

International Evidence Interview 3 – Kari Smith

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Jen Farrar

Hi, there, I'm delighted today to welcome Professor Kari Smith to our online conversation where we are sharing evidence from different international contexts and expertise from around the world, with a view to forging connections and comparisons to the current curricular and assessment reforms that are under way in Wales.

It's an absolute pleasure to have you here today, Professor Smith. Now, you're an Emeritus Professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. You are a classroom teacher turned educator whose wide research interests have spanned teacher education, professional development, new teachers and assessment with a focus on pedagogical aspects of assessment.

But I wonder if I could just ask you to quickly tell us a little bit more about your role and your research interests, if that's okay?

Kari Smith

Okay. First of all, thank you so much for the invitation - I'm honoured certainly on it. And as you said, I was a teacher a long time ago for nearly 20 years. But I would say that being a teacher, that really formed me, and it also formed my research interests later on because I was unhappy with the assessment system based on exams only. And I tried out (which at that time was absolutely something pioneering), for example, portfolio assessment, and the learners deciding on their own entries. I wanted to learner to put in good entries and entries they were not happy with and reflect on it – why? And then, later on, I wanted to learn more. So my Masters was about exploring the impact of external exams on students' motivation to learn English as a foreign language. And my PhD was on self-assessment in the learning of English as a foreign language. And that was before the turn of the millennium. It's quite pioneering in many ways. But that is the way I felt my heart was going.

Then I became a teacher educator while I was doing my PhD - teaching and the methodology of teaching English as a foreign language. And I also taught teacher research, another thing that I'm very interested in, and assessment. And I call the course Assessment as a Pedagogical Tool. And I enjoyed quite a lot of academic freedom, because I was teaching at that time in a University College in Israel. And as the Head of Teacher Education, I could introduce changes I believed in.

However, moving back to our home to Norway I experienced the obstacles of academic bureaucracy. And it took years, for example, to implement changes in the assessment for the course in higher education. And that really frustrated me because I felt that as a teacher educator, I couldn't really do what I wanted to do, because it took 2 years until, you noticed the reform and you could apply it. So, you couldn't do it according to the students.

I was one of the founders of the Norwegian National Research School in Teacher Education. And I was first, the Head of the board there. And then I became the Head, Academic Head. And here we enjoyed quite a lot of academic freedom, because the research school was in addition to the institution doctoral education. So that means that I have to give them extra support. We had about 260 PhD students, all teacher educators, going through the research school and I really enjoyed that, because there I had the freedom and the money to do what we could.

My research interests are, or they have been, assessment. But more the pedagogical and motivational aspects of it. I have not been that interested in the psychometrics - probably quite a lot opposed to it. And then also professional development of teachers and teacher educators. And now, recently, in the last decade or so, also quite a strong focus on doctoral education - but here focusing on doctoral supervision, and feedback in doctoral supervision. So you can see the assessment comes in here, too.

So today I am a basic Professor Emerita and I'm being in the fortunate position, I can do whatever I choose to do and not what I have to do. And that is lovely [laughter].

Jen Farrar

That is lovely, and it is great to be able to draw from all of your experience and insights. And I think what I was getting there was a really strong sense that all of your work has been very,

very focused on the individual learner, whether it's somebody in the classroom, or whether it is a PhD student, and looking at the sort of feedback they are getting, which, of course, is really pertinent for what we're talking about today. So thank you for that.

So if we could just try to locate your work a little bit more geographically, in terms of the context of where you are right now in Norway. How would you describe the curriculum for most learners at school in the curriculum? What are its key features and principles, please?

Kari Smith

Yep, okay. I think I'll first inform about the structure of schooling - maybe everybody is familiar with that. And that also includes assessment, and then a few words about your curriculum. And then, as you said, some of the key features and principles that we have.

Obligatory schooling in Norway is 10 years, 10 grades. That means the last 3 years, often called lower Secondary School - eighth, ninth, and tenth grade. That all had to do. Upper secondary education is voluntary and that is 3 years for the academic stream and 4 years for vocational education. The latter has 2 years in school and 2 years in apprenticeship.

In the latest reforms, and I'll come back to that, its time span is being extended, so most students can finish up secondary education, especially a vocational education. Because there are more students choosing the academic stream than the vocational stream. However, the dropout is mainly in the vocational stream - about 97% stopped at the upper secondary school and about 81% complete it all together. But that means 89/90% approximately in the academic stream, and only 70% approximately in the vocational stream. And that is also now why the extension in the new reforms, it might be important to see that more people finish up secondary school.

