curriculum reform efforts in Wales. Following an overview of why these are important, the chapter reviews the main contextual issues that underpin the curriculum reform, including policy coherence with particular focus on the alignment between the curriculum and the expectations of professional learning, the alignment of assessment and evaluation arrangements and the development of schools as learning organisations. The chapter then follows with an analysis of how the governance structures can continue to provide the improvement infrastructure required to support schools. It concludes with an overview of key issues for implementation.

Why is having a conducive context important?

Policies are influenced by the context in which they are developed and put into practice. Contextual features around a policy such as historical, cultural, social and economic dimensions, governance arrangements and other policies influence the process of policy development and can enable or interfere with the successful development and implementation of a given policy. For an effective policy implementation process, it is important to recognise the influence these conditions have and, where possible, build around and shape these (Viennet and Pont, 2017[1]; Fullan and Quinn, 2015[2]).

In education, the institutional structures of decision-making and implementation levels influence the way education policies may be put into practice (Fullan and Quinn, 2015[2]; Burns and Köster, 2016[3]). This refers to governance arrangements, as well as public support and engagement with the policy and with the education system as a whole. In Wales, much depends on the institutional infrastructure to support schools and other parts of the system in need to help realise the needed changes and innovations in educational practice.

At the same time, the number and variety of policies around a specific reform can make implementation complex and challenging. Research evidence shows the risks of policies contradicting or misaligning with each other, as they may be pulling schools and educational professionals in different directions. It may also be that there are many reforms at the same time, overburdening schools with too many actions (Viennet and Pont, 2017[1]; Porter, 1994[4]; Schleicher, 2018[5]). In terms of curriculum reform, it is key to align the rest of the policies around it. These might include aligning professional development for teachers to the content and aspirations of the changes in the curriculum, adapting the assessment and evaluation framework to the learning outcomes expected from the changes in the curriculum.

In Wales, as noted in earlier OECD assessments (2017[6]; 2018[7]), considerable progress has been made in recent years in ensuring coherence in its education reform agenda. Guided by Wales' education strategic plan *Education in Wales: Our national mission* (Welsh Government, 2017[8]), policies and programmes have been deliberately directed towards the realisation of the new curriculum in recent years by establishing the curriculum reform and its four enabling objectives.

This contextual coherence around the Welsh education reform agenda remains vital for the next steps in the realisation of the reform in schools. Wales has made efforts towards this, optimising the governance and school improvement structures that help shape the curriculum reform, and aiming for policy coherence. Particular focus has been placed in the alignment between the curriculum and key complementary policies such as teacher, leadership and evaluation policies and especially on preparing schools by investing in the Schools as Learning Organisations model (SLO). How these are implemented in practice for schools and aligned to the Curriculum for Wales will be at the heart of success.

An overview of contextual features

A curriculum reform does not simply rely on the curriculum itself. In Wales, two institutional mechanisms are particularly relevant to the success of the implementation of the new curriculum: the school improvement infrastructure and the model of schools as learning organisations (OECD, 2018[7]).

The curriculum reform also depends on policy measures that are essential to allow the Welsh community to turn the curriculum framework into a learning experience for students. Wales put the new curriculum at the centre of its reform agenda, developing at the same time the "four enabling objectives":

- high-quality education profession
- inspirational leaders
- assessment, evaluation and accountability
- excellence, equity and well-being.

These four complementary policies aim to develop an education system that supports and enables the implementation of the curriculum and the four purposes. This chapter analyses how the governance and the policies which are complementary to the curriculum can risk or enable the realisation of the Curriculum for Wales. It covers three of the four enabling policies that support the curriculum: leadership, teacher quality and assessment. The excellence, equity and well-being enabling objective is analysed as part of Chapter 2, considering that equity, excellence and well-being are a key aspect of student learning and need to be seen as part of the curriculum.

Observations and issues on the policy context

Optimising the institutional structure to realise the curriculum reform

Continue strengthening the school improvement service infrastructure

Although the overall responsibility for the school system lies in the hands of the Education Directorate of the Welsh Government, 22 local authorities in Wales are responsible for direct allocation of funding to publicly funded schools and for supporting vulnerable students. Local authorities have significant responsibility for public service delivery in Wales. The 22 local authorities are politically accountable through elections held every four years. They have locally elected councils that are responsible for a range of services such as trading standards, education, housing, leisure and social services.

