Research with schools on the early implementation of Curriculum for Wales: Wave 1 report

Executive summary

1. Introduction

1.1 This report presents findings of the first wave (Wave 1) of qualitative research with 64 senior leaders in schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) carried out by Arad Research on behalf of the Welsh Government during November 2022 to January 2023, which examined schools' early experiences of roll-out of Curriculum for Wales (CfW). It follows on from Qualitative research with practitioners on preparations for curriculum and assessment reforms (Welsh Government, 2022b) published in January 2022. A report detailing findings of a second wave (Wave 2) of interviews with senior leaders, as well as fieldwork with learners, will be published later in 2023.

2. Methodology and analysis

2.1 A total of 64 senior leaders took part in Wave 1 interviews; 16 of them selected from among those who took part in the Qualitative research with practitioners on preparations for curriculum and assessment reforms (Welsh Government, 2022b) as well as an additional sample of 48 senior leaders. A purposive sample of interviewees were recruited to ensure regional coverage and the inclusion of a variety of settings including:

- types of setting (primary, secondary, all-through, special, PRU):

- language medium (Welsh-medium, English-medium).

It is important to acknowledge the risk of selection bias among the sample of schools that engaged with the research. Settings that had progressed further than others in their preparation activities may have been more likely to agree to take part in the interviews.

A description of the methodology is set out in Section 2 and the sample profile is included in Section 3.

3. Findings: Overall progress

3.1   Senior leaders reported they were content with the progress they had made to date in designing and implementing their curriculum. Concerns about progress were expressed in a small number of settings but a few senior leaders noted they had previously been concerned about the size of the task ahead of them, but now felt they were making good progress. Schools who reported that they had been planning and developing their curriculum for 3-4 years appeared to be more confident in their approaches than those who reported being at an earlier stage of implementing their curriculum.

3.2   Senior leaders reported that practitioners were increasingly taking responsibility and ownership for curriculum implementation. Interviewees reported that there was an increased focus on pedagogy and collaborative activity both within settings and in their clusters. Increasing cluster-level activity facilitated by practitioners was cited as an example of increasing practitioner autonomy and ownership of the curriculum.

3.3   Senior leaders reported that developing and implementing their setting's curriculum had created challenges in terms of staff capacity and time, particularly in planning the curriculum and ensuring it covered the required elements set out in the CfW framework.

4. Planning and implementing across and within Areas

4.1   Senior leaders reported that practitioners in their settings were planning and mapping elements of the CfW framework against each of the Areas to ensure adequate 'coverage' and to avoid repetition where possible. A variety of approaches were described to developing links between subjects and Areas. Primary schools were more likely to be adopting a more integrated thematic or topic-based approach, while secondaries tended to report increased collaboration between subject leads, compared with the previous curriculum, and attempts to identify commonalities and links between topics in different subjects and Areas.

4.2   There were variations in terms of which Areas senior leaders considered were progressing well in their curriculum design and implementation. Senior leaders generally reported that Health and Wellbeing and Languages, Literacy and Communication were more developed Areas in terms of joint planning and integrated working. Interviewees tended to emphasise their setting's efforts to ensure that skills developed in Mathematics and Numeracy were mapped against and integrated effectively into other Areas. There was mixed feedback on the success of efforts to promote joint planning in the Humanities and Expressive Arts Areas. Science and Technology appeared to be the Area senior leaders felt was most challenging in terms of encouraging joint planning.

4.3   Mapping progression within Areas was a focus in many settings, with senior leaders describing how cluster activity was playing a key role in developing their shared understanding of progression. However, senior leaders referred to capacity challenges in releasing staff to participate in joint planning sessions and cluster activity.

5. Implementing RSE

5.1   Many settings reported that delivery of RSE had progressed well and report they had not encountered concerns from their parents and carers, despite sometimes having anticipated that there might be issues. Some senior leaders had experienced negative responses from

parents and carers in relation to RSE, but many had been able to address concerns through open and transparent communication.

5.2 Many senior leaders, particularly in primary schools, reported that their settings were using externally sourced (usually purchased) materials to inform and guide RSE design, planning and delivery. In some cases, senior leaders reported their settings had adapted some of these materials to ensure that they were developmentally-appropriate.

5.3 Some senior leaders expressed a desire for more centralised support for RSE curriculum design and concerns were raised about the ability of settings to deliver this aspect of the curriculum without financial outlay.

5.4 Several senior leaders reported that their setting had allocated responsibility for RSE to a specific staff member, such as appointing a Head of Wellbeing or PSE Coordinator. Senior leaders reported that RSE leads worked with other Area leads to incorporate RSE-related topics across the curriculum.

6. Implementing international languages

6.1 There were clear differences in the extent to which primary and secondary senior leaders had incorporated international languages into their curriculum. Senior leaders in primary schools reported that they were in the early stages of implementing the teaching of international languages in their schools. While a few primary schools had already embedded international languages through other programmes, most noted that they were reliant on collaborative activity with secondary schools or external partners to implement international languages within their curriculum.

6.2 Senior leaders in secondary schools reported a continuation in their international languages provision in-line with curriculum developments. A few reported an increase in their activity to support their cluster primary schools.

6.3 Several senior leaders, in both Welsh and English-medium schools, referred to the importance of prioritising the development of Welsh language skills over international languages.

