

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF DEVOLVED EDUCATION IN WALES



EDITED BY
ANDREW JAMES DAVIES
AND GARY BEAUCHAMP

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Edited by
Andrew James Davies
Gary Beauchamp

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Wales Journal of Education

Edited by
Gary Beauchamp
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‘Pwy a gyfyd Cymru? By whom shall Wales be raised?’ A Quarter-Century of Devolved Educational Policy in Wales

Andrew James Davies and Gary Beauchamp

In his overview of the life of the educational reformer Thomas Charles (*Y Bala*), the historian Ieuan Gwynedd Jones cites a religious and educational maxim that exercised the minds of Charles’ ‘conscientious and literate’ contemporaries in the eighteenth century: ‘*Pwy a gyfyd Cymru, canys bechau yw?* By whom shall Wales be raised, for she is small?’ (Jones, 1963, p. 31). Smith (2016, p. 22) has reflected on how this maxim posed a pointed and contested question in a Wales rapidly embracing social, economic and religious change, in asking who was, and who should be, the caretaker and steward of Wales’s ‘salvation and scholarship’. We have chosen these words to start this introduction, as the question still prompts reflection and is worth asking. Indeed, it echoes somewhat uncannily as contemporary Wales finds itself in the thick of a period of educational change no less profound and far-reaching. As we mark a quarter of a century of devolved policymaking in education, this book therefore celebrates the successes, and grapples critically with the ongoing challenges that Wales’ education system faces.

After centuries of being enmeshed within what Jones and Roderick term the ‘England/Wales’ state (Jones and Roderick, 2003, p. vii), the power to control almost all aspects of education in Wales arrived with devolution in 1999. Prior to this, during the twentieth century, Wales had made some ground in shaping some aspects of the education system to reflect its distinctive historical, cultural and linguistic identity, such as the *Cwricwlwm Cymreig* and the growth of Welsh-medium schooling. Yet, the ability to develop and control a distinctive statutory education system, which was designed to meet Wales needs, had previously been ‘synchromeshed...out of existence’ (Jones, 1997, p. 2). Devolution instigated a landmark opportunity to bring educational policymaking closer to learners,

parents, communities and to the locus of practice. It enabled, and continues to enable, the development of a statutory education system which reflects Wales' different and distinct priorities, and which distinguishes it from other countries, both within the United Kingdom (UK) and beyond. In this way education was, and remains, both a showcase, and a 'policy laboratory' for 'radically different solutions' (Reynolds, 2008, p. 753) to address the specific needs and aspirations of Wales' people (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, p. 5). Although similar books have confronted further and higher education (see, for example, Shattock and Horvath, 2019), this book will focus on early years and the statutory phases of education, given the speed and intensity with which policy change in these areas has accelerated over the past 25 years. Educational policy has provided an opportunity to be *different*, not for its own sake, but to reflect Wales' differences, be they cultural, linguistic, socio-economic and, in terms of the *politics* of education, its purpose, practice and governance. From early innovations like the Foundation Phase, through new curricula, to current national MA and Doctoral programmes, various Education Ministers (whose titles have changed to reflect changing priorities) have worked to justify, cajole or encourage change through the profession, and external mechanisms (such as OECD/PISA).

The question of 'by whom should Wales be raised' takes on a number of different significances in the chapters within this book. It poses critical questions about: the leadership of reform; about where responsibility lies for the successful implementation of a number of post-devolution policy innovations, such as the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales; about the nature and ownership of accountability; about how professionals can best be developed and supported to deliver the current ambitious reform journey; and a great deal more. This book therefore examines statutory education since devolution through a variety of lenses, reflecting key priorities and changes. Two key features of this book are worth noting: firstly, is the incorporation of early career researchers into the writing teams of papers, reflecting our desire to encourage and support those at the beginning of their academic careers; and secondly, the engagement of a number of colleagues through the four Welsh Government-funded Collaborative Research Networks (CRNs), which are engaged in building educational research capacity in a number of the areas covered in this book.

In answer to the recurring question of 'by whom shall Wales be raised', this book suggests that responsibility lies with all of us, at every level and in every domain of an

education system that is unrecognisable from that which preceded devolution, and which continues to evolve apace.

Aims of this book

This book brings together multiple perspectives from within and outside of Wales, examining how 25 years of devolved educational powers have impacted on Welsh education. The book has its origins in a special issue of the *Wales Journal of Education* in 2025 (Davies and Beauchamp, 2025), which assembled teams of authors – specifically including early career researchers (ECRs) – to provide unique insights into multiple aspects of the bilingual education system in Wales.

Wales Journal of Education

The *Wales Journal of Education* (WJE) (www.walesjournalofeducation.com) has a long history, and aims to play a key role in further supporting and developing the contemporary educational research base in Wales, by providing a venue for a range of high-quality submissions reflecting the diverse nature of educational research methods and methodologies. With the support of Welsh Government, the WJE is a platinum Open Access journal, free of charge, bilingual and available to read in digital format for anyone, anywhere in the world, with no author-facing charges.

The audience for this book

We hope this book will be of interest to all those who have an interest in education in Wales, both locally and internationally. This includes students, teachers, school leaders, academics and policy-makers.

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Devolved education policymaking in the UK: a four jurisdictions perspective

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ABSTRACT

This short paper addresses the pace, ebb and flow of policy moves in education in the context of the continuing process of political and administrative devolution in the UK. The concept of policy making is explicitly approached as a process. Given the potentially broad policy arena, the focus is necessarily selective and restricted to policy for schools. The paper identifies areas of policy mobility and immobility drawing on the concepts of 'policy mortality' 'drift', 'paralysis' and 'reversal' (Gunter and Courtney, 2023; Béland *et al.*, 2016; Gallagher, 2021). This brief review aims to show how policy possibilities in the four closely-linked jurisdictions are influenced by varying degrees of coordinative capacity, ministerial influence, policy styles and advisory systems, and the power and influence of potential veto players. Critical attention is afforded to the enactment of the principle of subsidiarity in relation to education change. Rather than progressive linear advance, the paper notes three alternate moves: continuing tension between central control and local autonomy in education governance in Wales and Scotland, paralysing policy drift from political division in Northern Ireland, and rapid acceleration of market-oriented change in England.

Keywords: devolution, subsidiarity, policymaking

Introduction – devolution journeys

The four nations have different experiences of devolution. Popular support for devolution and the devolution settlements in each country varied. Support was far higher in the 1997 devolution referendum in Scotland (74 per cent) than Wales (50.3 per cent). The new legislative systems had varied levels of policy capacity influenced by their prior experience of policy development and the size of the devolved civil service. Scotland's distinctive education system and administrative devolution long predate political devolution. Devolution continues to evolve as greater powers are extended, more areas are devolved, and support grows among the populace (Scotland Act, 2012, 2016; Wales Act 2014, 2017). From 2007, the Scottish Executive was rebranded the Scottish Government, later formalised by the Scotland Act 2012. Similarly, the National Assembly for Wales/Welsh Assembly Government was designated the Welsh Government (*Llywodraeth Cymru*) in 2011, subsequently formalised in the Wales Act 2014. In 2020, the National Assembly of Wales was renamed *Senedd Cymru* (Welsh Parliament) to reflect its extended powers. Although Wales remains the most limited devolved legislative system of the UK nations, its formal powers and responsibilities have developed rapidly. In contrast, any effort towards English devolution came much later and was limited to the creation of regional combined authorities from 2015. By which time, in contrast to the national school systems elsewhere in the UK, an increasingly fragmented school landscape offered little prospect for the development of locally led joint working with self-managing school Trusts (Greany, 2020; Woods *et al.*, 2021).

Prior to UK general election of June 2024, the four administrations were led by five different political parties. Devolution as an 'event' took place during a period of single party dominance in Westminster, Edinburgh and Cardiff. Between 2010–23 no party was in power in more than one UK nation. The proportional electoral systems of the devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were intended to make cross-party co-operation, coalition and minority governments the norm. Indeed, consociationalism (power sharing) by design prevents majority rule in Northern Ireland. While Welsh Labour/*Llafur Cymru* provided political continuity (if not 'policy congruity') in Wales (Evans, 2022, p. 30), elsewhere the political landscape was transformed following the 2007 Scottish Parliament election and the 2010 UK general election. Devolution was restored in Northern Ireland in February 2024

after a series of breakdowns of power sharing between unionist and nationalist parties from 2017. The third decade of devolution is one of political turbulence and cleavages within the UK with a growing schism between the two larger nations. Political polarisation intensified following the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014, the EU referendum of 2016 and the General Election of 2019. Territorial politics during the Covid pandemic and the emergence of ‘muscular’ or ‘hyper-unionism’ in England further exacerbated political tensions within UK governance (Kenny, 2022, p. 78). Rawlings (2022) notes that throughout the various phases of devolution, ‘Wales has had the only devolved administration fully committed to the UK’ (p. 714).

The political leadership, ministerial turnover and pace of change in the policy field of education has varied in each country. In the quasi-federal political system of the UK, policy for schools is a key ministerial portfolio. Education is the only Whitehall department with no programmes that apply to the devolved territories and no civil servants outside England (Paun and Munro, 2014). Whereas five Ministers in each country have held the Education portfolio in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since 2010, in England there have been ten Secretaries of State for Education, including five since 2022. From 2010, England entered in a period of policy ‘hyperactivity’ (Braun *et al.*, 2010, p. 548) with moves towards a Hirschian-influenced knowledge-rich curriculum, the rapid expansion of the academies programme, ‘hurried’ introduction of regional schools commissioners and a diminished role for local authorities (Freedman, 2022, p. 10). A sense of urgency underpinned reform shaped by ‘cultural conservatism’ and neoliberalism (Jones, 2013). Given ‘a legacy of asymmetry’ (Lesch and McCambridge, 2023), low initial policy capacity and lower levels of support for devolution, the rate of education policy innovation in Wales also increased, with system-level reform of the school curriculum and teacher education. However, where Gove (Education Secretary 2010–14) and Gibb (Minister of State for Schools, 2010–12, 2014–21, 2022–3) sought to ‘take back control’ from the education establishment (Craske, 2020, p. 286), in Wales collaboration was emphasised. Early policy initiatives included the Foundation Phase for children aged 3 to 7 which in contrast to the more formalised approach in England emphasised learning through play. Policy development in Scotland and Northern Ireland proceeded at a different pace. Menter and Hulme (2008) describe processes of change in the first decade of devolution in Scotland as ‘less radical and at a slower

pace than in England' (p. 319). The second decade saw the consolidation of university-led teacher education (Donaldson, 2011) and the full implementation of the skills-based *Curriculum for Excellence*, revised in 2019 and reviewed in 2020 (OECD, 2021). Innovation in Northern Ireland continues to be adversely affected by the complexity, slow pace and conservative nature of education policy development in a historically divided society (Clarke and McFlynn, 2021). Overall, the 'constrained divergence' (Raffe and Byrne 2005, p. 1) of education policy making in the early post-devolution period has given way to an uneven 'accelerated divergence' (Hodgson and Spours, 2016, p. 516).