Local authorities work closely with the governing bodies of education institutions and with the four regional school improvement partnerships, otherwise known as the four regional consortia. Wales developed its school improvement infrastructure in recent years, establishing four regional consortia to streamline and support school improvement services, following the development of the National Model for Regional Working (Welsh Government, 2015[9]). The Welsh Local Government legislation further provides structures to support joint working between local authorities on different topics including education. The regional consortia profiles vary (Table 4.1), and so do their operating model, which is based on their agreement with the local authorities they work with.

Table 4.1. Profiles of the four regional consortia in Wales, 2016

Regional profile indicators	GwE, North Wales	ERW, South West and Mid Wales	EAS, South East Wales	CSC, Central South Wales
Percentage of students in Wales	22	28	19	31
Number of public schools	439	513	245	398
Percentage of all public schools in Wales	28%	32%	15%	25%
Percentage of self-reported Welsh speakers aged 3+ (Welsh average 19%)	31	24	10	11
Percentage of students eligible for free school meals (Welsh average 19%)	16	17.5	20.8	20.7
Percentage of population belonging to an ethnic minority	2	4	4	7
Percentage of looked-after children in Wales	18	27	19	36

Notes: Children in care are children who are "looked after" by a local authority under the Children Act 1989 and Social Services and Well-being Act 2014. Regional consortia are often referred to by their acronyms in Wales: GwE stands for Gwasanaeth Effeithiolrwydd, ERW for Ein Rhanbarth ar Waith, EAS for Education Achievement Service, and CSC for Central South Consortium.
Source: OECD (2018[7]), *Developing schools as learning organisations in Wales*, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264307193-en.

For the curriculum reform, regional consortia channel their efforts into making sure that all schools are equally involved with the new curriculum. This is especially challenging as the profile and degree of involvement with the reform process differs significantly from one school to the next. Regional consortia implementation strategies vary, but most often include funding schools and school clusters to host professional learning activities, monitoring their readiness for change and offering support accordingly, and overall helping schools in their consortium to clarify the next steps of implementation for the curriculum. The four consortia also collaborate in planning their support for the reform, including for curriculum-specific professional learning (OECD interviews and documents provided by regional consortia).

Several challenges and areas for further improvement have been highlighted. Realising the curriculum reform and developing schools as learning organisations are both likely to increase demand for support by schools, which may also increase the work and capacity requirements of regional consortia to respond to these demands. Some stakeholders have pointed out to the OECD team that regional consortia, to varying degrees, still emphasise their focus on challenging schools rather than providing them with support and promoting a learning culture, although they have recently started changing their operations to shift the balance. Consortia will need to continue to invest in their staff, especially their challenge advisers who are the first points of contact for schools, to enhance schools' ability to develop as learning organisations and support them in putting the new curriculum into practice.

The good functioning of Wales' school improvement service infrastructure depends on local authorities and regional consortia on the one hand, but their co-ordination with the rest of the middle tier and with the Welsh

Government is also crucial. As other policies are developed that rely on the same actors for implementation, it is likely that regional consortia and local authorities along with schools will have to manage a number of initiatives, therefore, the current functioning of the school improvement service is likely to change. The OECD team noted, for instance, that the implementation timeline for the new curriculum will overlap with that of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Act, to be implemented in 2021 (Welsh Government, 2018[10]). This Act, as outlined in previous OECD reports, implies significant changes in the way the education system addresses ALN, especially because it aims to include a large number of needs, and thus a larger student population. The ALN Act is, therefore, expected to have significant impacts on the way schools and education professionals organise their work, and thus they might require extensive support from school improvement services. That the two reforms be implemented close to each other in time can be an opportunity for greater coherence between the two, provided their implementation does not overload schools, and the school improvement services help them efficiently (OECD interviews).

Furthermore, while there are several examples of good collaboration between the consortia e.g. in the area of leadership development or the implementation of schools as learning organisations, there appears to be scope for deepening their collaboration and co-ordination in other areas. This will also be essential for working towards more common approaches and quality standards of school improvement services offered by each of the different consortia. Although the OECD team understands Wales' position of allowing for regional approaches, many of those the OECD team spoke to said that there is an obvious tension of allowing for too much variance in approaches and the quality of school improvement services (OECD interviews).