Also, we have no grades in the first 7 years of school. None whatsoever. All through the system there is teachers' assessment. Only at secondary school, though, is the teacher assessment translated into a grade. And there are some exam grades, and I'll explain and come back to that later, because that is quite complex. The guidance says that teacher's grades should be a combination of assessment approaches to document students' competences in various ways: it could be observation, dialogue, discussions, performances, all relevant written work, learning, logs, etc. What teachers have to be ready to respond to

every half year are: What does the student master now?; What is expected that students should master in the next half year?; Is the student progressing?; and What needs to be done or changed, so the student can reach the goals? So, these are questions the teachers have to report on in the talk with the students and also with the parents.

At the end of grade 10 the students have exams and 2 subjects chosen by lottery - one written and one oral. The written exam is centralized, and the students have picked to sit the exam in one of the 3 subjects. It could be math, Norwegian or English, but which one, you don't know until 2 days before the exam.

The second exam is locally administered and is oral and that can be in any of the other school subjects. And that also you are picked to do it, and you have no idea ahead of time what exam you will have. So as so you can see, the system is interesting.

Jen Farrar

I can! Sorry to interrupt - is that a long-standing arrangement?

Kari Smith

We have had that for a few years - yeah, for a few years now [laughter]. It will get more interesting. All students at the end of compulsory school, they get an end of obligatory schooling certificate - that is the end of tenth grade, as a side - even if they fail in the subject. So that they will still get a certificate that they have attended school and completed school.

Then we go to the upper secondary school, and there the exam system is a bit similar. Both teachers' grades and the exam grades are written on the certificate, and I'll come back to the balance between them.

In the first year of upper secondary school, 20% of the students, only 20% of the students in the first year of upper secondary school are picked to take an exam in any subject they are studying. It can be written, practical, or oral depending on the subject, but only 20%. So it's quite a lottery.

In the second year of upper secondary school, all students take one exam that has been picked for them. And in the final year, all students have to take a written exam in their main

language, which might be one of the 2 Norwegian languages, or in Sami - Sami language. I won't go into the fact that we have 2 official Norwegian languages, but we have, okay?
[laughter]

In addition, all students have to take 3 other exams, which once again, is by lottery. And they don't know until a few, a couple of days at the most, before the exam. So at the end of secondary school, all students have taken 5 exams and 20% have taken 6 exams. But even though the teacher's grade counts for 80%, the exam grade overrules the teacher's grade.

Jen Farrar

Oh?

Kari Smith

So that means if the teacher's grade is pass, but the exam grade is a fail, the student fails the course and doesn't get the metric certificate. So you can see that we think that Norwegian teachers have 80% of the grade, etc., but you can see how the exam grade still controls it.

Jen Farrar

Yeah.

Kari Smith

So that is an interesting thing; an interesting trick that still stays.

Jen Farrar

Can I interrupt to ask quickly, I have many questions, but how often is there a mismatch between the teacher's judgement and the exam fail?

Kari Smith

The problem is that teachers then base their grade very much on previous metric exams (that means on tests that they give them). Do you understand? Instead of using the overall assessment repertoire as I talked about previously. That is the problem, because they don't want to be too far away from the exam grade.

Jen Farrar

Great.

Kari Smith

So that is my strong criticism. It sounds wonderful - teachers grade 80%. And in those subjects where they are not taking the exam, it's fantastic, because it's 100%. However, then you have this very strong ruling. So you have the backwash that the last year in high school is still being very strongly controlled by the exam.

Jen Farrar

It's a fascinating system.

Kari Smith

Yeah, it is a fascinating system. I'm not sure that it's the best, but it's a fascinating system. So that's the way it goes.

Jen Farrar

Is the rationale for 2 to 3 days' notice to make sure that the exam captures a snapshot that is relatively realistic of the amount of effort the learners are putting in around about exam preparation, or what is the rationale for the short notice period rather than a long one?

Kari Smith

That the students should not focus on specific exams, subjects, so that you have to be ready for anything; to be chosen for any subject. So you can't say that you're going for 5 in math – 5 is the good score now - that you're going for 5 in math, but you're going for a 3 in history. You can't do that during the year, because you might get up in history, and not in math. Or vice versa.

Jen Farrar

Great. Okay.

Kari Smith

So I think that's the reason.

Jen Farrar

Okay, thank you [laughter]

Kari Smith

So if you look a bit at the at the curriculum when we talked about this interesting exam system, the curriculum in Norway is governed by what we call the Education Law. And that is very central. It has a general part, and a subject related part.