National distinction

Devolution gave policy impetus to efforts to assert national distinction in both the politics and processes of policy formation. Ostensibly national governments can design policy that is more responsive to local needs, preferences and values. Devolution increased the scope for policy experimentation and the potential for policy learning through comparison. As Paun *et al.* (2016) observe, the four nations provide a 'living laboratory' for cross-national comparison because 'the four parts of the UK are much more similar to each other in terms of wider culture and institutional context than they are to any other country' (p. 13). Policy innovation and divergence are enhanced by territorial competition and the opportunity to garner political capital by 'othering' one's (larger) neighbour or identifying with the concerns of smaller nations previously subjected to 'peripheralisation' in policy debate in the UK (Lovering, 1991). Outside England, devolution has promoted the development of strong and progressive polities that signal 'national' values of egalitarianism and collectivism, social justice, and public provision over private wealth. Thus, for example, the former First Minister Rhodri Morgan (2002) made much of his intention to establish 'clear red water' between Welsh and Westminster Labour. In Wales, *The Learning Country* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2001) represented 'the first fruits of policy development from the Assembly administration in the new era of devolution' (Daugherty and Jones, 2002, p. 109). A sustained model of defensive distinction was pursued by an established policy community in Scotland accustomed to resisting any change construed as an attempt to 'Anglicise' education policy (Menter and Hulme, 2008, p. 320). In 2013, former SNP leader Alex Salmond's pledge that 'the rocks will

melt with the sun' before tuition fees are reintroduced for Scotland's undergraduates was literally carved in stone.

Policy styles and advisory systems

Each nation has drawn on independent commissions, panels, advisers and working groups to consider policy alternatives with varied levels of influence on outcomes. Government-appointed advisers are 'conduits of policy mobility' (Ball 2016, p. 557). Craft and Howlett (2013) define *externalisation* as 'the extent to which actors outside government exercise influence' by providing policy advice (p. 188). A wider range of non-government actors has entered the UK advice market in the context of a leaner civil service. However, there are differences in the extent to which the chosen advisers can be construed as representative of knowledge brokers within recognised 'epistemic communities' or are used to signify a participatory approach that serves to lend legitimacy to preferred recommendations. Haas (1992) defines epistemic communities as 'a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area' (p. 3). The relative influence of appointed advisers is contingent upon a range of contextual factors.

Contextual influences on national review processes ... include the timeliness of the review; the economic climate during the review; the knowledge, skills, commitment and aspirations (or policy activism) of appointed advisers; the receptiveness of stakeholders (e.g. 'protective and defensive' engagement) and the degree of cross-party support and continuity over time between government departments. (Hulme, Beauchamp and Clarke, 2015, p. 208)

The following section draws on emerging and established concepts from critical policy studies to illustrate policy processes within the new territorial politics of the union state. The first section uses the concept of 'policy mortality' (Gunter and Courtney, 2023) in accounting for radical change to school governance and the school curriculum in England. This is contrasted with the complex interplay of interests and knowledge flows within more collaborative policy environments. Selected examples are used to illustrate 'policy drift' (delay), 'paralysis' (inaction) and 'reversal' as possible outcomes of contestation. Examples include aborted moves to end school transfer tests and rationalise teacher education provision in Northern Ireland, and the abolition and subsequent re-introduction of national assessments in Wales and Scotland.

Policy mortality

The concept of policy mortality was introduced by Gunter and Courtney (2023) to describe the government ‘tactic’ of blaming and shaming in which the ‘failure’ of schools and educationists is ‘weaponised’ to accelerate ideological shifts in policy direction (p. 354). From this perspective, ‘failure is integral to change dynamics’ (p. 364). Reflecting on education policy in England, Gunter and Courtney (2023) argue that, ‘failure is a policy objective rather than a consequence of risky innovation and/or problematic implementation’ (p. 353). Trust in expertise in England has been challenged in pronounced discourses of derision that are intended to disarm and de-legitimise dissent (Craske, 2021). Craft and Halligan (2017) maintain that political influence over the policy process has increased through the use of political appointments that are often deemed to produce the outcomes Ministers want. In the wake of a contracting home civil service, Gunter *et al.* (2015) note the rise of a thriving ‘consultocracy’ in education policymaking in England. In this context, a process of de-institutionalisation through an increase in external policy advice may signal not a withdrawal but centralisation of executive power. The number of advisory groups multiplied over the last decade. Over the same period, academic expert advice has been marginalised in policy channels (Skerritt, 2023). Advisory groups have addressed initial teacher education (2015), school-based mentor standards (2016), behaviour in schools (2017), education staff wellbeing (2019), a ‘market review’ of initial teacher education (2021), multi-academy trust leadership development (2022), and cultural education (2023). Exley (2021) observes that advisory group membership is often drawn ‘from groups that were aligned with what the government was thinking anyway’ (p. 251). The de-politicisation of education policy in England has been associated with an erosion of democratic deliberation, reduced coordinative capacity (at the meso-level) and a reduction of political questions to questions of technical efficiency/‘what works’ (Gunter, 2015).

Elsewhere in the UK, less adversarial approaches and a greater openness to knowledge exchange are evident. For example, Connell *et al.* (2023) maintain that in Wales external advice is generally perceived to ‘augment (rather than challenge)’ (p. 643).

Externalisation of policy advice in Wales has been driven by a subtly different dynamic from that which has commonly been identified at a UK level: the aim has been to augment the

policymaking capacity of the civil service in a complementary and collaborative way, rather than in opposition to or competition with it (Connell et al., 2023, p. 633)

Distinctive policy development processes in Wales and Scotland emphasise stakeholder participation and consultation. The smaller size and connectedness of the devolved executives increases the prescience of external policy expertise and a consultative approach to policy design (Cairney et al., 2016). The ‘Welsh way’ of policy development is positioned as ‘more consensual’ than Westminster, stressing the ‘systematic inclusion of pressure participants’ in policy development (Cairney, 2009, p. 361). Similarly, policy making in Scotland has been characterised as consultative, joined-up, holistic and willing to devolve delivery to local public bodies through a collaborative infrastructure (Cairney et al., 2016). Policy discourse reflects a concern with asset-based approaches and co-production. Peter Housden (2014), then Permanent Secretary, Scottish Government, described the ‘Scottish approach’ as countering ‘professional sovereignty and organisational autonomy’ suggesting its small size gives an ‘immediacy to its key relationships’ (p. 74).

Following the OECD report, *Improving Schools in Scotland* (2015), new bodies were created to promote greater collaboration between researchers, policymakers and practitioners. An International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA) was established in 2016 to advise Ministers (Scottish Government, 2023).¹ In addition, in 2017 a National Advisory Group (NAG) and Academic Reference Group (ARG) were established to deepen cross-sector collaboration. External membership of the NAG includes senior colleagues with responsibility for educational research from a range of stakeholder organisations including the General Teaching Council (GTCS), Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE), and Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA). ARG membership is drawn from the Royal Society of Edinburgh’s Education Committee and the Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE), with one member representing Gaelic Medium Education.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/groups/international-council-of-education-advisers/> The eleven members of the ICEA include three academics from Russell Group universities in Scotland, a Scottish Headteacher and seven academics and policy advisers from North America, Europe and Singapore

An espoused commitment to consultation is evident in recent reviews commissioned by the Scottish Government that were led (or co-led) by respected figures from within Scotland's education community who possess academic expertise and acknowledged professional capacity. These include Muir (2022)² *Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education*; Hayward (2023)³ *It's Our Future – Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment: report*; and the report of the national discussion on education by Campell and Harris (2023)⁴ *All Learners in Scotland Matter*.

In addition, a small number of repeat players have acted as key consultants in the smaller nations at different times. Foremost of these are Graham Donaldson (*Teaching Scotland's Future* (2011) followed by the curriculum review *Successful Futures* (2015) and *A Learning Inspectorate* (2018) in Wales) and John Furlong (review of teacher education in Wales, *Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers*, 2015). Mark Priestley (collaborative curriculum enquiry), Louise Hayward (learning progression) and Keir Bloomer (*Investing in a Better Future, Independent Review of Education* (2023), Northern Ireland) have also all contributed to policy discussions across national boundaries within the UK. Thus, while diverse national-territorial imaginaries co-exist within the United Kingdom, it is possible to discern areas of policy 'hybridisation' (Evans, 2009) enabled by idea carriers/expert advisers working with local stakeholder groups, especially in regard to the school curriculum and teacher education. The politics of policy attraction discernible in the smaller countries contrasts with the condemnatory strategies of disruptive innovation in England.

Policy drift and paralysis

Much is made of the importance of public deliberation and consensus building within collaborative infrastructures of devolved governance. However, consultation is seldom aligned with agility in policy design. The following section considers the

2 Kenneth Muir is a former chief executive of The General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2014–21.

3 Louise Hayward is Professor Emerita University of Glasgow.

4 Carol Campbell was Professor of Education at the University of Glasgow and Head of Moray House Edinburgh University from September 2024; Alma Harris is Emeritus Professor Swansea University and Professor at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

limitations of such an approach in the context of political division. The concept of drift is used here to bring a sense of agency to considerations of policy *immobility*, elsewhere described as ‘functional inertia’ (McFlynn *et al.*, 2024, p. 1). Béland *et al.* (2016) maintain that ‘policy drift’ requires that potential reform solutions are available but are not adopted. From this perspective, ‘Drift ... is not simply a result of a dearth of policy ideas, but the consequence of a drive to maintain the legislative status quo’ (Béland *et al.*, 2016, p. 204). Needham and Hall (2022) note that drift is more likely where there are more veto players and veto points, and conditions of party-political stalemate. Drift is used here to explain continuity in some aspects of education policy using the examples of school transfer tests and arrangements for teacher education in Northern Ireland (NI).

With the establishment of the NI Assembly in 1999 direct rule ceased, and devolution was restored. This gave the Education Minister (1999–2002), Martin McGuinness, legislative responsibility for education (McGuinness, 2012). His first move was to abolish the transfer test (known as the 11+), citing the work of Gallagher and Smith (2000) who reported that ‘no school system has emerged to solve the problem of low-achieving schools. However, a selective system produces a disproportionate number of schools which combine low ability and social disadvantage in their enrolments, thereby compounding the educational disadvantages of both factors’ (p. 45). It was the intention to have the last transfer test in 2008, but politicians leaned on the political compromise associated with the implementation of the St Andrews agreement (2006), which allowed Grammar schools to set their own tests if they wished. The result of this process was that pupils now had to sit more tests since the Catholic grammar schools and the state (mainly Protestant) schools could not agree on a common test (McGuinness, 2012). It is important to note that with this system, schools did not have to prepare pupils for the transfer test. However, in 2016 the new Education Minister, Peter Weir, from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) introduced a new policy that schools could now start preparing pupils for the transfer test. The narrative relating to the transfer test demonstrates how political division between Sinn Féin and DUP education ministers influenced these key decisions and that even when Sinn Féin were strongly opposed to academic selection, the DUP had the power to overrule that decision.