Promoting a sustainable learning culture – Wales' Schools as Learning Organisations model

Wales has invested in a policy for the development of schools as learning organisations, as a means for realising the new curriculum (Welsh Government, 2017[8]; Welsh Government, 2019[11]). However, evidence available suggests that a considerable proportion of schools in Wales are still far removed from functioning as learning organisations (OECD, 2018[7]) despite the potential of the SLO model to contribute to curriculum reform goals being realised (Sinnema and Stoll, 2020[12]). The Welsh Government and regional consortia are working collectively to provide further guidance to schools on how to actually develop as learning organisations. These efforts are part of an implementation plan jointly developed by the Welsh Government and regional consortia in coherence with the broader action plan for education (Welsh Government, 2017[8]). This plan is the outcome of a specifically established Schools as Learning Organisations Implementation Group that consists of representatives of the four regional consortia, Estyn and the Welsh Government and, until recently, OECD representatives as external advisors. This implementation group has served as an important means for ensuring a common approach across the consortia for supporting their schools to develop as learning organisations – with the clear objective of empowering them to put the curriculum into practice. The OECD team visited a number of schools that had engaged with the SLO model, and spoke positively about how it helps them drive their schools. These collective efforts that are geared towards the successful implementation of the new curriculum should be continued.

Furthermore, Egan et al. (2018[13]) suggests that there is scope for further aligning the professional teaching and leadership standards and Wales' SLO model, for instance, during future revisions of the standards. This is not an urgent issue, considering most of the people the OECD team spoke to mentioned these policies already facilitate the realisation of the new curriculum.

Policy coherence for successful curriculum implementation

Aligning the education profession with the ambitions of the curriculum

As noted earlier, research evidence shows that a strong curriculum when combined with teacher and school leader development can be the driver of powerful school and system improvement (Steiner, Magee and Jensen, 2018[14]). While stronger curricula make a real difference, that difference is magnified by matching it with professional learning. Attaining strong student learning as a result of a quality curriculum calls for aligning professional learning accordingly and ensuring quality delivery (Steiner, Magee and Jensen, 2019[15]). Wales has taken these lessons to heart. Since the start of the curriculum reform, Wales has revisited its view of and expectations for the education profession: this includes the development and implementation of new professional teaching and leadership standards, the SLO model and an overarching, National Approach to Professional Learning (NAPL).

Aligning professional standards

Professional standards set a clear and concise profile of what teachers are expected to know and be able to do. Countries use them as the framework to guide initial teacher education, teacher certification, teachers' ongoing professional development, teacher appraisal and career advancement, and to assess the extent to which these different elements are being effective. As done in Wales, teachers' standards (or profiles) should be developed with active involvement of the teaching profession; they should also be based on research and evidence. A fundamental pre-condition for the preparation of a profile of teacher competencies is a clear statement of objectives for student learning. Teachers' work and the knowledge and skills that they need to be effective must reflect the student learning objectives that schools are aiming to achieve. The teacher profile must thus reflect the sophistication and complexity of the knowledge and skills that teachers need to achieve student learning objectives at different stages of their career. Strong teacher standards encompass subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, the capacity to work effectively with a wide range of students and colleagues, and contributions to the school and the wider profession. Teacher profiles, furthermore, recognise teachers' capacity to continue developing and the expertise they develop on the job. The profile could express different levels of performance appropriate to beginning teachers, experienced teachers, and those with higher responsibilities (OECD, 2013[16]; OECD, 2016[17]), or it could express the inquiry-oriented standards a curriculum such as the Curriculum for Wales demands – standards that capture the complex, context-bound and active nature of teaching a future-oriented curriculum (Sinnema, Aitken and Meyer, 2017[18]).

Wales reviewed the professional standards for teachers and leaders focused on promoting practices in schools for the realisation of the new curriculum (Welsh Government, 2019[19]). The standards were developed in collaboration between experts, the education profession, and other key stakeholders as part of the Pioneer Schools Network. The new standards reflect a contemporary, research-informed understanding of what good teaching entails and align with the ambitions of the new school curriculum (Donaldson, 2015[20]).The standards start to encourage more agency on the part of teachers, and more "co-agency" on the part of school leaders and teachers, which is in line with current reflections internationally (OECD, 2019[21]).

During interviews by the OECD team, most stakeholders highlighted that standards were useful for guiding teachers' and school leaders' professional learning, and that the teaching profession in particular received them well (OECD interviews). The teaching standards, for example, highlight the importance of engaging in innovation and collaboration between practitioners within and across schools, and authentic learning and

enquiry and action research based approaches. Such methods are believed to be of great importance for putting into practice the new curriculum that is being shaped around "big ideas" (Sinnema, 2017[22]) or "what matters", as referred to in Wales. The integration of the standards into the *Professional Learning Passport* is intended to help teachers and leaders plan and record their professional learning (Education Workforce Council, 2017[23]) and is another example of the policy coherence Wales has been striving for.