So the main principles of the general path include, and here you might recognize certainly some of it in Scotland and Wales: the value of each human being; identity and cultural plurality; critical thinking and ethical consciousness; creativity, engagement, and questioning or researching stance; respect for nature and environment, and democracy and involvement. So all teachers in all subjects, they have to have this in mind when they are teaching. These are the overall goals of education in a way.

Then we have, as for assessment, all students have the right to formative assessment by law. And the second part represents the competence goals in each subject, and these goals are standardized and are supposed to be progressive. So you can see me using 'are supposed to be', that formulation of the sentence, you can see I might be critical, but we can talk about that later.

There's also a close connection between the curriculum and assessment. And this is the same – either it's teacher assessment, or exams. So there's a close relation. The teacher will also make sure that he or she assesses according to the competence goals.

Jen Farrar

And do these competence goals link back to the conversations that you mentioned a little earlier about these core questions - what needs to, what does the, how does the student master knowledge? How do they progress? So are these competence goals linked to those sorts of discussions that you mentioned that happen in the lower secondary?

Kari Smith

[pause] I think they should be, and that is the intention.

Jen Farrar

Okay.

Kari Smith

I'm not quite sure that they are. I think that the competence goals are more related to the curriculum in their specific subject.

Jen Farrar

Right.

Kari Smith

Sorry.

Jen Farrar

No, it's okay. So these standardized competence goals, they're subject specific so they outline progress within each area?

Kari Smith

Yeah. And we will come back to that because you have the question later on. So yeah.

Jen Farrar

Okay, thank you. Okay, if I could then ask you, I mean that's absolutely fascinating, and thank you for that really interesting description. So you mentioned this has been in place for quite a while already. Have there been recent reforms to it? Have there been recent changes? Could you tell us a little bit about what changes have been made and how they've been received?

Kari Smith

Yeah, okay. Some of the recent changes, and in fact, the curriculum or the educational law is now up for a revision. Maybe I'll take up some of the main things that come out in the suggestions for the revision. It's not decided on, but the governmental plans for the revision, they are published, and we can still now respond to them.

One thing that is already in working, that is a strong focus on what we call in-depth learning. It is defined as the gradual development of knowledge and lasting understanding of concepts, methods, and relationships within subjects and between subject areas. So cross-disciplinary learning. This means that if you reflect on your own learning and use what is learned in different ways in familiar and unfamiliar situations along or together with others. So this is a very, I would say, forceful definition of in depth learning. But the question is, how is it translated into practice, and what do teachers do with it? And here, the follow up of this definition hasn't been strong enough, I think, to make teachers understand and to see how they can work it well, or translate it into their own teaching. So that is a problem, I think, in Norway - we are very good, as I will say later in "the letter", but to put it into practice, I'm not quite sure that it works well.

Jen Farrar

So do you mean, then, that this in-depth learning, the gradual development of knowledge and concepts, that will be decided centrally in a standardized way? Or is it something that's decided at school level or department level?

Kari Smith

How to do it is something that will be done at the school level, department level, and so on. But the definition as you have is there. And this stage, when we will talk about that, when we talk about newer reforms, there is a stage there that is lost – how do the teachers translate it into practice. These are wonderful words. I agree with every word of it. Wonderful. But it has to be translated into practice.

Jen Farrar

Yep.

Kari Smith

Yeah, that is one of my problems with what is happening with reforms. But we'll come to that.

Jen Farrar

Okay.

Kari Smith

Another change that we've seen is, the expanded support assigned within the secondary school, in terms of time, the possibility to change study programs. You have started on something, you see it isn't for you, then you can change. And it's not, it's okay that you couldn't do before. And there's a close follow up of students who are often absent from school. That means, before if you were absent from school, and you didn't come to school enough, you couldn't sit for the exam because we didn't have enough time. Now there's a closer follow up on what is happening? Why do they not come to school? And so on. And I think this is very positive. And it is especially important for students in the vocational programs.

Another thing which has come quite forward, and that is more attention is Norway, is given to the students - their rights to be heard. And student involvement in their own learning beyond student boards, etc. etc. that we always had. It would be interesting to see how this is followed up. I just wrote a paper on it in a practical journal for teachers where I claim the student involvement largely depends on teachers' pedagogical stance, beliefs and values. I think that is where you have to find the route to how to involve students.

Another thing is, which has got a stronger focus in the reform, is that in teaching to the good of each student to be a lawful right. Adapt the teaching is a lawful right the students should have.

