Along the path of change: practical lessons from supporting curriculum reform in Croatia

By Artur Taevere, Marie Joubert, Rebecca Kitchen, Jane English, Helena Valečić, Irena Ivanović, Claire Sinnema and Rosana Besednik.
Rarely has curriculum reform generated such a passionate response within the teaching community, and wider society, than it has in Croatia. Since the government first launched its reform initiatives in 2015, the teachers, teacher educators and school leaders involved have experienced life-changing impact, which has slowly started to be reflected in the wider school system. But there is still a long way to go.

Here we offer recommendations and lessons-learned from our experience of delivering curriculum reform in Croatia, through various British Council projects, which we hope education leaders around the world can use along their own paths towards curriculum reform.1

In this article, we will share both our direct experiences of supporting Croatia’s reform efforts through various British Council projects – all funded by the European Union, through the Structural Reform Support Programme, and delivered in co-operation with the European Commission. We will also make observations on the wider context of Croatia’s national curriculum reform efforts, led by the Ministry of Science and Education.

Recommendations at the project level:

1 Identify and nurture a cohort of mentors – educators whose practice exemplifies the pedagogical approaches you aim to promote in the new curriculum, and who are ready to support colleagues in their own schools, and more widely, to understand what curriculum reform means for their own practice.

2 Create a culture where new teaching and learning approaches can flourish, by shifting the attention of school leaders away from administration and towards instructional leadership.

Recommendation at the systemic level:

3 Support system-wide reform by recognising the role of everyone across the system, understanding the importance of relationships in curriculum realisation efforts, and ensuring a wider set of policies is aligned with the purpose of the reform.

1 The initiatives discussed in this article form part of the Croatian government’s wider curriculum reform strategy, implemented by the Ministry of Science and Education and expert agencies of the Croatian education system, with the involvement of a large number of educators. The British Council provided expert and technical support to the implementation of the reform. The views, opinions and recommendations expressed in this article are the personal views of the authors and do not represent those of the Ministry of Science and Education. The Ministry has no obligation to address the recommendations presented in this article.
A summary of curriculum reform in Croatia

Origins: a new strategy for education, science and technology was adopted by the Croatian parliament in 2014, and working groups comprising about 500 teachers and academics began developing new curriculum documents in 2015.

Objectives: the new curriculum focused on learning outcomes (while giving more freedom for teachers to choose appropriate teaching approaches) and the development of competencies (such as problem solving).

Timeline: 74 schools began working with the new curriculum in certain grades and subjects in September 2018 (they were called experimental schools in the context of the reform). One year later, this was extended to all 1,400 primary and secondary schools across Croatia.

British Council projects: since 2018, the British Council has delivered four distinct, yet related, projects to support curriculum reform in Croatia, one of which is ongoing at the time of publication. All have been funded by the European Union, through the Structural Reform Support Programme, and implemented in co-operation with the European Commission.

Evaluation: three independent evaluation studies have been conducted by the University of Auckland (New Zealand) and the University of Stirling (Scotland) to explore the response of teachers and principals to the curriculum reform, including their views on the quality of the support they’ve received.
Recommendation one

Identify and nurture a cohort of mentors – educators whose practice exemplifies the pedagogic approaches you aim to promote in the new curriculum, and who are ready to support colleagues in their own schools, and more widely, to understand what curriculum reform means for their own practice.

Setting the scene. To help transition from ‘the written curriculum’ in policy documents to ‘the enacted curriculum’ in actual classrooms, the Ministry of Science and Education set out to develop a cohort of mentors – experienced teachers in a range of subject areas – to support teachers across the country during implementation. To do this, they engaged 70 full-time and 200 part-time mentors, more than 100 of which engaged in extensive professional development provided by the British Council.

Summary of activities

How the British Council supported mentors
The British Council’s international team of experts conducted five face-to-face workshops and more than 20 online webinars – to deepen the learning of the workshops – between 2018 and 2021. Between 80 and 100 mentors participated in each two-day, face-to-face event, and a significant proportion participated in six or more days of face-to-face training.

How mentors supported teachers
During the first year of reform implementation, mentors conducted four advisory visits to 74 experimental schools. In the second year, they visited all Croatian schools and ran regional professional development events on specific subject areas. They backed this up with continuing virtual support (on the Loomen platform) for over 50,000 teachers. These activities were all co-funded by the Ministry of Science and Education and the European Union from the European Social Fund.

Valerija Turk-Presečki wrote: ‘reshaping the [learning] outcomes into a language understandable to students allowed them to see the connection between the activities and the goal they needed to achieve. Outcome planning has had a positive effect on the motivation and effort they [students] put into certain activities, because they see more clearly the connection between effort and learning.’