Several interviewees in Wales noted, however, the need to further clarify some of the standards. Some pointed out that the standards published in 2018 were missing a number of key skills teachers will need in order to implement the new curriculum. For instance, local design of the curriculum is only mentioned once and only to describe the concept of cross-curricular teaching, which is too limited compared to the importance that curriculum design will take in teachers' daily work with the new curriculum. There is a further risk that in practice the standards could be translated into checklists of specific examples, oversimplifying teaching rather than promoting the desired professional responsibility that is considered essential for the realisation of the new curriculum (Egan et al., 2018[13]). The Welsh Government, regional consortia and other stakeholders have an important role to play in supporting their interpretation and enactment by offering further clarity and guidance on how these can be achieved. Furthermore, the standards should not be considered as fixed, but rather should evolve through time as needed. Such revisions should be used as an opportunity for ensuring further alignment with related policies, like Wales' SLO model.

A common understanding of professional learning

In its action plan, *Education in Wales: Our national mission* (Welsh Government, 2017[8]), the Welsh Government has made a commitment to establishing a national approach to professional learning, building capacity so that all teachers benefit from career-long development based on research and effective collaboration. The OECD team found that Wales is clearly moving away from a model of delivering professional learning away from the school setting, towards a more collaborative, practitioner-led experience which is embedded in classroom practice (OECD, 2018[7]). This is important: although professional learning opportunities outside the school premises, for example, formal education courses at universities can play an important role in the professional learning of staff, research evidence clearly points to the importance of ensuring professional learning opportunities are sustainable, embedded into the workplace and are primarily collaborative in nature (Timperley and Alton-Lee, 2008[24]; Fullan, Rincón-Gallardo and Hargreaves, 2015[25]; Stoll and Kools, 2017[26]).

This view of professional learning is reflected in the Welsh Government's National Approach to Professional Learning (NAPL) that was launched in 2019 to which a large amount of resources has been devoted. The OECD team agrees that it is important to define a common understanding of what professional learning entails in the Welsh context and aligned to the curriculum reform. It can inform and build coherence between the professional learning offered by regional consortia and the programmes provided by higher education institutions and other parties. This coherence will be crucial to help put the new curriculum into practice and to establish a sustainable learning culture in schools across Wales. Globally, the profession seems satisfied with this renewed emphasis on professional learning. However, the focus of the national approach should be not only on the provision approaches, but on the quality of professional learning delivered.

Several stakeholders the OECD team interviewed noted the NAPL appears to be a complex model because it responds to many different obligations for teachers, such as responding to teaching profession's expectations, preparing for the new curriculum requirements, or other objectives. The OECD team agrees that some simplification could be made to facilitate schools' understanding and navigation of the reform agenda and the alignment of the training needs and offer. It is important that schools understand what

quality professional learning implies in Wales, but with the curriculum up and coming, their priority is to have access to the relevant quality professional learning activities when they need it.

An additional but necessary element for reflection will be to assess what the new curriculum implies in terms of workload for education professionals. School-based curriculum design, intense professional collaboration and professional learning, for instance, might require education staff to spend more time in school and in preparation time, especially in the first years of implementation (OECD interviews).

A reformed initial teacher education

Wales recently reformed its initial teacher education (ITE). As of September 2019, there were new minimum entry requirements into ITE, including a GCSE Grade B in mathematics or numeracy and English or Welsh language or literature; a GCSE Grade C in science to teach in primary school; and a degree with at least 50% relevance to the subject of choice to teach in secondary schools. Four ITE partnerships were formalised with Welsh higher education institutions for the university-based route into teaching for the school year 2019/20, with two more expected for the following year. The employment-based routes were also updated to allow student teachers to study part time (Welsh Government, 2016[27]).

In recent years, many OECD countries have raised entry requirements for teacher education programmes, often focused on raising entry grades. Teaching in the 21st century is, however, a complex and challenging profession. It calls on a mix of high-level cognitive and socio-emotional skills to be used on a daily basis in practice. Therefore, reiterating the recommendation of an earlier OECD assessment (OECD, 2018[7]) and following the examples of countries like England, Finland and the Netherlands, Wales should consider promoting intake procedures and selection options that go beyond only degree requirements. In line with the teaching and leadership standards and the ambitions of the new curriculum, teacher education institutions can expand and pilot more elaborate, well rounded selection criteria and intake procedures that cover a mix of cognitive and socio-emotional skills, values, and attitudes.

