



**UNIVERSITY OF
STIRLING**
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Developing Curriculum for Excellence

Summary of findings from research undertaken
in a Scottish local authority

Dr Mark Priestley and Sarah Minty
School of Education
University of Stirling
m.r.priestley@stir.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) is generally viewed as a landmark development in Scottish education, hailed by its architects as 'one of the most ambitious programmes of educational change ever undertaken in Scotland' (Scottish Government, 2008, p. 8).¹ It is radical in that it calls for a shift in classroom practices towards more pupil centred approaches to education. This is accompanied by a renewed view of teachers as professional developers of the curriculum and agents of change, and a new emphasis on flexible, local planning. Despite the far-reaching implications of this innovation, there has been little research to date on the new curriculum. The research reported in this briefing partially fills this gap, primarily exploring teachers' views of the new curriculum, and the nature and extent of implementation. The briefing summarises the findings from research conducted in tandem with a Scottish Government funded partnership project, established between a Scottish local authority and the School of Education (termed the Stirling Project by participating teachers). The project contributed to the development of CfE within the authority by providing explicit support for curriculum development to a number of different networks of practitioners. These development activities provided an opportunity to undertake research into teachers' enactment of CfE. The research aimed to:

- identify effective practices of curriculum implementation and teachers' professional learning in the context of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE);
- produce insights to inform sustainable, large-scale curriculum change and teachers' professional learning.

RESEARCH METHODS

The project utilised a mixed-methods approach, comprising in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and other stakeholders, and an online survey. A total of 31 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 participants, including headteachers (3), teachers (14) and representatives from the local authority (4). In total, teachers from 9 schools (2 primary and 7 secondary) were involved in the research: some were from schools at an early stage of implementing CfE in one of the Associated School Group (ASG) clusters established by the authority; others were selected from the authority's specialist subject working groups, mainly comprising experienced teachers who were engaged in implementing the new curriculum in their schools. The majority of teachers were interviewed twice, about four months apart.

In order to test whether findings from the interviews were replicated across the authority, an online survey of all schools was conducted during August and September 2011. In total, 716 respondents completed at least part of the survey [614 of whom completed the whole survey]. Amongst headteachers, the survey achieved a 79% response rate. For technical reasons, the survey was administered to school staff via headteachers; as such it is not possible to gauge exactly how many teachers received the survey. However, on the basis that there are approximately 2500 teachers in the authority, this represents an estimated 29% response rate.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

We report findings from the interview and survey data separately. We report interview data in terms of themes emerging from the data.

Emerging practices

The research explored the implementation of CfE in schools during the first year (2010-2011).

Whole-school development

At a whole-school level, interviewees' schools had experienced varying degrees of implementation. There was a sense that some schools had only started to implement CfE in 2010 when it became absolutely necessary for them to do so. Our data suggest that implementation was more developed in primary schools, where it is easier to meet with colleagues and work collaboratively than in secondary schools. In the latter, progress appeared to be more piecemeal, with some faculties/departments clearly more advanced than others. Across the sectors, progress was being made with regard to collaborative and collegial professional working and schools were increasingly developing and improving their own peer observation and teacher learning partner programmes. Teachers also identified whole-school progress in terms of cross-curricular developments. However, teachers questioned whether whole-school developments could be attributed to CfE, identifying parallel initiatives (e.g. cooperative learning CPD) which may have equally impacted on development.

Learning, teaching and assessment

There was a perception that CfE is largely a pedagogical innovation. Teachers reported gaining confidence in using new learning, teaching and assessment practices, and referred to an increasingly reflective culture, where they were more likely to question their practices. Interviewees indicated there were greater levels of experimentation, more active and collaborative lessons, more open and exploratory styles of learning, and a general move away from traditional, content-driven forms of teaching. Teachers also reported giving pupils greater levels of autonomy in their learning. This was seen as important in engaging them and providing relevance to their learning; however interviewees conceded this was not always easy as it required teachers to move out of their comfort zone. Interviewees also noted that they were increasingly experimenting with new forms of assessment, such as the use of photographs or video in formative assessment, and the use of peer- and self-assessment. Such developments were seen to require a change in the mind-set of teachers. Again, interviewees questioned whether these changes came about directly as a result of CfE – instead, they pointed to the important role of professional learning and wider changes in teaching independent of, or alongside, CfE.