Impact of the British Council’s work with mentors.
There are at least two sources of evidence to show that the British Council’s work with mentors had a significant impact. First, many of those surveyed after their training reported that they had developed a range of teaching competencies aligned to the reformed curriculum, and 69 per cent agreed that the training had been ‘life-changing’. Second, more than 90 applied for British Council recognition of excellence in teaching, in one of nine specific competencies (such as working towards learning outcomes, teaching problem solving), and their written portfolios of evidence and interviews provide detailed examples of their learning, development and changes in practice.
What worked well: developing a continuing professional development (CPD) framework.
Nine professional competencies were included in the CPD framework (see the image below). These competencies were selected because they aligned with the purposes and expectations of the new curriculum. Following four stages of development – (1) awareness, (2) understanding, (3) engagement and (4) integration – the framework has also been used as a self-monitoring tool by mentors and teachers. The framework emphasises that CPD is a long-term process, not an event.
What worked well: developing a responsive support programme. The international team of experts were explicit about the principles that underpinned their professional development programme.

1) They had a genuine desire to understand what mentors needed, and to develop the programme in line with what appeared to be working well for the mentors. To this end, mentors were involved in identifying what topics should be covered, resulting in an overarching theme of formative assessment. The mentors were also surveyed after each series of activities, and their feedback informed further planning.

2) They recognised that teachers tend to learn best when their existing knowledge and expertise are drawn upon and developed, preferably in collaborative safe spaces in which everyone’s voice is valued. They succeeded in developing collaborative safe spaces, but found it more difficult to develop an understanding of mentors’ previous experience.

3) They were determined to integrate practice with theory, based on Korthagen’s observation that ‘teacher learning takes place at the connection between theory, practice and person’ (2017, p399). They promoted ‘active learning’ both in their training of mentors, and in the mentors’ own work with teachers and students. They modelled these approaches in all sessions, and provided activities for the mentors, instead of lecturing. They taught ‘showcase lessons’ for mentors to critique, and organised ‘micro-teaching’ in small groups, challenging mentors to develop their own active learning approaches. In this respect, learning might have been stronger if all mentors had continued teaching on a part-time basis, as this would have provided opportunities to experiment and reflect.

Opportunity for improvement: scaling-up high-quality support. Mentors supported more than 50,000 teachers across the country through large-scale, virtual classrooms on Loomen, a Moodle-based platform. This made it possible to reach almost every primary and general secondary school teacher. (Far fewer teachers at vocational schools participated in professional development opportunities, as some vocational programmes were not covered by the reform.) The virtual platform had many benefits. For example, teachers appreciated that mentors were always available and could provide constructive and timely feedback (Kralj, 2021). However, developing new teaching techniques requires more than what was possible via virtual classrooms or occasional face-to-face advisory visits. It requires (among other things) seeing new teaching approaches being modelled, rehearsing them, monitoring, and providing and receiving feedback (Sims, 2021). Promising, school-based professional development models such as instructional coaching incorporate many of these elements (Kraft, 2018). In the context of limited budgets for professional development, scaling-up high-quality support has been a challenge in Croatia. And this is a universal challenge.
Recommendation two

Create a culture where new teaching and learning approaches can flourish by shifting the attention of school leaders away from administration and towards instructional leadership.

Setting the scene. Achieving curriculum reform objectives is impossible without strong leadership from school leaders, who can lead and manage the changes in their schools. Principals need to create a strategic vision and set the direction, and they should lead effective teaching and learning. If this isn’t the case, while some enthusiastic teachers may embrace the ideas behind curriculum reform, there will be little change across entire schools.

Summary of activities

How the British Council supported school leaders

The British Council’s team of school leadership experts provided intensive support to 20 Croatian principals, including a three-day, face-to-face workshop and a five-day study visit to Scotland, to explore how schools have embraced a new curriculum. In 2021, 45 principals also attended a virtual study visit with five school leaders in England, which comprised eight online sessions. Through the training, school leaders got to see evidence from international research on the impact of quality leadership, and during study visits, they gained access to practising instructional leaders, which helped them reflect on their own role as leaders of teaching and learning.

How school leaders supported other principals

A core group of principals trained by the British Council delivered a three-day workshop to principals of the 74 experimental schools, imparting their new knowledge on school leadership thinking and framing the learning with Croatian examples, to make it relevant to their peers. In 2019, this same core group delivered a four-hour training session for principals in all Croatian counties, funded by the Ministry of Science and Education. Further training and knowledge sharing beyond this group has been organised on an ad-hoc basis.