Inspirational leaders

The new professional standards (Welsh Government, 2019[19]) also included new descriptors for inspirational leaders, in terms of pedagogy, collaboration, innovation, professional learning and general leadership practices. For instance, a teacher in a formal leadership position is expected to promote teaching and leadership in Wales, to exercise corporate responsibility and culture, to empower and support others. In terms of pedagogy, they are for instance supposed to ensure that school strategy and infrastructure are fit for purpose, to ensure the four purposes for learners, and to report on effectiveness (Welsh Government, 2019[19]).

Similarly to the analysis of the teacher professional standards, leadership standards were seen as going in the right direction but with the need for further refinement and clarification. The implications of the new curriculum for leadership, although not formalised, include responsibilities and skills that go beyond the current practice of educational leadership in Wales, and the standards can help make this practice clearer to build the leadership capacity of head teachers and other school leaders (OECD interviews).

The Welsh Government, encouraged by the OECD (2017[6]), has taken on the commitment to promote a new approach to educational leadership, including (but not limited to) schools' head teachers and other administrative and pedagogical leaders (such as deputy head teachers and subject head teachers in secondary schools). To this effect, the Welsh Government established the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL), and entrusted it with the mission to create, promote and turn the Welsh perspective on educational leadership into reality.

In its first year of existence, the NAEL spent time analysing and learning about educational leadership from across the world and in Wales, working mainly with a network of head teachers committed to advance educational leadership in Wales (NAEL, 2018[28]). As a first endeavour, the Academy defined a set of criteria for quality courses in educational leadership and endorsed a number of such courses for the year 2018/19 onwards.

The OECD team acknowledges the progress made in creating a specific institution devoted to educational leadership, also because the focus on educational leadership was limited in previous reform efforts (OECD, 2017[6]; OECD, 2014[29]). Nevertheless, most stakeholders interviewed in Wales, including NAEL staff, agreed that the role of the Academy could be extended beyond endorsing courses to promote leadership. A key issue is that the Academy and educational leaders need to deepen their knowledge of what type of leadership is implied by the new curriculum. A first step could be to look systematically at what leadership practices Pioneer schools have deployed when testing the curriculum, what worked and what did not.

Aligning the assessment and evaluation policy framework with the curriculum

International evidence clearly points to the conclusion that a reform of any curricula should be matched with a review of assessment and evaluation arrangements to be successful (OECD, 2013[16]; Klenowski, Klenowski and Gladys, 2015[30]). Chapter 2 in this report reviews the changes under way in student assessment, as assessment for learning inherently forms part of the new curriculum. To support the realisation of the new curriculum and balance the accountability regime in education, the Welsh Government embarked on a reform of its assessment and evaluation framework, co-constructing the new arrangements with key stakeholders such as teachers and Estyn. This is one of the "enabling objectives" of the strategic education action plan, *Education in Wales: Our national mission* (Welsh Government, 2017[8]). At the time of drafting this report, the details of the new assessment and evaluation framework were still being clarified, but the philosophy was clearly announced: to ensure the new arrangements will be fit to promote learning and improvement.

Aligning qualifications with the new curriculum

An important step initiated recently is Qualifications Wales' review of qualifications, which will be essential for aligning assessment and evaluation arrangements with the new curriculum. Qualifications Wales was also part of several working groups with the Welsh Government and other middle-tier agencies and was working with the Exam board(s), so all the actors who would be operating the new qualifications by 2025 were involved.

Prior to initiating its review of qualifications, Qualifications Wales engaged with Pioneer schools to consider options for the future. It will take time to agree on the new form of qualifications, but some emerging issues included discussions about whether qualifications such as GCSEs should reflect the holistic Areas of Learning and Experience (Areas) or remain subject-based, how to safeguard trust in Welsh qualifications while adapting to the curriculum's different approach to learning, and how to assess, evaluate and qualify challenging competencies (OECD interviews).

Without such alignment there is a real risk that teaching and learning in for students aged 14 to 16 will be skewed towards the content of qualifications rather than helping students realise the four purposes of the new curriculum. Further communication on this development and the progress made in the review and the characteristics of the 'new' qualifications will be essential for the successful implementation of the new curriculum.