School-based curriculum development

We found more variable approaches in terms of school-based curriculum development. In some schools there has been a proactive whole-school or departmental approach to curriculum development based around discussion of the principles, practices and 'big ideas' of CfE. This 'big picture' view potentially enables schools to make radical changes to develop practices that are fit for purpose in the context of the new curriculum. In contrast, other schools have focused on cross-referencing the Experiences and Outcomes (Es and Os) with existing content. This more conservative approach potentially minimises change, to that absolutely required to meet the perceived demands of CfE, allowing schools to 'tick the box'. Most evident in secondary schools, in a minority of cases

this approach can be viewed as strategic compliance, rather than a thorough and rigorous engagement with CfE. Some teachers expressed concern and frustration at this type of 'tick box' approach, perceiving there to be a conflict within CfE, between the experience and outcomes and the core ideas of the curriculum. Some worried that in the process of adapting the old curriculum to the new would ultimately result in a 'repackaged 5-14'. Such variation can be attributed to the lack of a clear specification in CfE of engagement processes, combined with a lack of capacity in schools for the sorts of curriculum development required by this new type of curriculum².

Developments in provision by phase

There was a general consensus among the interviewees, both primary and secondary, that primary schools were further ahead in the implementation of CfE, and that this process has been smoother for primary staff. Secondary schools were seen to be constrained by engrained notions of the primary purpose of learning – a perceived need to prepare pupils for exams. The following section briefly outlines practices encountered within the Broad General Education (BGE) and Senior phases in secondary schools.

The research suggested clear signs of implementation activity at the BGE phase. This often took the form of newly developed programmes or a series of lessons based around themes or projects for S1 and S2, addressing cross-curricular themes and disciplinary subject matter through inter-disciplinary provision. On the whole teachers reported enjoying the development and implementation of these projects and spoke of the pleasure gained from being able to teach outside of their subject. Some schools had introduced distinct 'CfE lessons' or courses. Where whole-school discussion about the rationale for implementing such programmes did not take place, some interviewees indicated that programmes could be contrived and there appeared to be a lack of understanding of inter-disciplinary learning. In such cases, there is the danger that both teachers and pupils see CfE as another subject, militating against the transformative change intended in CfE. At the time of the research schools remained unsure as to how the BGE would be applied to S3, and there was some confusion as to the structures and purposes of S3.

There were evident tensions between approaches and strategies in the BGE and senior phase, and little evidence that inter-disciplinary approaches were transferring to the senior phase. Progress at the senior phase level was slower in contrast to the BGE, partly because some schools were understandably bringing in CfE changes on an evolutionary, year-by-year basis. Because of uncertainties around the new National Qualifications, interviewees' schools were yet to finalise their senior phase curriculum models at the time of the research. Many teachers indicated they were awaiting further guidance from SQA on the National 4 and 5 exams prior to undertaking further development. There was a general lack of understanding as to the changes being introduced in the senior phase, and concerns about the implementation timetable and the potential for greater inequality as a result of increasingly diverse provision.

Perceived impact of CfE on pupils

Teachers noted the potential of CfE to produce more rounded individuals in the long term, and hoped that children would experience a more open and exploratory approach as a result of CfE. Teachers reported having more creative and confident pupils, who were better at talking in front of an audience and collaborating with each other. However, many teachers also spoke of potential risks

within the new curriculum. They were concerned about the immediate effects of CfE on the first cohort – whom many described as ‘guinea pigs’ – to experience CfE and the new exams. The diversity, or perceived lack of consistency, of the new system left many teachers worried that pupils could be disadvantaged when changing schools.