Jen Farrar

Okay.

Kari Smith

Notice we commend it.

Jen Farrar

Yeah, yeah.

Kari Smith

But yet, little is said, however, about how to do this again.

And then we have the ongoing exam debate. During Covid, all exams in Norway were cancelled, and teachers' graded for the summative assessment for 3 years. That also meant acceptance to higher education. And higher education didn't oppose to this at all. Not to say, in a small study that I've done together with 2 colleagues, we found that... no, because there were no exams, there were no teaching to the exams, that means that more time was spent on learning the content, the subjects, and that is what they are interested in in higher education. So that was an interesting finding.

This year the summative exams were reintroduced in the form that I told you. However, not without quite a lot of discussion, specifically from the student side. They really voiced their opinion, because they said that there is so much stress in these exams, even though they are only 20%. There's so much stress for them, it's so stressing for them that it takes away focus for their motivation for learning.

So it seems that whatever we learned during Covid isn't developed. And I don't think we have taken sufficiently the opportunity to make changes. We didn't grasp it, all the opportunities we had. We are back in the old – old normal has become the new normal again. And that, I'm a bit critical of that. We had an opportunity there where we really could make changes.

Jen Farrar

But you said that these are suggestions for reform that are currently under way? So there are still opportunities for...?

Kari Smith

Yeah, so the exam debate I've not suggested, that I take back, because this is also something that we are discussing quite a lot here in Norway, the exams. But it's not in the suggestion for the new reform.

Jen Farrar

Right. So that's the level of the random exam will stand, even although that might, I would say, maybe suggest some tensions with that? The reform you mentioned about the student's involvement in their own learning and things like that, you know. Then it's, and of course, that speaks back to your own research interest, putting the learner at the heart and finding ways for them to be involved in their self-assessment.

Kari Smith

And it's interesting, because what they are doing is, they are even quoting the United Nations Declaration - the rights of the child. To say it is so strong - it's so strong. And then you suggest then that they are quoting this. The voice, the space, the impact, the influence. All these 4 main things that Lundy has translated in her model – that is mentioned. And it will be interesting to see how this is being followed up in the classroom.

Jen Farrar

Hmm, absolutely. So, then, from these reforms, and you've already mentioned some of your own concerns about these things, there's a real sense here of the tensions that are emerging with these reforms. You've referred to Covid, and the learning that's come from Covid. And I'm thinking about just moving on to some of your own research and ideas. You've written, you've described, sometimes, in terms of the tensions that can exist between what we write in policy documents and what emerges in use. You've described that as being “cosmetic practice” - you've already alluded to some of this already. But I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about what you mean by that, please?

Kari Smith

Yeah, now you get me going [laughter]. I tried when I thought of talking to you how to try to make this a bit clearer, and it really helped me also to make it a bit clearer to myself. I think that introducing any reforms is a 3-stage process. And the first stage is what I call “the letter”, the content and the wording on the reform. That has to be based on evidence. And when I talk about evidence, I mean research - quantitative as well as qualitative, practical evidence from experience by users of the upcoming reform, and expert opinions. So evidence is not only, for me, a diagram or whatever. It is more. And the evidence is collected

from, has to be collected from an international, and beyond all, a national knowledge, base. So the letter, the wording of the reform, should be adapted to the national context, but still be open enough to be adapted to the local context, and that is very open - one of the challenges that we have.

The second stage is the users taking ownership of the reform. The users have to believe in the changes - believe that it will be beneficial to their students. They have to, internalize, I call it, the changes. Get it under their skin, finding ways how they can be true to their own pedagogical and disciplinary beliefs in implementing the changes. And they need to take ownership, as I said, of it. This I call the "spirit" of the reform, as accepted by the teachers.

And the third stage is the practical implementation of the changes in school. And this is how the letter of the reform is translated into practice in class. However, I think we forget that the process of implementing a reform takes time - it takes years. And my worry is that stage 2, which I find the most complex and time-consuming process, is not taken seriously enough.

So if time is spent on it at all, the letter of the reform, is very open - stage one. So it's translated into practice and activities in a top down manner. And teachers get these ideas from study days, one-time lectures, handbooks, etc. of what to do in the classroom. This is what I call cosmetic changes.

The chief example is - and it's not because I'm against the ideas that I hear, but I take examples - we have seen that implemented in Norway. Teachers use, for example, traffic lights. You know the assessment system using traffic lights - Dylan William, a credit to him. Because they heard the idea in the lecture. Or self-assessment by using a smiley form because the reform says self-assessment should be used. However, the pedagogical and motivational rationale have not been sufficiently explained. And the spirit of the reform has not been internalized. So they do it automatically. We don't know why they do it, if you understand what I mean.