System-level monitoring and evaluation should promote learning at all levels of the system

During recent decades there has been a clear worldwide trend in education towards the development of effective monitoring and evaluation systems (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016[31]; OECD, 2013[16]). Such systems are central to informing policy planning for improvement, while serving the purpose of public accountability. On the other hand, the performance information they produce brings with it the risk of unintended consequences. Some studies have found evidence that such performance information, instead of leading to actual organisational learning, has resulted in blame avoidance behaviour, gaming of results, and naming and shaming (George et al., 2017[32]; Hood, 2013[33]; Nielsen and Baekgaard, 2015[34]; Daly, 2009[35]). As earlier OECD reviews have found, this has also been the case for Wales (OECD, 2014[36]; OECD, 2017[6]).

The Welsh Government and other stakeholders are aware of these findings. In response, and in line with recent paradigm shifts in public administration, often labelled the New Public Governance movement (Osborne, 2013[37]; Osborne, 2006[38]), the Welsh Government has aimed to develop trust in the profession and the system, promoting collaboration and networking and making assessment and evaluation primarily about learning. This does not imply a lack of accountability, but the obligation to use more reliable data on learning and to add or strengthen layers of checks and balances, including stronger professional and horizontal accountability.

Teacher assessments of student performance at the end of primary and lower secondary education were used to monitor progress of schools and the system. This double purpose increased the stakes of these assessments and challenged their reliability. Responding to the recommendations of the Successful Futures report by Graham Donaldson (2015[20]) and following the examples of education systems like the Flemish Community of Belgium, Finland and New Zealand (OECD, 2015[39]; OECD, 2018[7]), the Welsh Government is exploring using a sampling approach to provide data for evaluation and improvement of student learning and well-being. This is a positive development that may allow for such monitoring to cover the full breath of the curriculum and monitor system-wide progress across all areas of learning.

In addition, in consultation with the education profession, regional consortia, local authorities and other stakeholders, the Welsh Government decided to no longer use teacher assessments of students learning for monitoring individual schools. This decision will likely positively influence the quality of these assessments with teachers and head teachers being more willing to embrace (rather than hide) areas for improvement.

In light of the above, the Welsh Government set out to change its performance measures for system evaluation. It set out to develop a number of "quality indicators" that go beyond the mostly quantitative indicators that were used for monitoring school progress. It will be important to include longitudinal system-level monitoring of student progress and achievement in relation to the new curriculum's purposes.

A new school evaluation framework to promote learning and improvement

School evaluation has been subject to considerable changes in recent years in Wales. For several years, two parallel systems have been in place that lack in synergies and are dominated by accountability demands. In 2014 a national school categorisation system was put into practice. Developed collectively by the regional consortia and the Welsh Government, this system identifies schools most in need of support over a three-year period, using a three-step colour coding strategy. Step 1 assesses publicly available school performance data and Step 2 the school's own self-evaluation in respect to leadership, learning and teaching. Challenge advisors from the regional consortia examine how the school's self-evaluation corresponds to the performance data under Step 1. This is intended to ensure the process is robust. Under

Step 3, judgements reached in the first two steps lead to an overall judgement and a corresponding categorisation of each school into one of four colours: green, yellow, amber and red. Categorisation then triggers a tailored programme of support, challenge and intervention agreed by the local authority and the regional consortia (Welsh Government, 2016[40]).

Although national school categorisation in general is considered an improvement on its predecessor (i.e. the school banding system), it is still considered by many a high-stakes exercise because the colour coding of schools is made public. Several stakeholders interviewed also criticised the calculation method based on the school performance data (Step 1), in particular the small weight given to the number of students receiving free school meals in the final judgement. This high-stakes use of student assessment data in school evaluations has allowed for "gaming" and even stigmatising professionals and schools working in the most challenging communities. As such, the system is considered by many as unfair and offering a false sense of public accountability. In addition, external school evaluations by Estyn are based on different criteria and methods than the national categorisation system (OECD, 2017[6]). Not surprisingly, the findings and recommendations from these different school evaluations regularly differ. The OECD team also learnt that the school self-evaluation report was frequently seen in the past as something that was done "for Estyn", with much time and effort spent on its development. At the time this report was reviewed, Estyn officials reported not having asked schools for self-evaluation reports since the 2019 summer period.

Various school self-evaluation and development tools have also been made available to schools in Wales. These documents developed by the Welsh Government, regional consortia and Estyn are not well aligned and fail to give a clear picture to schools of what is expected from them in terms of self-evaluation and development planning. They may also not do enough to encourage schools to develop as learning organisations and promote a culture of enquiry, experimentation and innovation which will be essential for putting the new curriculum into practice (OECD, 2018[7]).