7. Arrangements for monitoring learner progression

7.1 Senior leaders reported having developed progression plans (often called 'progression maps') across Areas, with comments indicating that the principles of progression are incorporated into curriculum design. Schools are working internally and in clusters to develop a shared understanding of progression.

7.2 Primary and secondary school senior leaders recognised the greater emphasis on the progress made by the individual learner as part of their thinking and planning in relation to progression. Schools presented a number of examples of progression models and approaches they have developed and/or are trialling. Senior leaders recognised that the new approaches to learner progression being adopted require a change in practitioner mindset, which is likely to take some time to embed.

7.3 Schools expressed concerns or noted challenges in relation to several aspects linked to progression, notably a perceived risk of divergence as schools and clusters adopt different approaches to recording and reporting progression; and the increased time expended by leaders and teachers in developing and reviewing approaches to progression.

7.4　Senior leaders described changes in their approaches for reporting to parents and carers, including the format or medium used as well as what they report on to parents. Senior leaders expressed a reluctance among practitioners in their settings to move away from traditional styles of reporting on levels and grades, sometimes in the absence of a confirmed new approach to assessment within the school.

8.　Assessment arrangements

8.1　Senior leaders reported progress in developing new approaches to assessment, with an increased focus on formative, day-by-day assessment. Senior leaders reported using formative assessment to inform planning and differentiated approaches to teaching that respond to the needs of individual learners. Senior leaders commented on the change in mindset and attitude required to realise the ambition for a new approach to assessment.

8.2　Many senior leaders report a reduction in the overall volume of formal assessment during the school year; however schools continue to use national personalised assessment to gauge learners' progress in reading and numeracy.

8.3　For many senior leaders, significant questions remain in relation to assessment: they report being unclear and concerned about the assessment data they will be required to provide as part of accountability arrangements. In a number of cases, schools are continuing to use external assessment tools alongside the new assessment methods being developed.

9.　Supporting equity and inclusivity

9.1　Equity and inclusivity were viewed by senior leaders as ongoing priorities which were reinforced by the CfW framework and guidance, as well as the requirements of the ALN code. Senior leaders felt they were now more learner-centred in their approach to curriculum design, with the flexibility to tailor support according to learners' needs. An increased focus on learner voice activity which was now considered to be more central to curriculum design was felt to support a learner-centred and inclusive education.

9.2　More individualised approaches to monitoring learner progress were considered to be a key contributor to increasing equity and inclusivity. Senior leaders commented that a greater emphasis on each learner making appropriate progress for their own individual learning and development would support equity and inclusivity.

9.3　Changing their curriculum content to be more diverse and a better reflection of society was considered by senior leaders to be a positive change taking place in their setting. Senior leaders felt this aspect of the curriculum was progressing well in their settings, with a range of resources and training opportunities available to support this.

10.　Engaging with parents and carers to raise awareness of the new curriculum and assessment arrangements.

10.1　Schools were utilising a variety of approaches to disseminate information on the curriculum to parents. Some expressed caution in communicating CfW changes to parents and highlighted a range of methods used to 'drip-feed' updates in an effort to avoid overwhelming parents with too much information. Schools reported using their mandatory curriculum summaries to share information with parents about the reforms, setting out how the new curriculum is organised and an overview of approaches to learner progression.

10.2 Some senior leaders mentioned that CfW-specific events for parents and carers, such as workshops about the changes, were poorly attended. Senior leaders reported they found there was better engagement with parents and carers when putting on events which embedded CfW information, such as via presentations, celebration events and assemblies that the children also participated in. Several settings had started to include 'learning days' as a new means of reporting, inviting parents in to view and discuss their child's work.

10.3 Senior leaders described a variety of attempts to involve parents and carers in curriculum design. However, senior leaders tended to report limited responses from parents to methods such as surveys or meetings. There were reports of settings limiting their consultation with parents and carers until practitioners and settings had spent more time designing their curriculum and felt more confident in their approaches.

11. Issues for consideration

11.1 The following issues for consideration have been developed based on the findings set out above.

- The Welsh Government should continue to encourage collaboration between settings, focusing on supporting joint-working among Area leads as part of curriculum planning, and evaluation. This should include collaboration between primary and secondary schools.

- The Welsh Government should consider whether there is a case for the development of additional resources to support RSE provision, particularly in primary and special schools.

- The Welsh Government, working with regional partners, should ensure that international languages are promoted and delivered as an integral part of the new curriculum arrangements in all schools.

- During the second wave of research with senior leaders as part of this study, there should be a focus on understanding the learning points at school level from the trialling of new progression models, including how schools have refined and improved their approaches.

- The Welsh Government should continue to monitor the potential implications of divergence in settings' and clusters' approaches to monitoring progression, particularly in considering how to monitor progress at a national level.

- Senior leaders frequently referred to a desire for reassurance that the approaches they are taking to curriculum planning, progression and, particularly, assessment were appropriate (and 'on the right track'). While collaborative working between schools goes some way to providing reassurance, Welsh Government should consider whether there is a need for a role that provides external constructive challenge to schools (particularly around progression and assessment) during these early years of implementation.

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:
Schools Research Branch
Social Research and Information Division
Knowledge and Analytical Services
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ
Tel: 03000255381
Email: SchoolsResearch@gov.wales

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.