

# CURRICULUM REFORM AND RECONCEPTUALIZATION IN WELSH EDUCATION

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Over the past decade, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been supporting significant and ongoing educational reform in many countries throughout the world. These initiatives have included a focus on schools as learning organizations, enhanced and ongoing professional development for teachers, and the creation and implementation of national curricula (OECD, 2025). As one of the countries currently grappling with such reforms, Wales—which has been criticized for its tumultuous and disruptive approach to educational policymaking (Smith, 2024)—must now manage the lasting effects of policy-upheaval while also navigating a new era of comprehensive educational reform centered on the development, implementation and evaluation of a new, national curriculum framework that is a radical departure from the heavily prescribed national curriculum introduced in 1988.

The origins of this new era of Welsh education can be traced to a 20-point educational improvement plan produced by the Welsh Government to respond to substantial criticisms of its educational system and to introduce more stability and direction in educational policy (Andrews, 2011; Evans, 2022; Power et al., 2020). The most significant impetus of these reforms was the report, *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales* (Donaldson, 2015). The findings of this review were accompanied by 65 recommendations on how the Welsh Government could achieve its lofty aims for educational renewal. The Government accepted all 65 recommendations, and as a result, a new curriculum for Wales was born.

In 2018, during the *Future of Educational Research in Wales* conference, the Welsh Government introduced the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE), which prioritized bridging the gap between research and practice as an additional avenue of support for schools as they create curricula using the new curriculum framework. A cornerstone of this strategy was the establishment of four Collaborative Research Networks (CRNs), each focused on addressing key educational themes: Equity and Inclusion, Leadership and Professional Learning, Curriculum and Pedagogy, and Bilingual Education and Welsh Language. These networks were envisioned as dynamic spaces where researchers, educators, and policymakers could engage in dialogue, share insights, and co-produce research that would directly inform educational practice and policy in Wales. The CRNs reflect a commitment to promoting collaboration and building research capacity, enabling stakeholders to navigate the complexities of educational reform while addressing the unique challenges and opportunities within the Welsh educational landscape.

## THE NEW CURRICULUM FOR WALES

In short, the Curriculum for Wales is a framework designed to provide teachers with the agency necessary to develop bespoke (i.e., school-level), purpose-driven (Priestley et al., 2021), process-model (Donaldson, 2015), place-based curricula (Welsh Government 2023). Compulsory

curriculum content is organized into six multidisciplinary faculties called Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs). These include Expressive Arts, Health and Well-being, Humanities, Languages, Literacy and Communication, Mathematics and Numeracy, and Science and Technology. Additionally, each AoLE is supported by a collection of “statements of what matters” (Welsh Government, 2022, n.p.) that represent and organize the compulsory content of the curriculum.

While reading the initial guidance for the curriculum published by the Welsh Government (2020), one word stood out to me from the rest: *Experience*. The use of the term “experience” in this document is a clear indication of the shift from a strict, subject-based curriculum that explicitly told teachers what to teach, when, and how to a more progressive and multidisciplinary framework that is intended to support teachers in exercising their educational expertise and professional agency in creating and curating educational experiences for their pupils. In the new Curriculum for Wales, “experience” is used to define curriculum: the curriculum is all of the *experiences* a child goes through at school (Welsh Government, 2020, n.p.). It is also used to organize curriculum content (e.g., Areas of Learning and *Experience*) and to identify educational priorities: “Nothing is so essential as universal access to, and acquisition of, the *experiences*, knowledge and skills that our young people need for employment, lifelong learning and active citizenship” (Welsh Government, 2020, p. 5). As a result, the Welsh Government has situated *experience* as a central component to the curriculum alongside topics such as learning, knowledge, and skills. With this experiential shift, teachers and their pupils can benefit from reconceptualist approaches to curriculum due to emphases on curricular critique, critical reflection, and experience that have come to define reconceptualist perspectives. Specifically, I argue that, with this new emphasis on educational experience, teachers in Wales can particularly benefit from *currere*, an autobiographical approach to curriculum theorizing that is specifically designed for the analysis of educational experience, with the outcomes of these analyses being greater curricular understanding, higher quality educative experiences, and the “safe-return” of teachers’ professional and pedagogical voice (Grumet, 2016, p. 31).

