

Comments on 'Successful Futures', Professor Donaldson's independent review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales

Preface

I have limited my observations to those sections of the Review which deal with the curriculum in general and also with history. I have tried to identify within it the recommendations of the Report on the Cwricwlwm Cymreig, history and the story of Wales (1), and commented where appropriate on the approach taken to these. I have not addressed other issues such as assessment, school structure etc. unless they are relevant to the Cwricwlwm Cymreig and/or history.

I realise that this Review is only a basis for change. It makes recommendations regarding the foundations of the education system in Wales, and does RCCH not attempt to present the finished edifice. But the nature and security of a building is decided by its foundations, and these recommendations are the criteria which will be used by those constructing the next National Curriculum for Wales. In my view, some of the changes proposed for the curriculum in Wales are not securely grounded in Wales itself. Consequently I am very concerned about the quality and Welshness of a new curriculum for Wales established on this Review.

General

1. There is much to welcome in Professor Donaldson's Review, and one cannot disagree with the basic principles it sets down with regard to the curriculum in general. These are essentially the principles that inform the Foundation Phase and they, together with some of the other national curricula cited in the Review, also informed Curriculum 2008, with its emphasis on the learner and on developing skills across the curriculum. Consequently, Professor Donaldson's recommendations are in this respect a natural progression from previous developments in the National Curriculum in Wales, especially the Foundation Phase. They are an evolution rather than a revolution, and should not entail a fundamental change in the general principles of the curriculum in Wales. All this is entirely consonant with the recommendations of RCCH.

1 *The Cwricwlwm Cymreig, history and the story of Wales*, Welsh Government, 2013. ISBN

Cwricwlwm Cymreig

2. It is also very encouraging to see the consultation exercise undertaken as part of the Review showed such support for the Cwricwlwm Cymreig, the Welsh language and culture, and the concept of a Curriculum for Wales. This provides a firm foundation on which to build on the recommendations of the RCCH. It is good to read in the Review that
 - the curriculum should be 'authentic: rooted in Welsh values and culture ...' (p.14);
 - that the evidence from the discussions with stakeholders held by Professor Donaldson and his team showed clearly 'a firm commitment to the Welsh language and bilingualism, to the principle of comprehensive, inclusive education, and to the inclusion of a Welsh dimension in the education of all children and young people' (p.15);
 - and that the response to the call for evidence showed clear general support for 'the Foundation Phase, the Welsh language and bilingualism... and the focus on Welsh identity and the Curriculum Cymreig ' (ibid.).

It was also very encouraging to see that this was particularly evident in the consultation responses from young people.

3. However I am concerned that the Review itself appears to limit consideration of the Welsh dimension to language and culture only. This occurs as early as p. 19, when the support shown in the consultation responses to the Welsh dimension, and the focus on Welsh identity and the Cwricwlwm Cymreig is re-worded as support for 'Welsh language and culture' only. The same misleading interpretation (or misunderstanding) is also found on p. 24, and again in the Conclusions on p. 105, which refer to '... the importance attached to the Welsh culture and language ...' without any further reference to a broader Welsh dimension.
4. In the conclusions to his Report, Professor Donaldson says 'It is important to have a clear definition of what we mean by 'the curriculum'' (p. 106). It is impossible to disagree with that. Unfortunately, this Report does not attempt to define the Welsh dimension to the curriculum, nor mention it in any

context wider than the cultural, nor refer to it in any cross-curricular context. I see here a real danger of restricting to the language and culture alone that Welsh perspective which should be the basis of a real Curriculum for Wales. There is much more than that to the current Cwricwlwm Cymreig. The absence of any definition of the Welsh dimension is thus contrary to one of the fundamental principles of Professor Donaldson's Report, and also the recommendation of RCCH that the 'next national curriculum for Wales should take as its starting point the ideas and ideals embodied in the current Cwricwlwm Cymreig and build upon these as the foundation of the next National Curriculum for Wales rather than as an addition to it. It should have a Welsh dimension and an international perspective'(quoted by Professor Donaldson on p.24). He appears to ignore another recommendation in RCCH that the 'starting point in the development of the new curriculum' should be a clearer definition of the Welsh perspective. It is possible, of course, that Professor Donaldson believes that the references in his Report to the Welsh language and culture constitute such a definition, but if so, this does a grave disservice to the whole concept of the Cwricwlwm Cymreig and to current good practice.

