

Professor Jane Williams, Swansea University – Researching the Implementation Gap in Children's Participative Rights.

A national government, a local authority, or a school – or even all three – adopts a policy of compliance with the UNCRC. What then changes in children's experiences of school?

It is tempting to say: too often, too little. But how can we know? In our present research into the enactment in practice of young children's participative rights in schools, we are exploring the gap between declarations of adherence to the UNCRC in Welsh laws and policies and what happens in the everyday lives of children in schools in Wales. We hope to learn about the scale and complexity of the gap, and what may help to bridge it. In the first phase of our project, Welsh laws and policies are analysed to discover how, overall, they position teachers in relation to children's participative rights. Alongside this, empirical evidence is gathered on the content of initial teacher training and continuing professional development. From this we hope to assess how teachers are currently supported to fulfil the expectations of them that are inherent in the legal and policy frameworks on children's rights.

The distance between policy intention and policy implementation is identified by researchers in the fields of administration, management and wider social sciences as 'the implementation gap'. As long ago as 1978, Lewis Gunn, Professor of Administration at Strathclyde University, wrote an article in which he identified ten common barriers to effective policy implementation. His focus was on health policy, and he found the common barriers were: externally-driven time constraints; lack of time and sufficient resources; unavailability of resources; policy not based on a valid theory of cause and effect; relationship between cause and effect being indirect with multiple intervening links; multiple dependency relationships; poor understanding of, and disagreement on, objectives; tasks not fully specified in correct sequence; imperfect communication and coordination; and lack of authority to demand or obtain perfect compliance.

Since then, a 'science of complexity' has been applied to the problem of policy implementation (for example, Braithwaite et. al. 2018), recognising the interplay of multiple variable factors, the importance of social practices and the dynamic properties of systems, all having impacts on the nature and scale of the implementation gap. Nonetheless, Hudson et. al. (2019) identified four key factors behind failures of policy implementation: overoptimistic expectations; dispersed governance of implementation; inadequate collaborative policymaking; and the

vagaries of political cycles. The same research team went on to test a model of policy implementation support, finding positive results in a specific policy innovation in social care. (Hunter et.al 2020)

Our research is conducted in the context of the new curriculum for Wales which not only requires school leaders to ensure that staff know about the UNCRC, but also delivery of human rights education as a cross-cutting theme, embracing education 'about', 'through' and 'for' human rights. (Welsh Government, 2021).

Yan and He (2012), investigating the implementation of curriculum reform in a different place and time, found three conditions for bridging the implementation gap: long-term goals, teachers as contextual decision makers and nurturing and developing teachers. These conditions resonate with early impressions gathered in our own research. In Wales, the curriculum introduced by the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 sets out long term goals in the form of the four purposes of the curriculum: To enable pupils and children to develop as ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives; To enable pupils and children to develop as enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work; To enable pupils and children to develop as ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world; and To enable pupils and children to develop as healthy, confident individuals, ready to live fulfilling lives as valued members of society. It places a new emphasis on the role of school leaders and educators in negotiating a local curriculum which will, in their own context, best service these long term goals and incorporate other mandatory elements of the framework, including the six areas of learning and experience and three cross-curricular skills.

Our focus in the first phase of our project is on the third condition: 'nurturing and developing teachers': specifically, on how their initial and continuing professional training equips them to deliver on the commitment to incorporate education 'about, 'through' and 'for' human rights as a cross-cutting theme in the curriculum. Promoting knowledge and understanding of the UNCRC is an essential building block but only one of many needed to nurture and develop educators who can with confidence plan, deliver and evaluate human rights education. We hope our work will help identify what else is needed and how in practice it is or should be supplied.

References

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