Against this backdrop, the Welsh Government asked Estyn and OECD representatives to facilitate the work of a stakeholder group, tasked with formulating a common understanding of what good school self-evaluation and development planning entails in Wales. This developmental work was concluded in July 2019 and resulted in the development of a national school improvement resource, which was piloted in schools during the school year 2019/20. Similar to countries like Finland, Ireland and the Netherlands (OECD, 2018[7]), peer review by representatives of other schools is aimed to help schools in their reflections. It also allows for the dissemination of lessons learnt – both good and bad – and further enhances the horizontal accountability.

Many of those interviewed by the OECD team consider the national school improvement resource a positive development. Several strengths were noted, including the prominence placed on promoting schools to develop as learning organisations, and a participatory approach to self-evaluation involving all staff, students, parents, the community, and other partners that strengthens both "professional accountability" and "horizontal accountability" (Hooge, Burns and Wilkoszewski, 2012[41]). In addition, challenge/improvement advisors of regional consortia support school self-evaluation and improvement planning, which makes more concrete the transition away from high-stakes accountability towards accountability for improvement.

The new approach encourages schools to identify their strengths and priorities for improvement. Such prioritisation is essential for bringing about lasting change and improvements, rather than spending time and resources to meeting a large number of standards – all at the same time – thereby reducing effectiveness and efficiency, and often demotivating those involved when desired results are not achieved or maintained for long. Identifying and sharing good practices fits Wales' objective of a self-improving school

system (Welsh Government, 2017[8]), and will be essential for the successful realisation of the new curriculum. It will be important to maintain coherence between the new approach for school evaluation and the Curriculum for Wales. Schools may otherwise be pulled in different directions if the new curriculum is being implemented while the school evaluation processes place priority in other areas of improvement.

One issue under discussion with the new framework is whether to put aside the system of colour coding of schools, which is known to have tempered schools' confidence and even their capacity to engage in enquiry, experimentation and innovation (OECD, 2018[7]). Several options have been proposed, such as the publication of the school development plan and a summary of improvement priorities, which could be a positive development in terms of public accountability. The plan would provide a much more detailed overview of the actual strengths and areas for improvement of a school, compared to the colour coding scheme of national categorisation. To align it effectively to the reform agenda, it will be essential again to connect the school evaluation approach to the new curriculum, progress with its implementation, and student learning around it.

The successful implementation of this new approach to school evaluation can contribute to the realisation of the Curriculum for Wales if these are well aligned and contribute to schools focusing on the types of student learning brought about by the new curriculum and on their capacity and improvement processes to realise it. This depends, however, on a number of conditions. First, Estyn committed to include the themes that underpin the national school improvement resource as guiding principles in their school evaluations. In addition to the new curriculum, these can include safeguarding the quality of schools, while focusing on the rigour of schools' self-evaluation processes and development planning. Second, there is a need for further clarifying the roles and responsibilities between the local authorities, regional consortia and Estyn in terms of supporting school evaluation aligned to the realisation of the new curriculum (see Chapter 3 for more detail). Third, international evidence shows that the implementation of the school improvement resource will require a substantial, multi-year investment in developing the capacity of all those involved in self-evaluations and development planning (OECD, 2013[16]; Ehren, 2013[42]). The regional consortia have a leading role to play but, as also noted by several interviewees, to fully integrate the new approach to school self-evaluation and improvement in schools, the resource should be introduced in leadership development and teacher education programmes. This proposal fits Wales' objective of a self-improving school system (Welsh Government, 2017[8]) as it expands the school improvement role of its higher education institutions. Fourth, it is important that the Welsh Government, regional consortia and Estyn clarify and jointly communicate on the transition to the new system of school self-evaluation and Estyn evaluations aligned to the new curriculum. Discussions were ongoing between these actors at the time this report was written (OECD interviews).

The Welsh Government worked to communicate clearly about any changes to assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements, and how they align to the curriculum. Schools, students, parents and other stakeholders will benefit from a clear, holistic presentation of the new system of assessment, evaluation and accountability that is focusing attention on learning and the new curriculum, critical reflection and transparency. Participants to an OECD-Welsh Government stakeholder event in 2018 made the insightful suggestion to develop and disseminate a simple narrative and supporting graphical presentation of the 'new/emerging' assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements, compared to the 'old' arrangements. At the time of writing, the OECD team had access to a draft version of such document. The OECD team agrees that such a communication piece, which highlights the co-construction process, and explains the new system aligned to the new curriculum as it begins the next stages of implementation, may have great value.