5. It is impossible to disagree with the statement that 'there is no single, universal template for a 'good' curriculum - much depends on local and national conditions, values and culture' (p.17) nor with the basic principle of subsidiarity outlined on p.14 and which is discussed in more detail on pp.98-9. It is essential that what is taught in our schools reflect the values, culture and views of society, and these vary from area to area. But who will define national values and culture? Who is going to define the Welsh dimension now? It would be difficult to define these in a way which would please everyone, but without a definition there remains a basic problem. For example, the report refers to the need for a curriculum which includes 'all of the learning experiences and assessment activities planned in pursuit of agreed purposes of education.' (p.6) and one which is 'rooted in Welsh values and culture and aligned with an agreed set of stated purposes' (p.14), and to the OECD's criticism of the lack of 'a convincing set of overall aims and purposes' in Wales (p.21). As noted above, Professor Donaldson's report provides a clear and focussed outline of the principles of learning and teaching, which are very similar to those of the basic principles of the 2008

Curriculum, and which correspond with those of other innovative curricula across the world. But this could be the basis of the curriculum of any one of those countries: it makes no attempt to define the characteristics of Wales, or address the consultation responses which showed such appreciation of the Cwricwlwm Cymreig and the Welsh dimension.

6. The discussion on the elaboration and development of the Areas of Learning and Experience refers to establishing 'central development teams' to create 'for each Area of Learning and Experience, Outcome Statements for each Progression Step', noting that among the 'elements to be taken forward' by these teams will be 'advice on the incorporation of relevant elements of the Cwricwlwm Cymreig within the Area of Learning and Experience' (p. 95). Once again, the principle is sound, and similar to what has always been done in developing the curriculum from the beginning, but in the absence of any definition of the Welsh dimension in the Report, not any discussion of it, or any attempt to exemplify it, the task of these development teams will be very difficult. Does the reference to the Cwricwlwm Cymreig suggest that the present Cwricwlwm Cymreig should be used as the criterion? Or will the development teams follow the lead of this Report, which seems to take 'the language and culture' as being synonymous with the Welsh dimension?
7. Similarly, although reference is made to the need to develop teacher capacity (p. 18, pp. 96–98) and no clear guidance is given on how this would be done in the context of the Welsh dimension of learning and teaching. Some obvious opportunities to exemplify such a dimension are missed in the Report. The examples which are provided in the body of the Report do not reflect any Welsh dimension; consider for example the discussion of the Expressive Arts, pp. 43–4. It is quite a surprise not to see any reference in this context to the eisteddfodic tradition at least, especially in a document which is to be the basis of a Curriculum for Wales. When we turn then to an example of a cross-curricular study, that of a local river (p.88), we find an entirely appropriate reference to Vitava by Smetana, but no reference at all to any Welsh music. The international perspective is appropriately exemplified here, but where is the Welsh dimension?

8. When the broader characteristics of the Areas of Learning and Experience are discussed (p. 38) the need for a Welsh dimension as well as an international perspective is noted, but no reference is made to this in the following Recommendation 4. When the Humanities are defined (pp. 46–7), very general references are made to 'fascinating contexts' for learning about 'people, place, time and belief' and 'understanding ... historical, geographical, political, economic and societal factors ... in their own locality, Wales and the world in a range of times, places and circumstances' (p.46). This is the only reference to Wales, and no attempt is made to discuss the Welsh dimension or to exemplify it. A paragraph is given to the local dimension (p. 46) and another to religious education (pp.46–7) There is no reference to the Welsh dimension in the relevant Recommendation 9.