Can I come with a very personal anecdote here?

Jen Farrar

Yeah, please.

Kari Smith

The example was, I have 4 sons. Okay? One of them, he read when he was already four. We never taught him, but he just learned it okay? And he came to school when he was 6, and after half a year, a few months in school, by Christmas time, we were called by the teacher, and she said, we have to think of [name] going into special class because he might have reading problems. And we were shocked because he was reading fluently. And as a language teacher, I understood the moment she said, "Yes, we have given him a closed test" - you know the closed tests? Every nth word should be left out in the text. And [name] doesn't use - you can see [name]'s responses, they are not the right. And then I said, "How did you correct this closed test?" I already had a PhD in Education, and I was a language teacher, so I knew what she had done, or she had been doing. And then she said, "You see here, there is a bank of words, that I had written these words because they are only in the beginning of their reading process. So they just have to find the right word from the bank and put it in slash this". And then I understood, and I said, "Have you read [name]'s text? Have you read how he filled it in, or have you just looked at the pass answers, or the responses? Let us read it together." And then we read it together, and it was absolutely outstanding - completely comprehensible. Because [name] didn't have to use the bank, he used his own words.

Jen Farrar

Synonyms?

Kari Smith

Exactly. He had his own like words - he had a much richer vocabulary. And then that is the point of it. She had learned a technique in teacher education, but she hadn't learned about the rationale behind the technique, the distinct theory in psychology. So that is what I call cosmetic changes, and they are dangerous. So thank goodness we - he is now successful, with several university degrees, and so on. So we have no problem; he could read.

[laughter] But that is what I mean - that they do it because they've heard about it and don't understand why - why this technique comes through.

Jen Farrar

And so what is the, to shift then, from this surface level understanding, we need time is what you're saying? We have to acknowledge that time, you know, but how do we go about doing that?

Kari Smith

As you said, I think teachers must be given time to find their own ways. To try out techniques they have learned and adapt them to their own pedagogical beliefs and position - and not least, to their own students.

I think the most successful implementation processes I have been involved with, are when the school, including the principal, engage in at least a year long action research process, often interdisciplinary team wise, on how the reform can be adapted to the school culture, to the subject, and to individual teachers' personal practice theory.

So our job as teacher educators in these projects have been to facilitate the schools and the teachers' learning processes, but not to tell them what to do - they had to come up with that. And the principal then has to make sure that working time and not free time was earmarked for the teachers' learning processes, to do the action research, to discuss it. And also in these projects, when a new teacher came to school, he or she was adopted by team, which carefully mentored a novice into the process of finding his or her own ways within it.

So as I said, my worry is that reform makers do not have time and resources, from states to nationwide. And then changes become cosmetic - teachers do what they have been told to do.

Jen Farrar

So there's a real sense then - there is the pressure to, because there are pressures on the policy and the reformers, aren't they, to get things done, to make improvements, to see results. So we have a new curriculum, we have these reforms. How are the children doing? And so you're saying that compression, those pressures result in Stage 2 being bypassed, and what exists is pretty much what perhaps went before, but just dressed up slightly differently?

Kari Smith

Exactly. And yeah, I'll come back to that later on, also, because when you say what could be done? I really think that, also the policymakers, they have to understand that reform takes place to settle. And we have experienced that in, for example, in Norwegian teacher education. We have had now recently, until 2017, I know they're already talking about a new one again, we had up to three, four reforms within a decade or two. And that means that we have no idea what reforms work and what doesn't work because we don't. We don't get one cohort out before the new reform is already internalized. I think that's the problem.

Jen Farrar

Right. Right. Absolutely. So that time, needing time to bed down, to settle, to see results.

Kari Smith

Yeah, stage two.

Jen Farrar

Stage two.

Kari Smith

So putting it into stages really helped me clarify and see things.

Jen Farrar

Yes, I find it very helpful myself. I've been scribbling down a little diagram. I wish I could show you [laughter]. But yeah, I think that, especially if top-down change can be cosmetic, so where we're really interested in here is that middle space. So I suppose maybe moving on then, in those tensions we've considered there, how do we then support? We've mentioned time already, and we've mentioned mentoring - are there other ways that we can support teachers, perhaps in especially realising a shift from cultures of assessment for assessing performance - there's that, external, perhaps, performances towards one that is then focused on assessment of learning, and especially when teachers are facing pressures and accountability inspections, that kind of thing. What else? Are there any tools or ideas?