Similarly, an evidence-based case to reconfigure teacher education provision failed in the face of fierce opposition from denominational colleges (Clarke and Magennis, 2015). St Mary’s College and Stranmillis College in Belfast serve the Catholic/

Nationalist population and the Protestant/Unionist population, respectively. Two reviews of provision – a financial review and a review conducted by an international advisory panel – recommended a rationalisation or reconfiguration of provision to address disparities in funding and student allocations (DfE, 2013; DfE, 2014). However, as Clarke and McFlynn (2021) noted ‘the DUP and Sinn Féin united (across the political divide) to dissent and to defend the continuance of the status quo, in particular, the sustained funding of St Mary’s and Stranmillis Colleges’ (p. 133). A tight knit advocacy coalition (college defenders) prevailed over alternative sources of (epistemic) authority. Entrenched positions impeded the adaption of policy to address changing needs. As Gallagher (2021) observes, by maintaining the ‘institutionalisation of difference’ it is likely that policy immobility will ‘deepen divisions and encourage disputes over resource allocation, rather than a focus on the common good’ (p. 146).

Policy reversals

The above examples show how values-driven (progressive) and efficiency-driven (economic) policy choices can be vetoed by powerful coalitions representing particular interests. While policy divergence is an attractive marker of national distinction it remains conditional on political support. Temporary policy settlements can be preserved, unsettled, subject to backsliding or policy reversal.⁵ Policy ideas may gain traction and lose momentum. The pendulum swing of education reform is an outcome of contestation. The following section brings to the fore the contingent nature of policy through consideration of the interplay between subsidiarity and accountability in moves towards decentralised governance.

Across the national school systems of the UK there has been a putative devolution of higher levels of responsibility to schools and school professionals with an increase in accompanying ‘guidance’. Despite such espoused commitments to an ‘empowered

5 The clear example is the U-turn around Covid-19 exam replacement policy in all four nations. See Kippin, S., Cairney, P. (2022) The Covid-19 exams fiasco across the UK: four nations and two windows of opportunity. *British Politics* 17, 1–23 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-021-00162-y>

school-led system’,⁶ evidence of a commitment to scaling back hierarchical and performance-based accountability systems has not been uniform or irreversible. The ending of school performance tables in Scotland and Wales was one of the most visible effects of devolution in the early 2000s. External tests at age 7, 11 and 14 were abolished in Scotland and Wales to avoid concerns about the effects of teaching to the tests. The scale of tests was also reduced in England, with only age 11 maths and English tests retained by 2010. There was then a reversal with Wales and Scotland both re-introducing external tests in some form to assess pupil progress, inform teacher judgements and assess national benchmarks. In Wales, Leighton Andrews (Minister for Education 2009–13) declared the PISA 2009 results published in 2010 to be ‘wake up call to a complacent system’ and ‘evidence of a systemic failure’ (Dauncey and Boshier, 2021, p. 1). Consequently, there was a policy shift towards greater accountability with the introduction of school banding and statutory testing in an effort to raise standards and reduce the attainment gap.

In Scotland, re-centralising tendencies were also evident during John Swinney’s tenure as Cabinet Secretary between 2016 and 2021 when the Minister positioned himself as responsible for both policy formation and the management of implementation processes. A discernible shift towards a more directive style of management followed the introduction of an outcomes-based National Improvement Framework (NIF) for Scottish Education (Scottish Government, 2016). At this time critical scrutiny of public bodies delivering education policies was growing (Scottish Parliament, 2017). The priority attached to educational equity (closing a persistent attainment ‘gap’) stimulated renewed interest in teacher/teaching quality, a content review of literacy and numeracy provision in university teacher education programmes, and the reintroduction of National Standardised Assessments (NSA) in literacy and numeracy in P1, P4, P7 and S3 (Scottish Government, 2017). ‘Closing the gap’ re-introduced new public management (NPM) practices to measure outcomes and regulate the profession.

In Wales, the education policy pendulum swung again when Huw Lewis, Minister for Education and Skills (2013–16), engineered a policy move away from performativity in the wake of the 2010 ‘PISA shock’, to re-focus reform efforts on the learner and developing teacher autonomy. *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015) and the subsequent *Curriculum for Wales* (WG, 2022) became the most ambitious

6 <https://education.gov.scot/resources/an-empowered-system/>.

reforms undertaken by the Welsh Government to date. The new curriculum was developed through the policy principle of subsidiarity with designated 'Pioneer Schools' (in receipt of additional funding) working with the middle tier to co-construct its design and development underpinned by the vision of a purposes-based curriculum. However, such new freedoms entered practice settings with a legacy of prescription and a degree of scepticism around appeals to professional empowerment *vis-à-vis* external intervention (Newton, 2020). Continued decline in the 2022 PISA outcomes and little progress in tackling a persistent poverty-related attainment gap may present renewed challenge and further adaptation of the Welsh model of soft governance (Sibieta, 2024).

Conclusion

This brief and selective review of devolved education policymaking in the UK has sought to bring agency to the foreground in consideration of policy manoeuvres, alternatives and outcomes. The concepts of 'policy mortality', 'drift', 'paralysis' and 'reversal' are used to draw attention to the motives and tactics at play within the policymaking process. Further empirical investigation of the connections between territorial politics and education governance would be instructive. An emerging body of work is beginning to engage with epistemic communities, multiple streams and advocacy coalition frameworks in accounts of how education policy is made and re-made (Gearin *et al.*, 2020; Parker *et al.*, 2022; Cummings *et al.*, 2023; Santos and Pekkola, 2023). Theory-informed research in this area will help to generate new insights into the range of factors that promote the uptake or 'extinction' of policy ideas (Jones *et al.*, 2016, p. 16) and the ratification or rejection of policy alternatives in comparable and closely linked systems.

This short review raised the significance of distinctive policy styles and advisory systems in the post-devolution context. In England, strategies to reduce ambiguity in the highly complex policy arena of education have proven effective. These include 'shame/blame' problem framing (Gunter and Courtney, 2023) and the creation of an echo chamber that restricts access to policy alternatives. Despite high turnover at the executive level (within the politics stream), policy continuity was enabled by previous structural changes, a reduction in the level of influence (and number) of potential veto players, and a reconstitution of 'expertise' that valorises practice knowledge.

Consultation and interest mediation remain more evident in education policymaking processes in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. More inclusive and participatory processes are aligned with wider discourses of practitioner and community empowerment, and espoused moves towards Public Value Management (PVM). As Brown (2021) explains, where New Public Management (NPM) is directed at 'achieving public goals set by politicians; in PVM it is more complex, seen as achieving *negotiated* goals which can be shaped by stakeholder priorities through a participatory process' (p. 808). However, participation in invited spaces is not the same as influence. Some groups clearly command significantly more influence than others (Rozbicka and Spohr, 2016). Centrally orchestrated collaboration across a dense network of public bodies is not without challenge. An espoused consultative policy style entails protracted deliberation that traverses vertical and horizontal lines of accountability. Aspirations towards collaborative networked governance are played out in a congested meso-tier. Collaborative working can be adversely affected by institutional self-interest and protectionism, leading to duplication of effort and less efficient use of diminishing public resource. Collaboration and consultation are intended to promote a stronger sense of policy ownership, binding policy design with actors charged with implementation. Critical commentators have questioned whether such invited participation is more democratic, indicating higher levels of local self-control and professional self-governance (Kirsten, 2020), or whether such activity is a form of 'soft governance' (Moos, 2009) that performs the work of 'governing at a distance' (Clarke, 2012).

The higher profile afforded to collaboration and the principle of subsidiarity can pose challenges for coherence in policy making and may test national policy actors' confidence in local decision making. A series of OECD Education policy reviews have pointed to the importance of coordination and the risks of over-activity. In Scotland, the OECD (2015) called for a 'strengthened middle' after identifying meso-tier organisations with 'widely varying capacity' (p. 98). Successive waves of education initiatives give the impression of 'a busy policy landscape' and 'a system in constant reactive mode' (OECD, 2021, p. 105). In Wales, the OECD (2014) warned that too many reforms could result in 'reform fatigue' (p. 34). The decentralised nature of education delivery meant that schools often interpret and implement policies differently, leading to disparities in educational quality and outcomes (OECD, 2020). There is some evidence of policy learning. In his Ministerial foreword to the revised *Our National Mission* (2023) Jeremy Miles wrote: 'This roadmap sets out how our

existing policies and commitments relate to one another, rather than listing new commitments and aspirations.'

In summary, devolved education policymaking involves the construction of a progressive vision for national education through consultation processes that maintain a symbolic distance from the UK Government approach to policymaking (Cairney, 2020). A range of factors influences the pace of change, and the stability or precarity of provisional policy settlements. Advance, drift or reversals at national level play out in the shadow of a transnational/global education reform movement (Sahlberg, 2012) and the pervasive influence of supranational organisations. Alternative approaches to the governance of public education require a counter-movement towards trust-based accountability. Policy divergence in regard to performance metrics is yet to emerge.

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Education in Wales since Devolution: Three Waves of Policy, and the Pressing and Reoccurring Challenge of Implementation

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ABSTRACT

On the occasion of 25 years since the advent of devolution to Wales, this chapter explores the three distinct waves of Welsh education policy and practice which have been identified and explored by the authors of this chapter and other commentators as having occurred since 1999 (Egan, 2017; Connolly, *et al.*, 2018; Titley *et al.*, 2020; Evans, 2022; Milton *et al.*, 2023). It starts by tracing the early days of the devolved settlement, and the experimental approach to new policy piloted between 1999 and 2010 (Moon, 2012). It then looks at the policy turn towards greater accountability and challenge signalled in 2010 following the disappointing 2009 PISA results (Davies *et al.*, 2018), which constituted the start of the Second Wave. It then critically examines the Third Wave of policy from around 2015, which is characterised by Wales's ambitious reform journey (OECD, 2017) embodied in the national mission for education (Welsh Government, 2017a). It proposes that Wales has, since around 2021, entered a distinctive and challenging phase within this transformative Third Wave of policy. The current situation, we argue, is characterised by uncertainty and unprecedented levels of system upheaval which have arisen from the reach, scope and the complex practical implications of implementing the post-2015 reforms. This chapter concludes that to realise the ambitious curriculum reform agenda it has set itself, Wales now needs to ask searching questions about the implementation and the clarity of curricular

guidance; to re-evaluate its approach to subsidiarity; and to heed the warnings from other jurisdictions where similar curriculum reforms have negatively impacted learner outcomes and exacerbated inequalities. Without this there may be implications for realising the Curriculum for Wales, teacher retention and learner experiences in Wales.