9. The place of the Welsh language in the curriculum is discussed (pp. 58–60); the key part played by the language in the formation and preservation of 'cultural identity' is emphasised (p. 58) , and Professor Sioned Davies' Report is quoted when referring to the problems which arise in trying to teach the language to young people who 'do not regard the subject as being relevant or of any value to them' (p. 59). Professor Donaldson's Report was an opportunity to provide a context for the Welsh language which would help to make it relevant to such young people. The lack of a clear definition of the Welsh dimension to education in Wales, or of its exemplification, has already been noted. Its absence will not make the task of these teachers any easier. In addition, Recommendation 24 refers to the importance of the Welsh language in achieving 'a good understanding of the cultural life of Wales in the past and present' (p. 60): it would be possible to interpret this, together with the deficiencies noted above in the treatment of the Welsh dimension in Professor Donaldson's Report, as implying that it will be teachers of Welsh who will be expected to take the main responsibility for the Welsh dimension in the curriculum.

Summary

It is difficult to have confidence in a meaningful Welsh dimension being central to any future Curriculum for Wales based on this Report, in which no attempt is made to

- define such a dimension except as 'language and culture',
- nor to exemplify it,
- nor to refer to it, even when there are obvious opportunities to do so.

History

10. One of the fundamental changes recommended is the creation of a learning continuum from 3–16 (Recommendations 10–15, p.56; discussion of the principles, pp. 52– 55). Once again, Professor Donaldson's report proposes a development rather than a radical change. It was always the aim of the National Curriculum to establish such a continuum from 5–14, and that is the reason why the Attainment Levels of the current Curriculum are intended to be used by both the primary and the secondary sectors. It did prove difficult to bridge the transition from one Key Stage to the next, especially that between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. The difference between the subject skills of history, as defined in the Level Descriptions, and the assessment aims of GCSE have also proved a stumbling block to those trying to ensure continuity and progression in history between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 (see RCCH, Recommendation 2.5). The establishment of a learning continuum 3–16 is therefore a welcome development.

11. I would also welcome the principle of structuring the content of the curriculum into Areas of Learning and Experience, rather than individual subjects (Recommendation 4, and discussion of the principles pp. 33–38). The idea of combining subjects which have been traditionally taught separately is central to the present Foundation Phase, and it was the basis of the work of generations of primary teachers. It provides an opportunity to make cross-curricular teaching a reality, and by doing so to promote learners' skills and their ability to apply their learning in new contexts. The decision to include history in the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience is a matter of concern, however.

12. The Foundation Phase introduces the skills of history and geography together with those of science in 'Knowledge and Understanding of the World'. This is an area of study which deals with the finding, recording and evaluation of evidence, and drawing conclusions based on this process. I

find it regrettable that Professor Donaldson did not build on this when making his recommendations for learning beyond the Foundation Phase. Combining geography, history and Religious Education is painfully reminiscent of the approach that used to be taken in Welsh schools forty years ago. The description of the main features of the Humanities (pp. 46–7) does not give appropriate attention to the specific skills of the individual subjects, especially, in this context, the analytical and evaluative skills of history. This Report indicates that learning and understanding are the essence of the humanities, rather than investigation and evaluation of evidence.

13. The report on the Cwricwlwm Cymreig and Welsh History noted the limited evidence for the way in which the Cwricwlwm Cymreig and the history of Wales are presented in our schools ². This continues to be the case. The task group received a number of consultation responses which criticised the lack of local and Welsh history in the schemes of work of some schools. In the year that has elapsed since their report was presented, members of the task group have received more comments from individuals who are concerned about the nature of the history that is being taught, and that in part because of the delay and uncertainty caused by the decision to hold a full review of the curriculum. Members of the task group have been told that lacking clear guidance, several schools have stolen a march on the review, and have revised their schemes of work to include history, geography and Religious Education under the Humanities umbrella. Some have also decided to invest in commercial products such as ‘Cornerstones’, which do provide clear and definite guidelines, but ones which are based on the National Curriculum for England.

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² See RCCH, Section 1, p. 6. and Recommendation 1.4, and also Section 2, pp.12- 19, and Recommendations 2. 3, 4.