

## A new approach to curriculum in Wales

On Wednesday February 25<sup>th</sup>, the Welsh Government published the Donaldson report on the school curriculum in Wales. Graham Donaldson was Chief HMI in Scotland and thus free of the taint of Ofsted and the DfE. The report was based on a wide consultation, visiting 58 schools and receiving 713 responses (including one from SEA Cymru). It was broadly welcomed by the teacher unions in the following terms “extremely positive” (NUT), “game changing” (NAHT), “potential to make a profound and positive difference” (ASCL) (NASUWT), “very thought provoking” (ATL).

He proposes **four curriculum purposes**, something that the discredited national curriculum never did. Children should develop as:

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

These statements are elaborated into a coherent curriculum philosophy.

An advance is the abolition of national curriculum subjects, always controversial, with eternal arguments on what can't be left out. They are to be replaced by a return to the HMI **areas of learning and experience** in alphabetical order to underline their equal status, to be taught in an integrated way:

- **Expressive arts:** encouraging creative appreciation, artistic and performance skills, personal and cultural identity (art, drama, music, dance, film and digital media).
- **Health and well-being:** (PE, mental, physical and emotional wellbeing, sex and relationships, parenting, healthy eating and cooking, substance misuse, work related learning, teamwork and citizenship).
- **Humanities:** (historical, geographical, political, economic, business & social studies, including ethical beliefs, religions and spirituality). Donaldson encourages local studies, links between the humanities and for the first time the integration of Religious Education in the broader humanities.
- **Languages, literacy and communication:** Multiple language learning is to be encouraged. Welsh language teaching remains a priority and a good basis for future learning, with other languages introduced at least as early as year seven. The SEA agrees and supports the notion of Welsh medium schools acting as hubs to support learning in other schools.
- **Maths and Numeracy:** Developing broader mathematical and numeracy and financial skills.
- **Science and Technology:** Again there are huge advantages in linking the two areas. Practical skills will be encouraged and science studied in the light of its real world validation through technology. Computer science will be seen as a specific component within science and technology.

**Three cross curricular responsibilities** are literacy, numeracy and digital competence, and all teachers will be invited to consider how their teaching can promote these vital skills.

There will be choice available in the later secondary school years, but balance will be achieved by ensuring that the choices address all six areas of learning and experience.

## A new approach to curriculum in Wales

### **Assessment**

Among the Donaldson report's good points is the ending of Key Stages, always an artificial construct with national curriculum levels not commensurable between different key stages. Donaldson proposes their replacement by progression steps relating broadly to expectations at ages 5, 8, 11, 14 and 16. Assessment is to be proportionate and formative; teacher assessment is to be the main vehicle. Reliability will be achieved through moderation, although when assessment is directed to the next learning steps on a pupil by pupil basis there will be less need to ensure reliability between schools. The Welsh Government should establish a comprehensive assessment and evaluation framework and ensure that reporting to parents includes self and peer assessment, face to face discussion with teachers and pupil portfolios of work and achievement.

There will be a need to ensure system capacity with the DES, regional consortia, Estyn, qualifications Wales and universities all conscious of their roles and cooperating to fulfill them. Interestingly Donaldson in this section doesn't mention local education authorities. Possibly he knows something that the rest of us don't. He calls for legislation to cover a broad set of duties rather than a detailed prescription of content. This was one of SEA Cymru's points in the consultation that led to this report. Teachers must be free to use local history and environment to shade their curriculum content.

Donaldson said "It is about liberating a school from subjects and timetables and encouraging more connections across different areas of learning". The minister described it as "a compelling, exciting and ambitious vision and will shortly launch a Great Debate on the curriculum to ensure that the people of Wales engage with the issues. The document, although long (120 pages) is not the prescribed list of content and targets that we were used to in the old national curriculum. Instead it invites teachers and educationalists to accept the philosophy and translate it into a living curriculum through specification of areas of experience and achievement outcomes across the five progression steps and each area of learning and experience, including the cross curricular themes.

### **Accountability**

Inspections should examine how well a school embeds curriculum purposes in their day to day work. The school categorisation system, already improved by the ending of banding into quartiles, should be further adjusted to reflect the recommendations in the report. Splendidly, the Welsh Government will no longer gather information of performance on a school by school basis "but should monitor performance in key aspects of the curriculum through annual testing on a sampling basis". This, at a stroke, removes one of the major constraints on education under the present system and unhealthy approaches in many schools.

We must participate in this process to ensure that debate does not allow the strong points of the Donaldson report to be buried nor to be undermined by the accountability and inspection regimes. The new Welsh curriculum should adopt and use the philosophy of the Donaldson Report.

Mike Newman (SEA Cymru)

You can read the report at:

<http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/curriculuminwales/curriculum-for-wales/?lang=en>