We've had your 3 stages. Is there anything else within that space that you think would be helpful?

Kari Smith

I think I partly answered this question in my previous, really quite laboured response. Teachers need time to understand what it means to assess learning.

Jen Farrar

Yeah.

Kari Smith

How does that change the practice and techniques they have been told to use, and they used to apply for the sake of accountability? They are used to that - they assess for the sake of accountability very much.

So, most of us, we can only accept it. We are apprehensive when we have to do something new – okay, it's something we feel insecure about. We experience professional insecurity in a way, even those of us with quite a long experience. Therefore, I think, becoming familiar with learning and motivational theories, which you learn when you do your teacher education, but you don't relate it to practice sufficiently. How to give feedback and feed forward without translating it into a grade. Keeping in mind the importance of self-efficacy, and self-regulation, etc., it takes time, and I think it is a tough learning process. We have to support teachers finding their own ways. So I strongly support, and I believe in, action research projects, self-studies, etc. going over time. Where teachers work together in order to do that.

I just had a PhD student of mine. Yes, she finished a year or two ago. And she worked on a cooperative learning and the benefits students would have from cooperative learning. But she did this by making teachers work co-operatively in order to learn how to work cooperatively with the students. So they had to feel in their own body in an action research project together, longitudinal over two or three years, how to really get all the benefits for cooperative learning for their students. So I think that this is something that, as I said, it takes time.

Jen Farrar

I think what's emerging here is, we've got these, you know, that sense of time, and you've got the voices of the teachers and their experiences. And then I wonder, then, if we could bring in here something that I know you're interested in, what you've mentioned already, the voices of the learners, ipsative assessment. So I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about that now? How we can maybe use these practices specifically in relation to thinking about what progression looks like for learners within this space. If you have, as you mentioned, you know, thinking about how to feed back, how to feed forward without giving a grade. How do we define what progression might look like? And how can we use the learners as a resource for that as well? It's a massive question. Sorry, Kari.

Kari Smith

Yeah, I know it's a huge question, because the question that I had continuously asked myself - what is progression? Who decides that A has to be learned before B in a specific subject? Within a discipline, we frame a small part of the huge disciplinary knowledge space and call it a curriculum. And then we take that part and divide it into competence goals. And all learners have to progress according to this top down decided continuum.

I remember when I learned to be an English teacher, an English as a foreign language teacher. We were told that the aspect of the present tense – present continuous – had to be taught before present simple.

Jen Farrar

Okay

Kari Smith

We didn't get any explanation in teacher education. Why? Just that that was the progress in the curriculum and the books and textbooks. So the result was that the learners, at that time speakers of Hebrew and Arabic mainly, overuse present continuous through up to 9 years since they started English. Because they learned it first. And it was the most common mistake in the written essays of the metric exams. Overuse of the present continuous.

So when I started to introduce the 2 aspects of the present tense, at the same time I explained the difference, and much of the problem was solved. However, I went against the curriculum. So my point here is saying that, is it artificial? Is it random? That we, what part of the huge knowledge space, we say this is the curriculum? And is it random that some people decide that A should come before B, and that is progressive, and that is what every student will do. That means I don't have the answer, and I don't have a solution. But I think we don't think enough about this question.

So you can say, experts decide on this, and these are the most important etc. But we have, when we have all of experts deciding, do we use businesses? Do we use industries? Do we use other experts that should be involved in deciding the curriculum? So that is one of the questions I have with the curriculum and progression. And that also links me to when I talk about ipsative assessment.

I think that lack of recognition for the need of ipsative progress and assessment, it's dear to my heart. It's very dear to my heart, and I feel that we have a lack of recognition to it.

When I was a homeroom teacher for a non-selected upper secondary class, I had gifted students on one extreme, and struggling students on the other extreme, and then all that goes between. The gifted children became bored. I didn't really have to do much to keep up with the competence goals. They were not challenged and didn't learn the important lessons in life, as I see it, that is that hard work pays off. They were not educated using *Bildung* in the German sense, not only getting more knowledge, but they were not educated. Schools should give also another other aspect of education. So, as the teacher, I had to create new challenges for them, or to develop new goals together with them. It was not enough to give them all work of the same - give them busy work, keep them busy. They had the right to be challenged; every child in school has the right to be challenged, also the gifted ones.