### CURRERE CYMRU

The Curriculum and Pedagogy CRN, one of the four thematic networks alongside Equity and Inclusion, Leadership and Professional Learning, and Bilingual Education and Welsh Language, created the *Currere Cymru* (Cymru is name for Wales in the Welsh language) project with an aim to support teachers in recollecting, reclaiming, analysing, and reconstructing their educational experiences as narratives using the *currere* method.

As part of the project, educational practitioners and researchers from across Wales were organised into research teams and invited to a weekend *currere* retreat. The retreat was designed to promote a general sense of well-being, reflection, understanding, and dialogue, using strategies like guided meditation, walks in nature, preparing and eating communal meals, and circles for discussion. During the retreat, attendees engaged in the four steps of *currere*—regressive, progressive, analytic and synthetic, producing curriculum fragments that captured insightful vignettes from their educational experiences, aspirations and current practice.

In the months following the retreat, the collaboration continued as the teams continued to develop their narratives. This approach aligns with a “close-to-practice” research ethos (Wyse et al., 2021), which encourages reciprocal learning between educators and researchers while building

the research capacity of teachers. By prioritising reflection, co-creation and dialogue, the project facilitated attendees' praxis, nurtured professional and personal relationships, and as evidenced in the following articles, deepened their understanding of curriculum as a lived experience.

### THE ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

As an educator and researcher, I have sought to develop my understanding of experience as a vital component to my own academic praxis, and this has led me to a definition of experience grounded in Dewey's philosophy of education and complemented by critical and existentialist perspectives. For me, educative experience is the process in which human beings are enriched, through a transactional relationship with their environment and/or sociocultural *milieu*, with energy that leads to growth. This growth is the result of learning that occurs through various forms of doing and undergoing (Dewey, 1934). To be educative, these experiences are continuous, transactional, and intersected by critical reflection anchored in our subjective understanding of past and current experiences that orient us towards future aspirations.

From this perspective, while the Curriculum for Wales has taken an experiential turn, there is little explicit support for teachers to grapple with the concept of experience (Smith, 2024), let alone provide opportunities for them to understand curriculum as a *lived* experience (Marsh & Willis, 2007; Pinar, 2019). Often, experience is reduced to terms like "tacit knowledge" or is perceived as a kind of mental residue from practical undertakings. But, for me, experience is a much more encompassing concept. It is an embodied, situated, temporal, cognitive, relational, emergent, socio-cultural phenomenon, and teachers' engagement with curricula that emphasize experience would do well to engage with *currere* and reconceptualist curriculum theorizing if they are to not only consider how concepts of experience relate to teaching and learning but also how experiences of curriculum can inform their curriculum work.

### CURRERE, AMBULARE, AND FRAGMENTS

In approaching this project, we relied heavily on writings from Grumet (2016), Pinar (2019), Schubert (2009), Schwab (1969), Smith (2022), and Poetter (2024). First, we delved into the Latin origins of curriculum as "a running, or course," which suggests that the main priority in curriculum should be the models, processes, and definitions that emphasize plans, content, objectives, outcomes, and assessment. We then discussed Schwab's (1969) provocative declaration that the field of curriculum was moribund and other criticisms suggesting the field had been infiltrated, undermined, and even colonized by various academic traditions, theoretical perspectives, industrial and managerial influences, and other perspectives that promote positivistic, scientific, and technocratic approaches to creating, organizing, experiencing, and evaluating curriculum (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Kincheloe, 2008; MacDonald, 1971). We then turned to Pinar's (2019) call for a reconceptualization of curriculum that rejects the fascination with documents, objectives, outcomes, and assessments, with an emphasis on understanding curriculum as *lived experience*. As an alternative to curriculum, or "course to be run," Pinar mobilized the term *currere*, the infinitive-verb root of curriculum that simply means "to run." In short, the emphasis shifts from the "course" to the "running," or in the context of Wales, the shift is away from the *experiences* a child goes through at school and toward the child *experiencing* school.