Teachers’ understandings of CfE and its philosophy

The extent to which the philosophy of CfE fits with the beliefs and values of the teachers charged with implementing it is vital to its success. We perceived two levels of engagement with the core ideas of CfE:

- 1) First order engagement is related to whether or not teachers welcome the philosophy and ‘big ideas’ of CfE. We found that most teachers welcomed CfE in principle.
- 2) Second order engagement relates to how CfE fits with teachers’ implicit theories of knowledge and learning, and whether there has been a thorough engagement with the underpinning ideas of the new curriculum. In contrast to the broadly constructivist view of learning inherent within CfE, some teachers, particularly in secondary schools, perceived knowledge and learning as the transmission of content. There was therefore a lack of understanding of the core ideas of CfE, and/or a lack of fit between these and their beliefs and existing practices, which suggests that they are unable to implement it meaningfully.

This points to the need for a sense-making phase in this sort of curriculum development, and – as our research suggests – the time and resources to do this have been seriously limited.

Teachers’ responses to CfE

The majority of teachers responded very positively to the general philosophy and ideas behind CfE. A number of teachers indicated that it had enabled them to feel justified that they were already working in the right way. Teachers had different understandings of what CfE would mean for their own practice: some understood CfE as being mainly about new approaches to teaching and learning; others understood it in terms of extensive revision of content *as well as* new approaches to teaching and learning. How they responded to CfE was inherently linked to their views on teacher autonomy. While some welcomed the flexibility of CfE, others lacked the confidence to be able to teach outside their own discipline or without the structure previously provided by 5-14. We found only occasional examples of teachers who were able to regularly meet with colleagues to discuss the meaning of the fundamental principles of CfE.

Tension between inter-disciplinary learning and specialist subjects

Many interviewees understood CfE as the being about bringing together and exploring links between subjects. Those teachers who had been involved in developing interdisciplinary working were highly positive about it, emphasising the impact it had on the pupils, and the potential for locally relevant learning; they enjoyed being able to veer away from the norm. However, a minority of secondary teachers were opposed to it in principle, viewing CfE as a potential threat to their subject.

Tension between skills and knowledge within CfE

In some cases those same teachers who highlighted benefits of inter-disciplinary learning also emphasised the need to be able to test pupils’ knowledge. There was a perception among some

teachers (both primary and secondary) that knowledge was disappearing from the curriculum because of the new focus on skills. Such opinions tended to be expressed by teachers who held the transmissionist views of knowledge noted above, primarily understanding teaching as being about imparting knowledge.

Tensions around assessment

The greatest tensions that we encountered lay in the area of assessment. The changes to assessment which have arisen as a result of CfE, particularly changes to the exam system in the form of the new National Qualifications, require a substantial change in the mind-set of teachers. Teachers expressed anxiety, and in some cases fear, with regards to this, as they were often unsure exactly what was being asked of them. Some teachers clearly perceived curriculum development to consist mainly of assessing, recording and reporting against outcomes, pointing to the difficulties many teachers face as they try to move from prescription to greater teacher autonomy. Such views are likely to derive from assessment driven philosophies encouraged under the former 5-14 system. It is clear that in secondary schools, the possibilities for curriculum development are being limited by a 'wait and see' approach

Practical implementation issues

While most teachers broadly welcomed the ideas and philosophy behind CfE, they shared many concerns about its implementation on a practical level, and identified some of the barriers and drivers to its success.

Lack of clarity

Interviewees pointed to a lack of clear guidance, both from national and local sources. This was seen as a barrier to implementation, with the curriculum described as 'woolly' and 'vague'. Teachers frequently complained they were 'floundering in the dark', particularly in relation to the new National Qualifications and assessment. This uncertainty led to feelings of anxiety and insecurity among many participants.

Risk

The most frequently identified risks were those relating to the potential impact of the new curriculum on pupils. Other risks related to greater levels of diversity and autonomy for schools and teachers, which some interviewees interpreted as a lack of consistency and others interpreted as duplication of work. The continued importance of attainment data – and its influence in teachers' action – was widely noted. Many teachers indicated that they would ultimately be judged on a child's academic performance, despite CfE's emphasis on the whole child. Teachers felt accountable to the local authority and parents. They called for better communication with, and awareness amongst employers, universities and parents about this aspect of CfE.