Keywords: education policy, Wales, devolution, Curriculum for Wales

Introduction

This chapter evaluates twenty-five years of devolved education policymaking in Wales. It has become commonplace in the literature to think of post-devolution Welsh educational policy as being structured into three phases or waves, each of which have taken differing positions on issues such as accountability, teacher autonomy and agency, and the framing of educational standards (see Egan, 2017; Connolly, *et al.*, 2018; Titley *et al.*, 2020; Evans, 2022; Milton *et al.*, 2023). Our analysis starts by tracing the early days of the devolved settlement, and the experimental approach to new policy piloted between 1999 and 2010 (Moon, 2012). It then looks at the policy turn towards greater accountability and challenge signalled in 2010 following the publication of disappointing PISA results (Davies *et al.*, 2018), which constituted the start of the Second Wave. We then critically examine the Third Wave of policy from around 2015, which is characterised by Wales's ambitious reform journey (OECD, 2017), embodied in the 'National Mission' for education (Welsh Government, 2017a). In evaluating the current situation, we argue that it is only now, since the start of the implementation of the reform centrepiece, the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) (September 2022), that Wales's system is fully engaged in grappling with the complex implementation and sense-making in practice of the full suite of post-2015 reforms.

The First Wave: 'The Policy Laboratory'

The period immediately following the devolution of powers to Wales witnessed an intensive period of activity in the field of education, as the newly devolved institution

began exploring the policy levers at its disposal. We can point to two key guiding principles which drove policymaking in education at this stage of devolution: firstly, the period has been characterised as being a ‘policy laboratory’ (Reynolds, 2008, p. 753). There was a clear, discernible urge to pioneer new post-devolution approaches to education, employing what Evans (2022, p. 373) has called a ‘license to innovate’, so as to produce new policy solutions which reflected the needs and aspirations of Wales’s population (Jones and Roderick, 2003). On the other hand, was the stated desire of the new *Welsh Labour* administration in Cardiff Bay to differentiate itself from the Blairite *New Labour* government in Westminster through demarcating the much-quoted ‘clear red water’ between them (Morgan, 2002; Moon 2012, p. 315).

Rhodri Morgan (First Minister between 2000 and 2009), speaking retrospectively in 2010, reflected on the early devolved institutions as being legislative ‘laboratories’, testing new approaches, and bringing an infusion of new ideas to policymaking across the UK (Morgan, 2010, cited in Moon, 2012, p. 307). The (as was) Welsh Assembly Government’s overall strategy for education, outlined in *The Learning Country* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002), was fittingly ambitious in tone, articulating a desire to develop an education system that reflected the aspirations and needs of Welsh society (Jones and Roderick, 2003). The raft of policy initiatives (such as the Welsh Baccalaureate and the Foundation Phase curriculum) which emanated from the devolved government during this period were ostensibly ambitious at the level of policy discourse and rhetoric, but it has been argued that they were, in terms of their political orientation, far from radical. As Rees (2007) notes, they involved a commitment to classic universalist social democratic principles; citizen rights and obligations extended to children and young people; and the development of a partnership model between government, middle-tier arms-length bodies and various professional groups.

The Welsh Labour government was explicit in its commitment to prioritising equality of outcome over choice (Morgan, 2002), in advocating for the non-selective comprehensive school system (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, p. 21), and in rejecting the rhetoric of choice and marketisation, which had been embraced in England in the early 1990s, and which was sustained during the New Labour years (Power, 2016; Connolly et al., 2018). The so-called Welsh ‘alternative’ (Reynolds, 2008, p. 318) that emerged during these early years further advocated for trust in,

and partnership with, the teaching profession. It also took a markedly less centralised and directive position on the issue of external accountability (Power, 2016), with the abolition of two of the most visible markers of school performance: performance tables (2001) and SATs (2004). *The Learning Country* instead proposed a more holistic appraisal of schools' effectiveness (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002), and explicitly stated that, 'the informed professional judgement of teachers, lecturers and trainers must be celebrated without prejudice to the disciplines of public accountability; and with proper regard to clearing the way to unleash the capacity and expertise of practitioners' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, p. 11).

This experimental First Wave ushered in a number of new policy initiatives under the umbrella of the *Learning Country*, which it stated were intended to provide a more bespoke educational system 'suited directly to the country's needs' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, p. 5). These included the initiation of the Welsh Baccalaureate, then envisaged as a European-style curriculum, affording breadth and cross-curricular learning; the establishment of 14–19 Learning Pathways, which aimed at creating locally-coherent study routes for young people at the key points of transition between Key Stages 3 and 4, as well as aiming for greater parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, p. 10). This period also saw the planning and piloting of the Foundation Phase, a learner-centred, play-based curriculum for the early years which has been termed by some as progressive (Jones, 2024). This curriculum adopted a socio-cultural and constructivist approach to experiential and play-based early learning to both engage all young children and aimed to ameliorate the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on children's educational experiences and outcomes (Maynard et al., 2013; Jones, 2024).

Initially, this experiential and child-led curriculum was welcomed by the teaching profession. However, academic research began to highlight some of the challenges and complexities in realising this curriculum in practice. An early example was a report by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2005) which highlighted the gap in expertise and capacity required to realise the ambitions of the Foundation Phase curriculum. In addition, at this time an initially supportive press began to scrutinise the outcomes of this First Wave of policy-making, resulting in the emergence of what became a narrative of 'policy failure' and/or 'crisis' in relation to Welsh education (Rees and Taylor, 2014; Dixon, 2016).

The Second Wave: 'A Complacent system?'

The OECD's 2010 publication of the 2009 PISA results for Wales could be viewed as marking the beginning of the second movement of post-devolution policymaking. Wales had fared particularly poorly in the 2009 tests, with significantly lower scores than those posted in 2006, across Reading, Mathematics and Science. One of the strategies embedded within the PISA assessment regime was to leverage systemic change in low performing countries through mediated governance (Grey and Morris, 2022): the mechanism by which local press would agitate for policy change based on PISA-generated data. This was particularly effective in Wales, where an increasingly critical press amplified the narrative of Welsh educational failure, often ignoring the nuances or even critiques of PISA (see Rees and Taylor, 2014). This narrative was addressed and endorsed by the newly appointed Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning, Leighton Andrews, whose response to this poor performance was described by some as being 'zealous' (Egan, 2016, p. 30). In a much-quoted speech delivered in early 2011, Andrews laid down a robust challenge to the sector. He stated that: 'PISA, I am afraid, is a wake-up call to a complacent system. There are no alibis and no excuses. It is evidence of systemic failure. But, as I always say, never waste a crisis' (Andrews, 2011).

While not directly criticising his predecessors, Andrews denounced the *laissez-faire* policies which were a feature of the First Wave, and was vocal in challenging what he called three 'libertarian myths' about education, that he argued had taken hold in Wales: namely, that children should be allowed to develop at their own pace; that greater choice for learners would in itself drive engagement; and, that teachers should be left to teach as they saw fit (Andrews, 2014, p. 31). To varying degrees these 'myths' represented a direct challenge to some of the key assumptions implicit in the policy agenda outlined in *The Learning Country*. The policy initiatives which these challenges precipitated were, a move away from many of the key aspects of Wave One policymaking.

Andrews's 20-point plan, unveiled at his 2011 speech, proceeded to outline a bold transformation agenda which put at its core literacy, numeracy, school standards and a 'managerial' approach to external accountability (Brady, 2021, p. 26). National tests were (re)instated for literacy and numeracy from the end of Year 2, through Key Stages 2 and 3, as well as Baseline Assessments within the Foundation Phase. Following the implementation of a National Categorisation System, schools were

assigned to bands according to their performance against a range of key measures – a system which was subsequently replaced with a traffic light approach to categorisation in 2014, and which was extended to primary schools in 2015. The policy commentary around banding and categorisation maintained that it was not a return to league tables, but rather framed the new system as being a means of ensuring targeted support, rather than as a means of naming and stigmatising schools who were seen to be underperforming (Welsh Government, 2011; Connolly *et al.*, 2018). The Welsh Government also embarked on a number of high-and middle-level structural reforms during this period, designed to support its improvement agenda, and reset the significant latitude which was afforded to the teaching profession during the First Wave. The most significant of these was the establishment of a School Standards and Delivery Unit within Welsh Government, with a remit to drive improvement, and to support and challenge the sector. Wales's twenty-two Local Authority-led school improvement services, that had been criticised for variability of quality and complacency in the face of poor standards (Andrews, 2014), were consolidated into four regional consortia, with the aim of providing more consistent and better-quality support and intervention.

One of the enduring legacies of this period of policymaking was the end of the three-jurisdiction regulatory settlement on GCSEs between Wales, England and Northern Ireland in 2013, which had been in place since 1988 (Andrews, 2014; Barrance and Elwood, 2018). Andrews had been vocal about need for reform of GCSEs, and the post-2013 specifications included less controlled assessment; were subject to greater externality; and were more purposefully aligned with the types of skills measured by PISA (Andrews, 2014; Titley *et al.*, 2020). His reform of GCSE qualifications from 2013 opened the door to the distinctive approach to qualification governance in Wales, and arguably paved the way for the Made-for-Wales qualifications which will begin to be implemented and rolled-out from 2025 (Qualifications Wales, 2024).

The Third Wave: A 'National Mission', and a Roadmap for Welsh Reform

It was perhaps the commissioning of the independent review of the school curriculum by then Education Minister Huw Lewis in 2014, culminating in the publication of *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015), which marked the start of an intensive period

of system re-modelling which has characterised the Third Wave of policymaking. The influence of the OECD on Welsh policy since devolution has been significant (Egan, 2017), with the Welsh Government having commissioned a total of five reports on the Welsh education system between 2014 and 2021. In 2014, the OECD published an analysis of the issues facing Wales's education system and assessed how well placed the nation was to respond to its own improvement agenda as set out in the Second Wave (OECD, 2014). One of the OECD's conclusions was that Wales needed a longer-term strategic plan for education, and that it had tried to move too quickly for reform to take hold (OECD, 2014, pp. 34; 116). Whilst curriculum reform was not its purpose, or among its main recommendations, the OECD report did acknowledge the Welsh curriculum review that was underway, and suggested a number of systems to which Wales might look for inspiration. It cited curriculum reforms in Norway that had provided greater autonomy for teachers and outcomes-based learning experiences for pupils (OECD, 2014, p. 47); it proposed building social capital through teacher collaboration, citing the Finnish model (OECD, 2014, p. 69); and noted that a common feature of 'high-performing' jurisdictions was greater curriculum control and pedagogical leadership for teachers (OECD, 2014, p. 71–2). In many ways, these ideas prefigured the recommendations of *Successful Futures*, and are in line with what Shapira and Priestley (2018, p. 75) term a new international 'genericism' in contemporary curriculum design, which foreground learner competences, outcomes and active pedagogies.