And then you, on the other extreme, you had the struggling students. Those who had a tough time achieving the competence goals. They often saw themselves as failures and became demotivated, and gave up. Like we said, we have a strong drop out of the vocational screen. Neither they were educated for life. So also here, I had to give them individual goals to build a kind of ladder with smaller steps, to make them experience

success and progress. They had the right to experience that it was worthwhile working to maintain motivation. They had the right to be educated that it's worthwhile working. So all learners had, as I believe, the right to experience progress, either they are low or below the standardized curriculum continuum.

So this requires ipsative assessment. And I view that in education, it's also about the learning, about the importance of effort and work to strive for - to be ambitious.

Standardized curriculum doesn't work for either of the two extremes; not the gifted ones, and not the struggling ones. So I think it might be useful to revisit Tomlinson's work on differentiated instruction and the 3 dimensional assessment system - looking at content, process and product. That, his work, quite some time ago, maybe we should revisit it and have a look at it.

Jen Farrar

With a view to considering what it can tell us about ipsative assessment and involving that?

Kari Smith

That means that when, for example, you give grades, we are not only giving grades according to the competence goals. We are also - not in the same grade, we can differentiate the grade - so we could have a student who is above the competence goals. Gifted, good. However, works little, no effort, etc., and that would also be in the grade schedule, in the assessment system. Where you have somebody who might be below the competence goals, however, has progressed and is working very hard. So if you have this 3 system, hold the progress, a gifted student who is above competence, started above, and completes and finishes above but that pupil hasn't progressed, hasn't learned very much. So that means going back and having a look at the 3-dimensional system might not be too crazy.

Jen Farrar

That's a good suggestion. Thank you very much. And we can provide a link to that paper as well.

Kari Smith

It's Tomlinson's work.

Jen Farrar

Thank you. Thank you. And I think what you're kind of suggesting there was a more nuanced look at, you know, the assessment as a process, and what's going into that, and the different facets that can be involved within that. And like you say, just considering the learning that's taking place, rather than just the end result - that final product. Thank you so much.

Now I'm mindful of the time. There's so much we could talk about, but I wanted to ask you about a project that you're currently involved in. Now I know it's underway right now, and there's not a great amount you can tell us, but it's a project with a group of schools who have volunteered to go gradeless. And as the data is still being collected, I know you can't tell us an enormous amount. But I wonder whether you could perhaps a bit about the rationale behind the project and your hopes for it, please?

Kari Smith

Yeah, we are a group of researching teacher educators, cross disciplinary. And the group is led by Professor [name]. We are interested in exploring a bottom-up process, where teachers decide to make changes by reducing the use of grades. So it investigates teachers' and students' experiences in going gradeless in upper secondary school. That is the interesting thing - we are only focusing on upper secondary school. And focusing mainly on Norwegian, English, mathematics and also vocational education. So we are also looking at the school leadership - what's the consequences for them? And we are also looking at teachers' professional practice with this and how do they do that? And what kind of professional development takes place with the teachers and the school leadership? We also decided recently, because that is something that I pushed for, and it was accepted. That is, to look into how parents feel about their children attending a going gradeless school.

So, as you said, we have collected data and there's no intervention. So we don't tell them how to do it again. We just look at it. So it would be a descriptive study, not an experimental study, and this fall will be used to analyze the data and start writing up and publishing the results.

Jen Farrar

So can I just confirm - clarify - so this is the upper secondary? So these are the young people you mentioned, so you will have those 20%, who'll have an exam in year one. Then they might have, you know, random exams in years 2 and 3, so they will get grades for those external exams. But do you mean throughout the academic year they're going gradeless?

Kari Smith

Exactly

Jen Farrar

So they won't, so that the actual day-to-day leading up to the end of year is just all formative feedback?

Yeah, that's fascinating. So we can look to find out some more about that come Autumn.

Kari Smith

We hope so. Yes, we hope so. When we have the data, and there are good people in the group so we probably do some writing.

Jen Farrar

[laughter] Okay, that's, well, that does sound very interesting. And I think, as you said, to get an insight into how what would support teachers in moving this forward, looking at the resistance that might occur, and looking at parents and the parental expectations, and that broader sphere is fascinating, as well as that how the young people find grades as motivation presumably within that year as well.

Kari Smith

It's interesting because we've just had a few glimpses of the results. And it's interesting that the strong students, they prefer the grades. And that is not new.

Jen Farrar

No, okay, thank you. Drawing from the wealth of research and knowledge that you have and anything else you think is relevant, is there anything else that you think would be useful for colleagues in Wales to know about what teachers should expect about a period of intense curricular reform. We've mentioned time, we've mentioned uncertainty. Is there anything else you'd like to add at this stage?