We then examined other reconceptualist perspectives and new insights into the *currere* method, including my own interpretation of the method that I call *Ambulare*. Although still in development, *Ambulare* signals a new-materialist and pragmatic interpretation of *currere*. Over the years, several authors have called for an embodiment of *currere* (Ohito & Nyachae, 2019; Radina et al., 2022; Snowber, 2016), which caused me to reconsider a privileging of mind over body in *currere* research. In response, I wanted to get *currere* out of the mind and into the body. To do this, I use walking in nature as a central component of my reconceptualization of *currere*, not only to better address concerns over embodiment, placement, and my general pragmatic orientation towards doing and undergoing (Dewey, 1934), but also as a means to indicate a temporal and semantic shift from the running of the course. In short, *Ambulare* seeks to offer a philosophical alternative to *currere*:

It rejects “the race” and “running” in favor of more valuable concerns than speed, competition, and ranking. It emphasizes health and wellbeing, in both an individual and socio-cultural sense. Walking, unlike racing, is conducive to other activities that nourish us—eating, drinking, laughing, listening, and more. *Ambulare* also acknowledges alternative routes, choices, opportunities, avenues, and trajectories. There is no fixation on the course, finish line, or stopwatch. We can accelerate, decelerate, veer, turn, or simply stop—whatever is needed. Finally, *Ambulare* argues that it is better to walk than run, in most situations, and that it is better to take time when engaging in complicated conversations. (Smith, 2022, p. 112)

Finally, Poetter’s (2024) concept of “curriculum fragments” was a particularly useful construct for introducing people to *currere* and curriculum theorizing. Poetter writes that fragments represent the raw and often disjointed aspects of curriculum knowledge, theory, and lived experience that educators encounter in their practice. These fragments are not deficiencies or problems; rather they are opportunities for reflection, reclamation, and meaning-making. The process of engaging with fragments involves embracing their incompleteness and leveraging them as entry points for deeper inquiry, creativity, and curricular understanding. By working with curriculum fragments, educators can resist the urge to impose artificial coherence and linearity in their understanding of self and curriculum intersected through experience and instead honor the complexity and diversity of their various socio-cultural and political contexts, theoretical understandings, philosophical orientations, and educational practice(s).

From this perspective, fragments emerge from both personal and professional spheres, bridging autobiographical experiences with theoretical constructs. Although these reflections are incomplete, they are not isolated; their meaning is developed through relational and contextual interpretation, which echoes the hermeneutic and existential dimensions of curriculum theorizing. These fragments, when critically examined, serve as catalysts for dialogue and transformation.

For me, curriculum fragments strongly resonate with Freire’s culture circles and specifically his concepts of “codifications” and “generative themes.” In Freire’s (1968/2018) work, culture circles are pedagogical experiences focused on the critical examination of lived experience, with the intention of these analyses being the development of a more sophisticated, nuanced, and complex view of our lives, complemented by a critical understanding of the contradictions and proposed limits that obfuscate perception and narrow interpretation and, ultimately, our participation in-and-with the world.

From these discussions, codifications—or representations of these experiences—are shared and decoded through dialogue. From this deliberative analysis, generative themes central to the participants’ lives and realities are then constructed and analysed. This investigation is an example of what Freire calls *praxis*, or the cyclical process of action, reflection, and theory that nurtures our critical consciousness. From this perspective, I believe fragments operate similarly to codifications, as they are representations of lived experience that are recollected, reclaimed, and restored. As one reflects on indelible educational experiences, future aspirations, and the reality of their current educational practice, they construct generative themes that guide them through their narrative.

## CONCLUSION

Education in Wales is undergoing a profound transformation, as researchers and practitioners navigate the shift from a prescriptive, subject-focused curriculum to one rooted in experience, agency, and co-construction. Anchored in the Curriculum for Wales framework and supported by initiatives like NSERE and the Collaborative Research Networks, these reforms represent a bold ambition to bridge the gap between theory and practice, empower professional agency, and enhance educational experiences for pupils across Wales.

However, the success of these reforms hinges on a deep engagement with the complexity and centrality of experience in curriculum work. Through critical reflection on formative educational moments, future aspirations, and present realities, the articles in the *Currere Cymru* section of this issue illustrate the profound potential of reconceptualist approaches—specifically *currere*—to empower educators as they navigate the intersecting challenges of professional practice, identity, and activism.

The *Currere Cymru* project exemplifies how *currere* can provide educators with transformative opportunities to reflect critically, share narratives of experience, and engage in meaningful dialogue with peers. This praxis nurtures renewal, affirming and invigorating educators’ scholarship, teaching, and advocacy. Ultimately, the articles included here demonstrate how reconceptualist perspectives and the *currere* method can provide educators who are navigating significant curriculum change across the world with profound insights into their educational identity and practice that can further enhance, define, and amplify their professional voice.

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