In addition to curriculum redesign, the next Education Minister from 2016–21, Kirsty Williams, also oversaw myriad new reforms under the umbrella of the National Mission (Welsh Government 2017a). These were intended to remodel the education system, to support the development and realisation of the new curriculum, and, crucially, provide the long-term strategic framework that the OECD had proposed in 2014 (OECD, 2014, p. 116). The reforms included revised professional standards which set out the pedagogical and leadership competences teachers and leaders should demonstrate at all career stages (including engagement with research and enquiry) (Welsh Government, 2017b). The OECD (2018) were commissioned to develop a Wales-specific blueprint for the reimagining of schools as 'learning organisations' (SLOs), based on its well-established conceptual model (Harris *et al.*, 2022; Welsh Government, 2018). However, it has been argued that the adoption of this SLO framework neglected to address the challenges and shortcomings of importing a model from business with limited evidence of how it might align with the

Welsh professional standards for teachers and leaders (Egan *et al.*, 2018). Kirsty Williams also took a more relaxed view on the issue of accountability within the system, compared with the approach taken during the Second Wave of policy post-2010. In 2017, she announced that as part of her reforms, accountability in education would be ‘fairer’, more ‘proportionate’ and ‘transparent’, and that the approach would be co-constructed with the profession (Evans, 2017). The National Mission itself proposed de-coupling assessment from so-called high-stakes accountability (Welsh Government 2019, pp. 39–40; Titley *et al.*, 2020), favouring self-improving accountability based on inter-school collaboration (Welsh Government, 2017a).

The coalescence of these reforms under the umbrella of the National Mission gave them an outward appearance of being co-ordinated and complementary in nature. And, at the level of policy intention, reading across these key reform documents, there is a consistent commitment to certain principles such as curricular autonomy, teacher agency, teacher professionalism and (re)-professionalisation, research-informed practice and proportionate accountability. However, given the lack of detail and clarity of some of the reforms (discussed below) it is perhaps unsurprising that Wales seems to be experiencing a concerning ‘implementation dip’ of the kind outlined in Fullan’s model (2001, p. 5), where enthusiastic innovation, aspiration and sincere intent meet the realities of professional capacity and system readiness – largely as some in the profession have expressed uncertainty as to exactly what they are being expected to deliver (Duggan *et al.*, 2022; Crehan 2024).

The Third Wave hits the shore: the search for clarity and coherence in implementing the vision

Since around 2021 Wales has entered a phase of uncertainty and unprecedented period of system upheaval arising from the implementation of the Third Wave. To extend the analogy, it is only now that the Third Wave of policy has hit the shore of practice, and with it the full reach of the post-2015 reforms is now becoming apparent. As noted above, the policy perspective employed during the first five years of the Third Wave was in many respects aspirational, prospective, and therefore concerned (in post-2016 policy terms) with *co-constructing* and *road-mapping* the reform journey in the future tense. What is distinct about the current reality we propose here is that the system is now focused on, and faced with, the granular, day-to-day questions

around the implementation in practice of the post-2015 agenda – most notably the CfW – described as the centrepiece of the post-2015 suite of reforms (Davies, 2025, in press). The current situation is therefore characterised by the complexity of sense-seeking and sense-making of education professionals in their respective contexts (Ball, 2011; 2012), in moving from aspirational policy intentions to on-the-ground practice. It is increasingly becoming dominated by the incremental journey faced by schools and teachers in attempting to find clarity and coherence in developing curricular content and in assessing learner progression, and now doing so within a very challenging context, both financially and in terms of dealing with the ongoing legacy of Covid-19. This stage has, by necessity, therefore, brought into sharp focus the omissions, and scarcity of detail and clarity that have arisen from the deliberately under-prescribed curriculum guidance (Crehan, 2024).

A key principle of reform since the end of the Second Wave has been to give teachers and schools greater curricular autonomy and agency, as reflected in recent guidance on CfW: 'The Curriculum for Wales celebrates the agency and professional judgement of all practitioners' (Welsh Government, 2024). This has arisen arguably from Donaldson's advocacy in *Successful Futures* of a change strategy based on the principle of subsidiarity with the aim of 'encouraging local ownership and responsibility within a clear national framework of expectation and support' (Donaldson, 2015, p. 99). Donaldson further noted that a key challenge in exercising appropriate subsidiarity was locating 'the right balance between central direction and local flexibility' (Donaldson, 2015, p. 99). It is this dilemma of agreeing and setting the point at which government and the profession agree to demarcate and delegate responsibility that now requires further consideration, along with the direction of that delegation, as we argue below.

Handy (1994, p. 115) argues that true subsidiarity is 'reverse delegation – the delegation by the parts to the centre'. A key principle of subsidiarity is that power stays as close as is possible to practice, and is delegated upwards by teachers, not downwards by central government. Subsidiarity is therefore not about devolving control from the centre to the local: indeed, the Latin term *subsidium* translates as to provide help, aid or support. Therefore, subsidiarity is about the duty of care of the higher order authority (central government) to provide assistance to the lower order (schools and teachers) as it is deemed appropriate by the expressed needs of the lower order. So, in practice, this means helping schools and individual teachers do what they cannot do alone. Indeed, Newton's (2020) interrogation of

understandings of subsidiarity in the CfW warns of the risk of conceptualising it as a way of decentralising governance, without devolving power.

Importantly whilst there has been much discussion about the approaches to curriculum design that teachers might adopt in the classroom to realise the CfW, there seems to have been far less consideration and co-construction of exactly what type of decision-making is best devolved and what level of national guidance should be provided. Handy's analysis of subsidiarity suggests that opportunities for 'trust and confidence' must precipitate honest conversations, and that opportunities for 'positive disagreement and argument' are fundamental to embracing subsidiarity successfully (Handy, 1995 cited in Donaldson 2015, p. 99). Recent work in Wales suggests that this way of working may not currently be commonplace in school settings (Milton and Morgan, 2023) and therefore establishing trust and confidence as a bidirectional feature of educational leadership practice in Wales within, and beyond, school settings may be important going forward (Morgan *et al.*, 2024).

This might suggest that the level of autonomy currently afforded to schools and teachers by the version of subsidiarity exercised in framing the CfW is then perhaps out of sync with the model originally proposed in *Successful Futures*:

Discussions with stakeholders suggest strongly that there is a real desire among the profession for schools and teachers to have more (but not complete) autonomy to make their own decisions within a national curriculum framework (Donaldson, 2015, p. 15).

Whilst delegating significant responsibility can enable autonomy, it can also neglect the extent to which support and guidance are needed to create the conditions for teacher to feel that they have agency and can be agentic. Indeed, it is argued here that the relationship between autonomy and agency during the Third Wave phase of policymaking is deceptively complex, and may also be at the heart of the uncertainty and lack of confidence that some practitioners have reported in realising the curriculum (Duggan *et al.*, 2022, p. 60). Priestley *et al.* (2015) make the point that autonomy and agency are distinct and nuanced terms, which, we suggest, are often mistakenly used interchangeably. Autonomy can be understood as nominally having the freedom to make professional judgements, facilitated by a comparative lack of external regulation (Priestley *et al.*, 2015, p. 7). Agency, on the other hand, is a term which is often 'inexact and poorly conceptualised' (Priestley *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). It can be defined broadly as a sense of professional control, which is largely contingent on

possessing autonomy, but also it relies on a number of other key conditions. Some of these are practical and concrete (such as resource and time) and others which are conceptual and abstract (such as capacity, professional capital, professional knowledge and an enabling culture) (Hughes and Lewis, 2020). It is the precise and contextually-appropriate combination of all these conditions working together which is needed to support teachers to feel they can be agentic, which may then equip them with the ability to enact change and realise their professional values and aspirations. Priestley *et al.* (2015) and Daly *et al.* (2022) express this as having a supportive ecology around the teacher, which enables them to act with agency. So, whilst autonomy is often a pre-requisite for agency, it does not guarantee it.

A theme of recent research in Wales has been to consider the implementation of the CfW from an *emancipatory* perspective for teachers (Davies, 2025, in press). Commentators have examined how moves towards teacher-led curricula can potentially, and under the right circumstances, increase teacher agency by expanding the autonomous space within which teachers operate, thus creating the conditions for *re-professionalising* an allegedly de-professionalised workforce (Hizli Alkan and Priestley, 2018; Hughes and Lewis, 2020; Sinnema *et al.*, 2020). Yet, in contrast, these studies have also considered the unintended consequences that may arise from inexact implementation: namely that in spite of an ostensibly well-intentioned under-prescription of content and assessment in the name of autonomy, teachers and schools could struggle with an ‘absence of specificity’ (Crehan, 2024, p. 2). The clear risk is that the almost complete delegation of curriculum development to a workforce who were never initially trained to be curriculum makers, may not all want this responsibility, and in some contexts who may lack the ecological infrastructure to support true agency, could lead to uncertainty, divergent practice and inequality (Hizli Alkan and Priestley 2018; Hughes and Lewis, 2020; Power *et al.*, 2020; Sinnema *et al.*, 2020, Crehan, 2024). A recent study of teachers in Wales has pointed towards such uncertainty, anxiety, and an absence of clarity about approaches to assessment and progression, as well as a lack of confidence amongst some senior leaders and practitioners as to whether their current modes of development and delivery were truly consistent with the vision of the CfW (Duggan *et al.*, 2022). Some practitioners in this study expressed misgivings as to whether they were ‘they were on the right track’, and spoke of needing reassurance and further support (Duggan *et al.*, p. 60). One of the key sites of uncertainty has clearly been the contested position of knowledge in the curriculum, and a number of commentators have questioned how

a purpose-led approach can guarantee a knowledge-rich curriculum (Donaldson, 2015; Hizli Alkan and Priestley 2018; Sinnema *et al.*, 2020). Power *et al.* (2020) have probed the real implications for inequality of both experiences and outcomes that can arise from curricula lacking agreed corpuses of powerful knowledge (Power *et al.*, 2020; Davies, 2025). As Crehan (2024, p. 2) has recently pointed out: ‘When the curriculum contains only high-level, somewhat ambiguous statements, it leads to variation in interpretation that doesn’t only lead to differences in taught content (which needn’t be a problem), but to different standards in different schools.’