A new education research strategy

In addition, a prominent issue that has been raised during several of the interviews with the OECD team was the need for a strategic research agenda that is used to strengthen the quality of curriculum design, teaching and learning across schools in Wales, and can also contribute to monitor progress in the realisation of the curriculum. It was apparent to the OECD team that compared to several years ago the Welsh Government, regional consortia, schools and other stakeholders are much more engaged with research to investigate and enhance their practice. One university study was already conducted around the implications of the new curriculum for equity, and offered promising suggestions for a research agenda around these topics (Newton, Power and Taylor, 2019[43]).

At the same time it was apparent to the OECD team that there is scope for more strategic use of research to support the curriculum reform. The Welsh Government and other stakeholders have recognised this issue and are drafting a national strategy for educational research (OECD interviews). This research agenda should form an integrated part of the overarching assessment, evaluation and accountability framework. Although in its early days, the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE) sets out the ambition that Wales will develop critical enquiry as part of both the professional learning offer and school-level curriculum making. The NSERE aims to create the environment within which the middle tier can work with schools to develop their skills in enquiry, on the one hand, and enrich the evidence base for all schools to draw from, on the other (OECD interviews). It would also be advisable in the future, to involve higher and post-secondary education institutions around the analysis on the possible impact of the new curriculum on their students and their own teaching practices, once the first cohorts to experience the Curriculum for Wales reach those levels of education.

Overall, Wales is moving towards a stronger system of assessment, evaluation and accountability focused on learning, critical reflection, transparency and trust. The OECD team shares the views expressed during interviews and stakeholder events that the new system Wales is moving towards is not decreasing accountability measures but is shifting the approach towards a professionally driven system. The effort aims to strengthen and better align several evaluation arrangements with adding layers of checks and balances (i.e. professional accountability) through a more systematic participatory approach to school self-evaluation and peer review.

The OECD team considers that there is scope for better aligning the policies and the whole system to the objectives and aspirations of the new curriculum and its realisation in schools. To develop it, the strong processes of co-construction practised in Wales could be a valuable approach to ensure they are fit for purpose and there is strong engagement. This has already been done to develop the school self-evaluation resource through 2018, with Estyn, OECD and practitioner working groups.

Conclusions

There is a shift in Wales from what had become a managerial education system to one based on trust and professionalism, which can build on a favourable political and policy environment: most parties and governance processes are aligning behind the curriculum, and many key policies complementary to the Curriculum for Wales are evolving in the same direction. This is because efforts were made to make the education reform journey a coherent one, with the four enabling objectives around the curriculum, including the teaching profession, leadership, assessment and equity, excellence and well-being.

Wales has invested in the quality of education professionals with the development of professional standards for teachers and school leaders, the creation of a national professional learning programme, investments in initial teacher education, and the creation of a National Academy for Educational Leadership. The Welsh Government has also focused on changing its assessment and evaluation approaches to fit the new curriculum, moving from a high-stakes school environment to one based on professionalism. Efforts have been made to develop a self-evaluation resource for schools and to enhance system-level monitoring. In addition, the school improvement infrastructure has been consolidated, with regional consortia providing school improvement services and supporting their schools to develop as learning organisations.

For the curriculum to be effective across all schools in Wales, the Education Directorate should pursue further coherence of these complementary policies with the curriculum. It can prioritise its own actions based on what the system needs, and more specifically, on what schools need to successfully roll out the new curriculum by 2022. It is essential that the accountability framework and the school-leaving qualifications align with the new curriculum principles in order to avert the risk that misaligned accountability and assessment measures undermine the curriculum.

This chapter has presented a detailed analysis of the challenges, policies and contextual elements that can contribute to success with the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales. It will be important for Wales to shift its considerations and implementation approach towards consolidating curriculum coherence around schools. Building on the analysis developed in this chapter and the previous one, Chapter 5 develops and weaves together a set of concrete recommendations and actions for a coherent implementation strategy to ensure the Curriculum for Wales reaches schools and classrooms.

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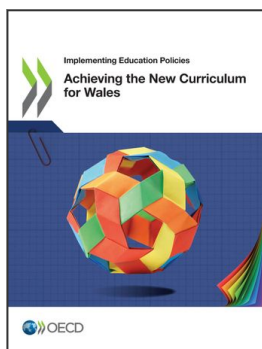
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