Kari Smith

First of all, I think also, yeah. The implementation of the reform, it shouldn't be evaluated after a year or two, but time is needed for the reform, as I say, to settle. And then also, I am all for the formative mentoring of the implementation process, but not in favour of external evaluators who come to school and sit with a tick off form to see that the teachers do this or that. That is not... I'm completely against things like OFSTED and things like that. Sorry.

But I think teachers should, as students, be allowed not always to be successful. And the only way to measure success is not necessarily higher scores on the PISA test. What if the goals were also that children were happy in school? Started their adult life with motivation and not pressure for lifelong learning - motivation for lifelong learning, not pressure for lifelong learning. And to be creative and be equipped to meet black swans, like, for example, the Covid came up, which they will encounter many times in life. That means how do we put that into competence skills – these abilities? And I think that these are things that schools of today really have to think more of. How to live in a world of uncertainty, and how to support people in, in learning how to manage uncertainty. Because if you have the curriculum with the competence goals as the right or wrong answer and so on, there is no uncertainty. But that is not what we will need. Any information we need we can find on the net. So I don't say they shouldn't have a strong knowledge base, because then, only then, you learn how to pose the good questions, if you know what you're talking about. But we also have to allow for asking for our students in school to ask the questions. What if? We are the teachers, the decision makers. We don't have the answers. And that is where I have the problem with new reforms that think they will be capable of tackling that, but putting all into regulations, and so on.

Jen Farrar

So there's a tension there isn't there, between trying to create sufficient space within a curriculum for teachers to explore these big questions? I love what you said about you know, generating a motivation for lifelong learning through motivation itself, not pressure. And then we have this, you know, this sense of a tension, where with by being prescriptive and saying, if we do this, if we do, X, Y, Z, you will come out with this product. And when in a pressurized environment, we don't have much time. We have these tensions between creating space, creating opportunities where people might make mistakes, where things, you know, teachers can experiment, can explore, and learners too, as opposed to this narrower model. But as you're saying, is that truly preparing our learners for this world that we live in?

Kari Smith

Yeah.

Jen Farrar

Yeah, okay, thank you so much. And I think, there are many examples you've given us today from Norway which are super interesting, and they seem to me to be super relevant. Are there any other final comments you want to tell us, or other lessons you think that teachers in Wales might learn from their counterparts in Norway?

Kari Smith

No, only I think that the teachers in both Wales and Norway they have to have a strong professional voice. Not only when their salaries are negotiated, but when the education, curriculum, and assessment are discussed. I sometimes miss that voice. [signals money with hand]. Specifically in Norway. So I would say, use your voice. Because I think we should ask the teachers to define their professional roles and responsibilities and not leave it all to policymakers.

So just to conclude with what I say, I think that we have to strive for more, what I call personal professionalists and not political professionalists. Do you understand the difference? Political professionalists is what decision-makers decide the role of teaching

should be. But what about the teachers, the personal professionals? That is what is acted on in the classroom and they should be allowed to talk about that.

So I think, in Norway, we are continually striving to improve education, and I highly respect that. I not always agree, but I highly respect it. And I think that as I've come to know Wales, you are not afraid of making significant changes with the future look, I think so, so that is also highly respected.

Jen Farrar

So - pardon me.

Kari Smith

Yeah, so just to say it, there's no quick fix. And I think even in small countries, like Wales and Norway, the reform changes we have to accept will be implemented in different ways. So the framework might be nationwide, but the translation should allow for diversity - local diversity. And also, let's not forget, a new reform, it's not necessarily a good reform. So just be open, question, be critical, that I think also a teacher should be probably, they are back in Wales as well. In Norway, I hope, I would wish that would be more. They are very obedient in everything except their salaries.

Jen Farrar

But seeing this as an opportunity to, this period of reform, as an opportunity to really consider that personal professionalism, your role as a teacher and your voice as a teacher within the landscape. Thank you for those inspiring final words in this really interesting conversation.

What will happen once we share this this recording with colleagues is that there'll be an opportunity for people to submit some questions to you, Kari, and we can send them to you. So if people would like to follow up on anything that you've mentioned, or perhaps seek clarification, then we can come to you and get some responses, if that's okay.

Kari Smith

That's fine.

Jen Farrar

Well, many, many, many thanks for such a fascinating conversation. I really appreciate you giving up your time. Thank you.

Kari Smith

Thank you for giving me time.

Jen Farrar

Okay, thank you.