Looking forward

The implementation of the CfW will inevitably dominate the Welsh educational landscape for the foreseeable future. Consequently, to realise the ambitious curriculum reform agenda it has set itself during the Third Wave, we conclude that Wales needs now to ask searching questions about what support is needed to enable implementation. A re-evaluation is potentially needed by Welsh Government of the understanding and enactment of subsidiarity, and the importance of promoting of trust and honest conversations as advocated right at the outset of the curriculum reform process by Donaldson (2015) in *Successful Futures*. There is also a pressing need to heed the warnings emanating from other jurisdictions which have followed a similar path on curriculum reform, especially where these have impacted learner outcomes negatively and exacerbated inequalities (Shapira *et al.*, 2023; Crehan 2024). This will also mean taking seriously the concerns raised by practitioners in Wales about the lack of coherence and clarity of the current guidance (Duggan *et al.*, 2022), whilst guarding against *ad hoc* and piecemeal additions. These issues, along with the most recent assessment of Wales’s progress (Sibieta, 2024) are sobering, and present a clear and pointed challenge to a system undergoing seismic reform.

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Professional learning in education: policy and practice in Wales since devolution

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ABSTRACT

In the 25 years since devolution in Wales, professional learning has changed significantly. This chapter considers the development of Welsh Government initiatives over the last two decades and explores where they might be placed on a continuum between transmissive and transformative approaches. The chapter also explores recent developments of professional learning through the lens of political, professional and pragmatic conceptions of the domain. Although there is limited empirical research on these initiatives, there is some evidence of shifts in policy and practice in Wales aimed at streamlining and improving the quality assurance of professional learning for practitioners. The Welsh Government's definition of professional learning is evolving, and a positive landscape formed of professionally led and transformative professional learning may be emerging. However, the chapter argues that professional learning has some way to go before it is fully integrated into the learning culture of schools in Wales.

Keywords: professional learning, policy change, Wales, devolution, educational leadership, professional enquiry

Introduction

The professional learning architecture of any education system is likely to be complex and nuanced, even in a national education context as small as that of Wales. The 25 years since devolution have afforded the Welsh system the opportunity to devise and develop professional learning systems, cultures and processes which have the potential to be distinct, powerful and engaging. The purpose of this chapter is to make sense of this complexity by providing an overview of some of the key themes and developments that have emerged in the last two decades. It is clear that the professional learning picture is even more complex if initial teacher education (ITE) is also taken into account, as there have also been significant and extensive reforms in this area over the same period (Furlong, 2015). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the professional learning of existing practitioners. Within the confines of this chapter, we hope to offer not just a description of the many developments but rather a way of understanding, in our view, some of the more significant ones, through the lens of the *political*, *professional* and *pragmatic* conception of professional learning (Jones, 2011) and considering where policies and practice of professional learning in Wales may lie along a continuum between *transmissive* and *transformative* approaches (Kennedy and Stevenson, 2023).

We define professional learning broadly to include professional development, a term that encompasses the training that teachers undertake to demonstrate their engagement with activities related to their role (Jones, 2016). However, before we attempt any overview, it is worth briefly acknowledging the range and number of professional learning developments that have occurred. Since 1999, there have been a considerable number of policy interventions in the professional learning landscape in Wales at national level. They fall into two broad categories. The first category focuses on more general reforms within the Welsh education system which have significant professional learning implications. Examples of these are ALN reform in 2021 and the Curriculum for Wales in 2022. In both these examples, a wide-ranging system reform has set out new professional learning expectations for those working in the sector. Alongside these, there is a second category focusing on direct interventions upon content, mode of delivery, and/or philosophy of professional learning in the same time period. Examples include, the New Deal (Lewis, 2015), the National Approach to Professional Learning (NAPL) (Welsh Government, 2018a), two new national MA Education qualifications over the time period and numerous

iterations of accredited programmes focused on school leadership (such as the NPQH in 2017 and 2024). Perhaps the more general point to note at this stage is that professional learning policy in Wales has been constantly on the move, whether through interventions that directly seek to restructure the mode of delivery or philosophical approach to professional learning, or interventions that are focused on a different element of the educational superstructure, but which have significant implications for professional learning. After a quarter of a century, it is necessary to consider how best to make sense of these rapid developments. A number of commentaries have already been conducted (Jones, 2011; Egan and Grigg, 2016; Roy *et al.*, 2021), and we draw upon the insights generated by these studies and focus on developments that have happened subsequently. However, there is more limited research data on the impact of such policies or on the changes themselves.

One of the current authors, in a retrospective analysis of professional learning since devolution, proposed a further categorisation of professional learning according to its perceived function: *political*, *professional* or *pragmatic* (Jones, 2011). These distinctions are arguably as pertinent today as they were at the midpoint of the devolution journey, and so we will use them in the analysis that follows. The specific functional emphasis of each of these will be quickly recapped here. The *political* emphasis focuses on using professional learning to achieve specifically identified whole-system reforms or instituting national, standardised professional learning structures. It sees professional learning as, 'imposed or directed externally rather than emerging from the teaching profession itself' (Jones, 2011, p. 761). This contrasts clearly with the *professional* focus which emphasises the function of professional learning to generate deeper, more effective levels of practice in ways determined internally by the profession itself. This emphasis is characterised by the belief that teachers are 'lifelong learners, form critical friendships, network, evaluate and continually seek ways of improving practice' (Jones, 2011, p. 761). Broadly speaking, the political focus directs professional learning according to the perceived needs of the system as determined by the Welsh Government, whereas the professional focus is less prescriptive and allows practitioners, both individually and collectively, to determine the direction, form and content of professional learning. In effect, the former prioritises system wide direction and consistency, while the latter aims to enhance the agency of professionals and practitioners. In reality, it is more a question of emphasis and tone of discourse. Arguably, the tone of policy has been professionally aligned since the publication of the National Mission in 2017 which emphasised

‘co-construction’ of new developments (Welsh Government, 2017). Those with the executive responsibility for the overall development and performance of an education system, in this case the Welsh Government, are able to *politically* engineer the conditions within which *professionally*-focused and designed professional learning might flourish.

There is, of course, a third category that undoubtedly emerges; the *pragmatic alternative* (Jones, 2011). If the political emphasis draws its power from an externally derived vision of professional learning need and the professional emphasis draws its power from internally derived priorities and goals, the pragmatic emphasis enacts professional learning that responds to more contingent, ad-hoc, short-term, locally-derived aims and restrictions. The pragmatic emphasis is more likely to be determined by the constraints of budget, staffing and opportunity, for example, than by broader, longer-term visions of professional learning effectiveness (Jones, 2011). The danger for any educational system is that the pragmatic influence upon professional learning becomes the dominant mode with negative consequences for equity and coherence for schools and professionals.

Before we move on to consider some of the more recent professional learning developments in the light of these distinctions, it is also worth considering an additional way of viewing professional learning. Kennedy and Stevenson (2023) distinguish between professional learning approaches which aim to *transform* and professional learning provision which aims to *transmit*. The first is potentially messy, disruptive, provisional and open-ended but arguably more powerful in identifying future trends. The latter is aimed at fostering conformity and compliance in terms of practice and is arguably, although easier to operationalise, less likely to develop the passion, commitment and professional drive needed for long-term educational professional growth (Boylan et al., 2023). Pressures for harder-edged political intervention emerge regularly following, for example, Wales’ less than flattering performance in PISA (Dauncey, 2023). The importance of taking a transformative approach was highlighted by the need to address pupil and teacher learning at the onset of the Pandemic when schools were closed. Both approaches have significant implications for professional learning policy and practice.

At this point it must be noted that many of the developments that we will go on to discuss have fundamentally emerged from the political domain, but this is not the only way of viewing them. We acknowledge the complexities of policy and practice. However, an examination of these in greater depth is beyond the scope of this

chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to explore a selection of developments in turn (from the last ten years) and to consider, irrespective of their initial point of emergence, where we feel they sit in terms of their ability to attain a *professional* focus, their likelihood of being dominated by a *pragmatic* agenda, and even their ability to offer professional learning that is potentially *transformative*. Where does the system sit after 25 years of devolution?

The offer of the New Deal

In 2015, the then Minister for Education and Skills Huw Lewis announced his New Deal for education professionals in Wales (Lewis, 2015). This appeared to be something of a reset in comparison to the more overtly political interventions formulated by his predecessor Leighton Andrews, which themselves followed on the heels of the poor PISA results of 2009 (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2010; Jones and Evans, 2024). The New Deal, as the name suggests, signalled a compact with the profession and unsurprisingly the promise of a greater role for the profession in determining professional learning needs and priorities at more individualised levels. The initial announcement offered education professionals in Wales ‘a structured entitlement to access world class professional learning opportunities to develop their practice’ (Lewis, 2015). The language itself clearly identified the role for professionals in determining their professional learning needs and priorities, highlighting that practitioners would ‘establish career long development pathways [...] to take greater ownership and responsibility for their professional learning’ (Lewis, 2015). In effect, this amounted to a political intervention, at the highest level, to professional learning provision that would be orientated around the internally identified needs of the profession, something of a bridge between the *political* and the *professional*. The New Deal envisaged two key delivery conduits for these aspirations. One was, at the time, the recently formed school improvement consortia, and the other was the provision of a standard universal repository for individual professional learning progress, namely the Professional Learning Passport (PLP). The former would be tasked with providing the majority of high-quality professional learning opportunities whilst the latter had the role of providing a platform upon which ‘practitioners [would] be able to record their professional learning in a single place, and [would] enable them to develop a detailed, online portfolio capturing all of their professional learning’ (Lewis,

2015). The aspiration to meet the challenges ahead through professional learning that would be designed and implemented 'by practitioners for practitioners' (Lewis, 2015) was clearly established. However, the extent to which the New Deal has genuinely delivered professionally focused professional learning, or even transformative professional learning, is debatable perhaps not least because of its capacity to attract resourcing and focus as other interventions have subsequently occurred at national level. Nevertheless, this aspiration to institute from the top a professional learning settlement which would become authentically professional in execution has remained (Miles, 2023). It was referenced clearly within the first enabling objective of 'developing a high-quality education profession' within the publication of 'Our National Mission' (Welsh Government, 2017, p. 25). This aspirational commitment continued into the National Approach to Professional Learning (NAPL) (Welsh Government, 2018a) and its successor the National Professional Learning Entitlement (NPLE) (Welsh Government, 2022). The NAPL included a significant focus on the 'Individual Professional Learning Journey' and the NPLE, through its foregrounded use of *entitlement*, has explicitly attempted to reinforce the agency, in terms of professional learning, of the individual practitioner.

The challenge of a new curriculum

The Donaldson report (2015) paved the way for curriculum renewal in Wales and the professional learning requirements for this reform were anticipated through the formation of Pioneer Schools. Just as any professional learning offer to educators may be attempting a balance between a *political* emphasis and a *professional* emphasis, the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) has attempted to balance a nationally coherent curriculum offer with the desire that the details of this offer should be planned, designed and executed at a local level. This latter principle of subsidiarity, emphasised in the initial report (Donaldson, 2015) is in many ways analogous to the professional learning emphasis that focuses on the *professional*, as discussed above. There are inevitably tensions and complexities in trying to achieve this balance whether in the domain of curriculum reform or, as we are discussing in this paper, the domain of professional learning. In this particular instance, since the implementation of CfW implies significant professional learning across the system, the tensions coalesce.