Funding and resources issues

Funding was one of the most frequently identified barriers to implementation of CfE. Teachers questioned how transformational change could be achieved in an age of austerity. Schools reported experiencing the effects of redundancies, reductions in management time, and temporary contracts. Staffing issues were a key source of anxiety for staff.

Teacher workload and morale

Uncertainty around funding and job security led in some cases to very low morale among teachers. This was exacerbated by concerns about the McCormac review (being conducted at the time of the research), changes to teachers' pay and conditions and union ballots as a result of this. We found evidence of morale worsening among both primary and secondary teachers, but especially secondary, in between the two interviews. Nearly all interviewees indicated that workload has increased as a result of CfE. These were considered to be additional barriers to implementation.

Teacher attitude and confidence

Many interviewees displayed a lack of confidence, both in taking forward CfE themselves, but also in terms of the benefits it would bring to children. They lacked confidence in moving away from previous ways of working, and the perceived lack of clarity around the new curriculum meant that even those whose philosophy and practice matched well with CfE sought reassurance. Interviewees identified a core group of teachers who resisted CfE, and spoke of the divides this has created between staff in some schools.

CPD and collaborative working

CPD, peer observation and collaborative working were considered to be strong drivers. This was in terms of engaging teachers in CfE, enhancing its implementation by providing reassurance to less confident or resistant teachers, and developing reflective practitioners. Teachers on the whole highly valued the opportunity to meet with colleagues and discuss their experiences of and concerns about CfE. Various ongoing initiatives in the authority to develop pedagogy and formative assessment were identified by most interviewees as having facilitated the implementation of CfE. As we have noted, opportunities for teachers to meet to make sense of the core concepts of CfE appear to be limited in schools.

Specialist subject working groups

The working groups established by the local authority to support curriculum development were also considered an important means of enhancing engagement with CfE. Interviewees who were members of the working groups were largely positive about their experiences, emphasising the benefits gained from being able to meet with colleagues from other schools and to share ideas and concerns. However, members were not always clear as to their groups' remit.

Leadership and departmental support

Headteachers need to have a clear strategic vision of where they are taking CfE in their school. Where this vision was absent, or was not clearly articulated to staff, progress in implementing CfE was hindered, pointing to the need for further local authority support for headteachers.

School factors

Overall, it was felt that the size of school was important in terms of creating an environment where CfE could be implemented more readily. Arranging meetings between different faculties and departments in large schools was deemed to be particularly difficult. The research suggests that opportunities for teachers to collaborate are extremely important in fostering school-based curriculum development, especially when extensive innovation is required. Many schools appear to

lack the horizontal structures required to facilitate such teacher/teacher dialogue (whether formal or informal), being organised hierarchically³.

The survey

The survey was conducted in order to test whether findings from the interview data were representative of teachers across the authority. On the whole, we found that they were, with the majority of interviewees' concerns replicated in the survey findings. There were significant differences by teaching role and by school sector to the majority of questions. Echoing the interview findings, on the whole, headteachers were more positive in their responses than teachers, and primary teachers were more positive than their secondary colleagues. Significant differences by school size and working group membership were also evident, although to a lesser degree.

Emerging practices

- More than half of survey respondents (56%) agreed that their school had made good progress in implementing CfE (15% disagreed).
- The most frequently identified curriculum development approaches were cross-referencing of the Es and Os (57%); whole-school discussion of the big ideas (53%); departmental discussion (39%) and curriculum development led by a school working party (31%).
- More than two-fifths of survey respondents (44%) agreed that they were concerned that CfE will be detrimental to some pupils (36% disagreed).