Impact of the British Council’s work with school principals. When the British Council started working with an initial group of 14 Croatian principals in January 2019, most were firmly of the opinion that their role was school administration – not leading teaching and learning. One of the successes of the project has been that they now view themselves as instructional leaders. Zdenko Kobeščak, principal of Stjepan Radić elementary school commented: ‘based on the example from Scotland, we introduced Learning Walks [in our school], [to gain] monitoring and insight into teaching through short visits by principals and associates.’ Irena Ivanović, a member of the mentor team and now principal of secondary school Čazma, said: ‘the school leadership training by the British Council was a life-changing experience for me. It made me a principal and taught me what really matters in schools. Focusing on the principals’ role in the quality of teaching and learning and their capacity as the agent of leading and managing change has helped me understand what being in charge of a school should actually be about.’
What worked well: combining theory with practice.
While the core group of Croatian principals learned new theory during the training sessions and study visits, the addition of a leadership project, which principals had to implement in their schools to put these new ideas into practice, was an important element of the training programme. In one school, the principal encouraged teachers to work together on designing and delivering classes with the aim of achieving greater student involvement and a personalised approach. In another, the principal developed a new structure of middle leadership to give class teachers and heads of departments much more professional freedom and autonomy.

Opportunity for improvement: strengthening leadership capacity across the entire school system. It became apparent quite quickly that school leaders should have been involved from the start of the reform. Change is required in schools and classrooms, and needs to be led by principals and other experts within schools. This work should have started earlier, to reach a wider group of school principals. Recent professional development events at the county level have shown that principals want more support in terms of leading and managing change, to support them to implement the new curriculum.
Recommendation three

Support system-wide reform by recognising the role of everyone across the system, understanding the importance of relationships in curriculum realisation efforts, and ensuring a wider set of policies is aligned with the purpose of the reform.

Pay attention to the whole system. In Croatia, a lot of attention was given to those whose work is most closely and directly linked to classroom practice (mentors and the classroom teachers they subsequently worked with). But, less attention was given to the indirect, but crucial, educational system functions that surround any curriculum reform implementation efforts. These functions include pre-service and in-service teacher education; teacher accreditation; school inspection; quality assurance systems; teacher and leader evaluation; exams and other qualification arrangements; formal standards for teachers, leaders and teacher educators; leadership development; ongoing monitoring and evaluation; professional learning (including for teachers, leaders, psychologists, librarians and other professional support roles); and resource developers. Two of these elements are particularly important. First is examinations, because unless examinations are aligned with curriculum reform, effective change won’t be possible. Second is ongoing monitoring and evaluation, which needs to consider the extent to which teachers’ practice and students’ experience shift in line with the new curriculum. Mentors and teachers can – and must – learn a lot and make numerous changes, but the wider system must also support the efforts of everyone, and support schools to operate as learning organisations that can realise the curriculum.

Develop relationships across the system to support the curriculum. Everyone involved in any education system has a diverse array of experience, expertise and skills. And while they need to draw on their own resources to effectively play their part in curriculum reform, they also need access to the resources of others, to meet the challenges that come with implementing a new curriculum – since no one person can be expected to have all the required knowledge or skills to achieve it on their own. To effectively leverage expertise across the system – so it can be accessed and used by others – means focusing on how easily people can interact, connect and collaborate. Building the capabilities of individuals is not enough; the system also needs to help build the relational ties across its many people and diverse parts. It needs to create opportunities for people to get to know each other, to work together, to share and to learn from each other. Doing this creates the conditions necessary for curriculum reform ideas to move from person to person, and from place to place. It helps skills and talents to be shared, and the necessary curriculum capabilities to be developed from within the system itself.

Curriculum reform requires people to review their priorities for teaching and learning, to consider new possibilities and, often, to change their practice. This can be extremely challenging, as it requires people to feel safe enough to attempt to change and innovate. And key to this are strong relationships of trust. In addition, new connections are important for the spread of resources, so attention must be given to the relational ties among teachers within a school and teachers across different schools. The system needs to support initiatives that develop this trust, and create opportunities for connections.

Focus on the long term. By necessity, any ambitious curriculum reform will be a long-term project. In Croatia, significant impact has already been achieved in two to three years, which is the typical tenure of one Minister of Education. However, scaling-up the reform and having a wider and sustained impact across the entire school system requires more time. Teachers need time to digest the new curriculum, to learn new teaching approaches and refine them in their classroom practice. It also takes time to produce textbooks, assessments and other resources that support the new curriculum. Evidence from school systems in countries where curriculum reforms are seen to be successful, such as Japan and Estonia, suggests that policy continuity in education is an important enabler of successful implementation. To begin, a core group of teachers, teacher educators and school leaders needs to be supported to understand the proposed curriculum reform objectives. After this, and over time, a wider group of educators and a larger number of schools can join the reform effort, making sense of the new curriculum and trying out new teaching approaches in their own context.
Final thoughts

Here we have shared some experiences, observations and learning from our involvement in Croatia’s curriculum reform process through various British Council projects. We celebrate everything that has been achieved by those involved, whilst acknowledging that Croatia still has a long way to go to achieve its reform objectives. We have reflected critically, both during and after the process, as individuals and collectively, and believe that many of our reflections and recommendations will resonate with others who are on their own paths towards curriculum reform. It is also worth noting that, whilst our work predominantly focused on mentors and principals, we emphasise that a system-wide focus is fundamental to the success of any curriculum reform initiative.

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