Some have argued that in terms of CfW, although the broad spirit of subsidiarity has been welcomed by the profession, lack of clarity on the detail and limits of this subsidiarity principle have threatened to hamper progress (Newton, 2020). It is possibly this uncertainty that has left an element of the profession feeling relatively unprepared in terms of their own professional learning to implement the CfW (Duggan *et al.*, 2022; Evans, 2023). To rectify this, some have called for a renewed ‘coherent, well-coordinated and sustained professional learning programme’ (Evans, 2023, p. 10), presumably, a programme which would blend the *political* and *professional* and avoid professional learning for the implementation of CfW defaulting to the *pragmatic*. Balancing these two elements is a significant challenge for any system, particularly since the CfW is no longer being prepared but is now very much being delivered.

Developing learning organisations

There has been yet another significant influence on professional learning in Wales in the last 10 years. The Schools as Learning Organisations (SLO) (Kools and Stoll, 2016) model has been repeatedly emphasised at various levels by the Welsh Government since 2017 through its extensive links with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), links which have had significant effects in a variety of domains within the sector. The concept of SLO has had political weight attached to it, denoting this time not professional learning focused on a particular topic or area but rather the ways in which powerful learning can be supported by schools and school leaders. It emphasises a model of organisational development that potentially could and should be led by the professional and contextual interests of those working within any given institution. Therefore, although the SLO model is *politically* endorsed, the dimensions on which it is structured are free to be shaped by and defined at a local level, by *professionals* for *professionals*.

As there has been an emphasis on the Welsh iteration of SLO, there is now a growing body of literature focused on SLO in Wales which is useful in this context. Some have concluded that the Welsh SLO model has the potential to be *transformative* and that the assumptions behind its dimensions are supported by broader empirical evidence (Harris *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, others have positively noted a correlation in

Welsh schools between the presence of strong SLO features and the belief for staff that their school is ‘a good place to learn from and with colleagues’ (Kools *et al.*, 2019, p. 432). However, even those who are broadly positive about the potential of the SLO model in Wales have queried whether the system as it currently stands has the infrastructure, expertise and capacity to fully realise its benefits, noting along the way that practical guidance for schools and school leaders in terms of developing as a learning organisation is less easy to find (Harris *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, others have suggested that the generalised culture of sharing of knowledge and learning in schools, fundamental to the SLO model, still has some way to go and that, too often, professional learning remains siloed within discrete processes and routines (Milton *et al.*, 2022).

Promoting professional learning at Level 7

In terms of accreditation for professional learning, much has happened since devolution. We will go on to discuss leadership qualifications below, but here we will explore the political initiatives that have produced two Master’s level national programmes in the last 15 years alone. Arguably, both programmes have reflected a desire from the Welsh Government to develop a greater proportion of Master’s qualified practitioners within the system. The Master’s in Education Practice (MEP) had, as the name suggests, a clear focus on individual teachers developing their *practice* and hence it was potentially *transformative*. Even here, it is perhaps interesting to note that the original impetus for the development of the MEP arose from an arguably more *transmissive* desire by the Welsh Government to respond to the poor PISA results of the previous decade and a perceived lapse in standards. It was there to correct something within the system. The MEP only lasted from 2013 to 2015 (with the last cohort graduating in 2018) and could be considered a first attempt by the Welsh Government to develop capacity to deliver Master’s level professional learning to the workforce at scale (Connolly *et al.*, 2017). The MEP used delivery partnerships that went beyond the confines of Higher Education (HE). The second attempt, is the ongoing MA Education (Wales) programme, which is spread over a greater number of collaborating Higher Education Institutions (HEI) than its predecessor and thus may be seen as more ambitious structurally in terms of professional learning delivery capacity within HEIs (although its delivery model does

not extend beyond HE). Both interventions have received significant financial resourcing from the Welsh Government, demonstrating, in part at least, political will. However, at the time of writing, there is yet to be a full evaluation of the MA Education (Wales) programme in terms either of its impact and reach or its ability to provide professional learning that is owned by the *profession* and that is *transformative* rather than *transmissive*.

Learning for leaders

Professional learning provision for school leaders in Wales has also undergone significant developments, in the last fifteen years. Alongside the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) which predates devolution and was introduced by the incoming Blair government in 1997, the Welsh system has developed additional leadership professional learning programmes that focus on specific stages of leadership (for example, middle level leaders or aspiring headteachers). Once again, these programmes have attempted to balance the needs of the *political* (by developing professional leadership qualities and skillsets across the system to support and drive renewal and reform) and the desire to stimulate professional learning for leaders that is driven by the perceived *professional* needs of leaders themselves. In addition, these leadership programmes have grappled with similar structural delivery and capacity issues as the level seven programmes discussed above. At times, these distinct challenges have merged into one. In addition, since its inception in 2018, the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL) (NAEL, 2018) has also had as one of its missions the development of professional learning of leaders across Wales and has had the role of endorsing existing leadership programmes, should they seek this designation. It has also, over its lifespan, developed an ever-increasing cohort of NAEL Associates, leaders who are effectively advocates for leadership learning and mentors/coaches of other leaders within the school system.

In 2012, Leighton Andrews as Minister for Education and Skills, announced that a reconfigured NPQH would rigorously assess candidates against the leadership standards and therefore, provide *political* affirmation for those who subsequently qualified (Andrews, 2012). Later, the review of the NPQH iteration by Waters (2023) that followed, has identified the need to tilt back in favour of a more bespoke offer that will attend more directly to the different contexts in which individual leaders find

themselves working, in effect a recognition that the *profession* itself should provide perspectives that need to be incorporated into any leadership programme. Doubtless this is a nuanced balancing act that will continue into the future. However, some have argued that the professional learning architecture in Wales is still overly complex and confusing (Harris *et al.*, 2021), potentially limiting its ability to be truly *transformative*.

Learning through enquiry

Teacher enquiry is increasingly being seen as a powerful mode of professional learning, one which is able to deliver impactful and genuinely *transformative* learning for practitioners in their particular *professional* context (Milton and Morgan, 2023). Enquiry here is about practitioners asking themselves critical, complex, often uncomfortable questions about their practice and working through the challenges that ensue. The Welsh Government, working with regional consortia and HEIs, has devoted time and resources into attempting to capitalise on this. Indeed, there has been much political investment in enquiry structures under the umbrella of the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE) (Welsh Government, 2021), and there is additional endorsement through the most recent iteration of Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (PSTL) (Welsh Government, 2019) where for example, there is an explicit expectation that teachers should be engaged in action research/professional enquiry. In 2018, the National Professional Enquiry Project (NPEP) (Welsh Government, 2018b), still ongoing, was launched and this has been joined more recently by the Embedding Research and Enquiry in Schools (EREiS) scheme. Within these projects, there is a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, message that professional learning is inextricably linked to the *doing* of enquiry, or at least, the demonstration of actively engaged reading about research conducted elsewhere. Effectively these activities are positioned as a gradual broadening of *professional* horizons.

There are structural issues that would need to be addressed before a discrete programme like NPEP could become a truly authentic and sustainable national forum for practitioner *professional* enquiry. It is simply not known how much resource might be required over what kind of time span, to build long-term behaviours and cultures, and to avoid projects such as NPEP becoming stuck as things-in-themselves, reified, fighting for space, resources and attention in a crowded system.

Concluding thoughts

In each of the professional learning developments that we have briefly explored in this chapter, there are consistent footprints of professional learning that could be both *professionally*-focused, in the sense of being formulated and co-constructed with practitioners, and *transformative*, in the sense that they could provide learning experiences which have deep impact on ideas, beliefs and practices of practitioners. At times, these exist as aspirations, for example in the NPLe. At other points they exist in structures that have the potential to deliver, such as NPEP, even if there may be some distance still to travel. It is perhaps for these reasons that there is often a mood of 'cautious optimism' within the system (Woods, 2021, p. 6).

Yet, such optimism is often tempered by the notion that there may be some distance still to travel to attain a professional learning offer which is truly professionally-focused (Egan and Grigg, 2016), or which could be supported by authentic, integrated learning cultures within schools (Milton *et al.*, 2022), or which could achieve an effective level of consistency and coherence across Wales (Jones and Evans, 2024). There are in fact a variety of perspectives on professional learning in Wales from which one may judge that there is still plenty of work to be done. Each perspective would suggest we need, as a professional learning system, to do fewer of some things, and more of others. For practitioners, the crowded system of well-meaning players is difficult to navigate. The review of the roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales stated: school leaders said they and their staff felt overwhelmed by the current professional learning [PL] offer – 'we struggle to decipher the white noise of the PL offer'. They also said they did not have the time to access much of it and when they did it was of variable quality (Jones, 2024). The professional learning endorsement process introduced by Welsh Government in 2023 is an attempt to improve the quality of professional learning provision, and the findings of bodies such as Estyn (2022) give further guidance.

However, it is not a simple task to get everyone to agree on the specifics of what should be muted within that same system, and what should be amplified, even if there is broad agreement about the desirability of an eventual professional learning offer that is *transformative* and *professionally*-focused, and which is less likely to be driven by purely *pragmatic* rationales for action. Agreeing to reduce distracting clutter within the system is one thing, but it is not the same as gaining agreement

on exactly what is creating that clutter. To this challenge we can add the relative lack of empirical research data on various professional learning offers within the system. Sometimes this is because things are not around for long enough to be the subject of this type of research, such is the current pace of educational reform and change.

At the 25-year-point, post devolution, significant events in the professional learning landscape are afoot, both associated with a desire to de-clutter, or cut back a garden that has grown in many different directions. The Welsh Government has instituted a process for slimming down and quality assuring (Welsh Government, 2023) the extensive professional learning resources on its Hwb platform in an attempt to help practitioners in Wales, wherever they are based, identify high quality professional learning materials more easily. At the time of writing, there are also clear signs that the middle-tier of the three-part education superstructure in Wales is likely to be re-configured in an equivalent attempt to simplify and add coherence to a professional learning offer which practitioners have found to be complex and challenging to negotiate. Wales is still an education system of many moving parts and it will be fascinating to see, as we enter the next quarter of a century of the devolution journey, how the development of a system-wide professional learning landscape which is *professionally-driven* and *transformative* unfolds.