Factors shaping implementation

- The majority of respondents welcomed CfE: around three-quarters agreed that the philosophy of CfE was in tune with their own educational beliefs; that the Four Capacities are good purposes of learning, and that they welcomed CfE's emphasis on inter-disciplinary learning.
- There was less agreement with statements relating to the long term aims and impact of CfE: less than a third (32%) agreed with the statement 'I feel positive about the way the curriculum is developing in Scotland'; the largest group disagreed (47%). Less than half agreed with the statements 'CfE is a highly desirable development for Scottish education' and 'CfE will lead to lasting change in Scottish education'. Despite this, 40% of respondents disagreed that they preferred the curriculum as it was prior to CfE.
- Two thirds of respondents (66%) agreed that the purposes and principles of CfE are clear to them. However, the majority also agreed that they had not received enough central guidance on assessment (78%), and less than a third (30%) agreed that National guidance is helpful in planning the new curriculum.
- Less than two-fifths agreed that they felt confident in implementing CfE in the next 12 months; the largest group (44%) disagreed.
- Responses were more mixed in relation to the statement 'Implementing CfE has been made easier by the authority's Learning Teaching and Assessment policy and materials' (27% agreed; 34%, disagreed).
- More than half (53%) agreed that 'CfE allows me greater freedom as a teacher'.
- The majority (74%) agreed that their workload has increased as a result of CfE (just 6% disagreed).

- CPD and school leadership and teacher attitude were the most frequently selected drivers. Funding, resources, ICT, and staff numbers were most often identified as mainly barriers. Respondents most often selected 'not sure' in relation to council wide working parties, associated schools groups, staff capacity and school physical environment.

IMPLICATIONS

Our research points to a number of implications for both school practices and for future curriculum policy in Scotland – both nationally and within local authorities. The research suggests that implementation has been less problematic where schools have been able to develop and articulate a clear vision for CfE. This is partly about effective leadership. School managers have a clear role in developing such a vision. And they have a responsibility to facilitate teacher engagement with curriculum reform by providing spaces and developing channels for teacher dialogue. This is in part a resourcing issue, which has been problematic in the present climate of austerity. However it is also an issue of process. We suggest that such a process should include the following dimensions.

Sense-making opportunities

Curriculum change is complex and involves encountering new and unfamiliar concepts and terminology. Sense-making is a key part of the process of engagement, and this has been missing in many schools (at least in a systematic sense). At an early stage of engaging with new curricular policy, schools should provide opportunities for teachers to engage with each other (whole school and smaller groups) to make sense of key ideas. This should be informed by external resources (for example relevant research on learning, teachers from other schools, external experts). This part of the process is fundamentally about *defining curricular purposes* that are relevant to the school in question – reconciling the new curriculum with local needs and conditions.

Fit for purpose

Schools should spend time determining which *content and methods* (pedagogy, assessment) are *fit for purpose*. This is about, in the case of CfE, deciding what sort of knowledge young people might need in order to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective learners. Here, we warn against approaches which downgrade knowledge in favour of skills development. Citizens in a modern democracy need both, and it is important that skills are underpinned by knowledge⁴. It is about determining which teaching methods are most effective in achieving these goals, and how they might be assessed. Such methods should be closely matched to curricular purposes, and we would warn against one-size-fits-all approaches (for example cooperative learning offers some potential to address key aims of CfE, but may be detrimental if over-used).

Addressing barriers/developing drivers

The research suggests that many methodologies developed for CfE are difficult to implement in practical terms. A major priority for schools and local authorities implementing major curriculum change should be *to identify issues that impede the development of such methods*, and *to address them*. Some such barriers are school-based (for example secondary school timetables may impede the development of active learning methodologies). Others lie at the level of local authority practice (for example accountability systems that over-emphasise attainment). Conversely, schools and local

authorities should identify drivers and where possible strengthen these. Drivers for CfE include high quality CPD activity.

Cycles of curriculum development

Curriculum implementation is an ongoing, rather than a one-off activity. Development of new approaches needs to be *cyclical*, and accompanied by regular *evaluation and reformulation of plans*. We emphasise that implementation activity often raises as many questions as it addresses. Collaborative Professional Enquiry (CPE)⁵ offers much potential as a methodology for developing the curriculum in schools⁶. However, this is a complex process that requires some expertise in practice; local authorities should undertake to develop this expertise through guided engagement in CPE (available through accredited Masters' level courses at many universities).

Implications for policy

Our research points to a perceived lack of clarity in CfE documentation. While we accept that this is in part due to a shortage of sense-making activity in schools, we also highlight the lack of such specification in policy, and contradictions in policy documents that have created difficulties to teachers implementing CfE. We offer the following observations:

- CfE lacks a clear specification of process to guide school-based curriculum development. Future policy should be more explicit in this respect.
- While CfE implicitly endorses learning through active engagement, it does not clearly specify the principles that underlie such an approach, instead talking in often vague terms about active learning. Moreover, while it clearly emphasises the importance of learning, and the centrality of the learner, it does not clearly articulate questions of what should be learned and why. We suggest that future policy ensures greater clarity in respect of these important questions.
- Our research shows that teachers see tensions between the 'big ideas' of CfE, and its Experiences and Outcomes. These findings suggest that such tensions lie at the root of many implementation problems.⁷
- CfE places the teacher at the heart of curriculum development – as an agent of change. And yet, schools are places where such agency is often restricted by accountability practices that hinder innovation. National agencies and local authorities should carefully consider how the negative effects of accountability systems may be countered.⁸

We conclude this summary of key findings with the following observations. First, CfE has much to commend it, although its implementation has been far from smooth. There remains a risk that eventual implementation in many schools will not represent the sorts of transformational change envisaged by the architects of the new curriculum. Second, implementation is dependent upon the active engagement of professional and committed teachers. Our research has convinced us that Scotland has a highly professional and motivated teaching workforce; however, such engagement has been rendered difficult for many by a lack of clarity and coherence in the documents that have guided implementation, and the lack of systematic processes for closing the implementation gap⁹ between policy and practice.

FURTHER DETAILS

Project team

Mark Priestley
Sarah Minty

Contact

Dr Mark Priestley
School of Education
University of Stirling
Stirling FK9 4LA
Email m.r.priestley@stir.ac.uk

Endnotes

¹ Scottish Government (2008). *Building the Curriculum 3: a framework for learning and teaching*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Government.

² For further detail, see: Priestley, M. (2010). Curriculum for Excellence: Transformational change or business as usual? *Scottish Educational Review*, 42[1], 22-35.

³ See also: Priestley, M., Biesta, G.J.J. & Robinson, S. (2012). *Understanding teacher agency: The importance of relationships*. A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, Canada, 13-17 April 2012. This paper derives from a parallel research project, the ESRC-funded *Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change* project (RES-000-22-4208). Available at http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/events/documents/Teacheragency_AERApaper_final_000.pdf

⁴ The apparent downgrading of knowledge in modern curricular policy has been subject to systematic critique by scholars within the social realism school of thought. For example, see: Yates, L. & Collins, C. (2010). The absence of knowledge in Australian curriculum reforms. *European Journal of Education*, 45[1], 89-102. Note that while we share the concerns of these authors in respect of the place of knowledge in the curriculum, we do not endorse their position on pedagogy, or their approach to deriving curricular content from the corpus of human knowledge. Instead we advocate a process driven approach (see note 7 below).

⁵ For example, see: Reeves, J. & Fox, A. (Eds.) (2008) *Practice-based Learning: Developing excellence in teaching*. Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press.

⁶ Scottish Government (2011). *Teaching Scotland's Future: Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Government.

⁷ For further discussion of these issues, see: Priestley, M. & Humes, W. (2010). The Development of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Amnesia and déjà vu. *Oxford Review of Education*, 36[3], 345-361.

⁸ This issue is discussed at length in the following publications: a] Reeves, J. (2008). Between a rock and a hard place? A Curriculum for Excellence and the Quality Initiative in Scottish Schools, *Scottish Educational Review*, 40[2], 6-16; and b] Priestley, M., Robinson, S. & Biesta, G.J.J. (in press). Teacher Agency, Performativity and Curriculum Change: Reinventing the Teacher in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence? In B. Jeffrey & G. Troman (Eds.), *Performativity across UK education: Ethnographic cases of its effects, agency and reconstructions*. Painswick: E&E Publishing.

⁹ Supovitz, J.A. & Weinbaum, E.H. (Eds.) (2008). *The Implementation gap: Understanding reform in high schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.