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Reconceptualising Curriculum in a new era of Welsh Education

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ABSTRACT

The new curriculum framework for Wales offers educators an approach to curriculum work that is a radical departure from the previous national curriculum introduced in 1988. One feature of the new curriculum framework is its emphasis on experience. However, there is little support for theoretical considerations of experience offered by the Welsh Government in their guidance for teachers. This chapter proposes that reconceptualist approaches to curriculum theory and theorising can potentially address this shortcoming. The reconceptualisation of curriculum shifts the focus from traditional perspectives to understanding curriculum as 'lived experience' (Pinar 2019). Additionally, with the introduction of the method of *currere*, Pinar (1975) offers a method through which educators can analyse and interpret how their educational experiences influence and shape their educational values, practices and identities, as well as how they come to 'understand curriculum' (Pinar *et al.*, 2008). In this chapter, I discuss the origins and aims of the reconceptualist movement in the context of the new curriculum for Wales and argue that such approaches to understanding curriculum can increase teachers' capacity for educational research, enhance their curricular understanding, and strengthen articulations of their educational and professional voice.

Keywords: *currere*, curriculum, reconceptualist, curriculum theorising, curriculum theory

Introduction

William James, an eminent philosopher, psychologist, and mentor to the renowned John Dewey, once wrote, ‘emergencies and crises show us how much greater our vital resources are than we had supposed’ (James, 2011). Crises and curriculum seem to go hand-in-hand. For example, crises often serve as the sources and justifications for educational reform. Recently, several OECD countries including Japan, Finland, Estonia, Norway and Wales are experiencing significant changes in their national curricula to address perceived crises in health and wellbeing, teacher and learner agency, and performance on international assessments (2020). Crises have also indicated important shifts in the trends and trajectories of the field of curriculum studies. For example, the perennial question of the role of knowledge in curriculum theory has been argued from various philosophical perspectives as a *crisis*, from Young’s emphasis on social realism and ‘powerful knowledge’ (2013) to Deng’s (2022) argument for ‘knowledge-based’ curricula interpreted through Lambert’s capabilities approach (2011) and Bildung-centred Didaktik. Priestley (2011) and Deng (2018) have also questioned the quality, trajectories, and impact of curriculum theory and theorising may have on the actualities of teachers’ curriculum work, and Wheelahan (2010) has expressed concern over the erosion of scholarship within the field and the impact this has had on guiding educational policy.

Of course, curriculum crises are not limited to the twenty-first century, and my own interests in curriculum (Smith, 2022) were aroused when I first encountered Joseph Schwab’s declaration (1969) that the field was not simply in a state of crisis – it was *moribund*, a position that was furthered by Dwayne Huebner (1976) who argued curriculum studies was, for all intents and purposes, already dead.

William Pinar responded to these morbid diagnoses with a call for a reconceptualisation of the field (1975) through an emphasis on understanding curriculum as lived experience, accompanied with an autobiographical approach to curriculum theorising that served as a method for the analysis and interpretation of educational experience. For nearly fifty years, reconceptualist thinking has made challenging and innovative contributions to the field of curriculum studies (Baszile, 2015, Schubert, 2009, Aoki *et al.*, 2004), yet these contributions are not easily identified in the recent trend of international educational reform.

In the context of Wales, the role of reconceptualisation is crucial. With its emphasis on purpose, multidisciplinary, and experience, reconceptualist thinking

offers teachers innovative approaches to curriculum understanding that closely align with the purposes, structure, and content of the new curriculum, as well as the aim of the Welsh Government in increasing research capacity within its educational system. This chapter discusses the evolving Welsh educational landscape and a potential crisis within the new curriculum framework centered on the concept of experience. It then delves into the origins, aims, and arguments of reconceptualist approaches to curriculum theory and theorising. Finally, I briefly introduce the *Currere Cymru* research project as an example of how reconceptualist approaches to curriculum, and specifically *currere* as an autobiographical approach to curriculum theorising, can help resolve this crisis by enabling teachers to recognise their own educational experiences and 'personal, practical knowledge' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1985) as vital resources that they can draw upon in enhancing their capacity to engage in and undertake educational research that can further enhance and support their curricular work.

The Everchanging Educational Landscape of Wales

Educational reform is something of a national pastime in Wales. While the advent of devolution in 1997–9 empowered Welsh Government to enact policies specifically tailored to the educational needs and priorities of Wales (Roberts 2012), it has also resulted in a perpetual, and often tumultuous, series of educational interventions and reform.

In 2011, these initiatives intensified as the Welsh Government published an aspirational 20-point educational improvement plan in response to sustained criticism of its educational system (Power *et al.*, 2020), frequent and rocky episodes of educational policymaking (Evans, 2022) and repeated, lackluster results on international assessments (Welsh Government, 2023a; Dauncey, 2016). In 2014, this plan was translated into a five-year strategy focused on creating a pedagogically proficient workforce, nationally and internationally respected qualifications, a self-improving educational system and review of the national curriculum (Welsh Government, 2014). The culmination of that review was published in the report *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales* (Donaldson, 2015) which included the rationale for the creation of a new, national curriculum that represents a radical departure from the subject-based

curriculum introduced in 1988 and later updated in 2008 (Donaldson, 2016; Welsh Government, 2023).

A New Curriculum for Wales

It may be more appropriate to refer to the new curriculum for Wales as a framework for curriculum work as this new approach is intended to support teachers in the creation of bespoke (i.e. school-level), purpose-driven (Priestley *et al.*, 2021), process-model (Donaldson, 2015), place-based curricula (Welsh Government, 2023). In order to achieve these aims, the framework comprises a plenitude of curricular components, including 12 pedagogical principles, four purposes, several principles of progression, and the following six Areas of Learning and Experience:

- Expressive Arts
- Health and Well-being
- Humanities
- Languages
- Literacy and Communication
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- Science and Technology

Furthermore, the AoLEs, which are multidisciplinary faculties of subject matter, are supported by 27 ‘statements of what matters’ that identify, organise, and describe the mandatory curriculum content that all pupils in Wales should experience at school (Welsh Government, 2022).

An Emphasis on Experience

In 2020, the Welsh government published *Curriculum for Wales Guidance*, a 252-page introduction to the purposes and organisation of the new curriculum, as well as approaches for understanding assessment and progression. The majority of the guidance includes descriptions of the six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) and the statements of what matters (i.e. the compulsory content of the curriculum),

along with principles of progression (i.e. conceptualisations of how learners progress in regard to both the specific AoLE and also its relationship to the other AoLEs), and descriptions of learning (i.e. suggested ideal-types of learners' capacities and competencies developed through each AoLE).

After poring through this document, I noticed one feature of the guidance that stands in stark contrast to the previous national curriculum: the term 'experience' features prominently in the text – an impressive 338 times! Frequency alone is not necessarily a reliable measure of significance. However, the way the term 'experience' is used in the guidance is a crucial indicator of how the Welsh government intends to change the understanding of the curriculum among educators, pupils, their communities, and families. For example, 'experience' is used as an indicator of how curriculum content is organised: compulsory curriculum content is organised through areas of learning and *experience*. Additionally, experience is used to denote the needs of young people in Wales, with the guidance going so far as to say that '[n]othing 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). Of course, the term is also used to describe how educators and pupils are orientated to participate in and undergo various dimensions of teaching and learning; put simply, they *experience* curriculum.

While the new curriculum advocates for greater teacher agency, more holistic perspectives on education, and innovative approaches to pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, the theoretical foundations that inform and support these aims and intentions are not explicitly presented in much of the curriculum guidance and other resources provided to teachers. For example, although the term 'experience' is included in *Curriculum for Wales Guidance* over three hundred times, and the arenas in which teaching and learning takes place are referred to as 'Areas of learning and experience,' there is no discussion of theories of experience from theorists such as Dewey (1938), Lewin (1948) or Kolb (1984). As such, the theoretical grounding for the new curriculum framework remains largely inaccessible for teachers, particularly if they are to not only consider how concepts of experience relate to teaching and learning, but also how *experiences of curriculum* can inform teachers' curriculum work. As a consequence of this oversight, teachers may find themselves lacking the necessary tools to effectively translate curriculum guidance into meaningful learning experiences for their students, thereby hindering the efficacy of their own curricular

work and pupils' realisation of the competencies, capacities, and purposes that contribute to the distinctive character of this new curriculum framework.

In this chapter, I propose that *currere*, a method of curriculum theorising that focuses specifically on the examination, interpretation, understanding and communication of *experience* (Grumet, 2016) can address these theoretical shortcomings by offering teachers a powerful tool through which they can navigate the complexities of their own educational experience and its influence on their orientations to, understandings of, communications about, and performances of, curriculum. Through drawing on reconceptualist approaches to curriculum and the *currere* method, teachers can be afforded opportunities to engage in curriculum work that is not only aligned to the purposes of the new curriculum but can also lead the development of rich and meaningful educational experiences for their pupils.

Reconceptualising Curriculum

Before discussing curricular reconceptualisation, it is useful to discuss more traditional and established approaches to understanding curriculum. Curriculum is a word that is not easy to define. Traditionally, and in a very broad sense, it represents plans for instruction involving categories of curated facts, knowledge, skills (although I am loathe to separate the two) and, to some degree, experiences. Traditionally, curricula interpreted through this lens have been organised around three historical foci: Curriculum content, the needs of society, and the needs of the learner (March and Willis, 2007). This orientation to curriculum aligns with the Latin definition of the term (i.e. *racecourse*, or 'a course to be run'), with the underlying assumption being that when these plans are enacted in schools (e.g. when the 'course' is presented to pupils for them to 'run'), the outcomes of these enactments and their proceedings will lead to the achievement of certain aims, objectives and other educational outcomes – some specified, others unintended. In the case of the curriculum for Wales, the curriculum is defined as 'everything a learner experiences in pursuit of the four purposes. It's not simply what we teach, but how we teach and crucially, why we teach it' (Welsh Government, 2020, p. 5). The four purposes mentioned in this definition (e.g. Ambitious capable learners; Enterprising, creative contributors; Ethical, informed citizens; and Healthy, confident individuals) are presented as 'the starting point and aspiration for schools' curriculum design' (Welsh Government,

2022), encapsulate the historical foci mentioned previously, and circumscribe teachers' curricular work. As a result, these purposes represent a more holistic conceptualisation of educational aims than what was presented in the previous, national curriculum.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States, debates over curriculum theories, definitions, and models, as well as methods for curriculum research, sparked division and debate within the field. In the culmination of this debate, Schwab (1969) referred to several 'flights of and from the field', including an unrestrained pursuit of theories and meta-theories, the dogmatic preservation and rearticulation of tradition(s), and 'eristic, contentious, and ad hominem debate' (p. 4) as factors that he felt had rendered the field of curriculum as 'moribund'. In Schwab's view, without a renaissance, the field could no longer attend to the work of improving educational experiences and outcomes in schools.

William Pinar responded to Schwab's call, but rather than settle for a renaissance or revival, he argued for something much more radical: Reconceptualisation. The term 'reconceptualisation' in curriculum studies originated with Macdonald (1971), a prolific author and insightful critic who argued that positivist perspectives had dominated the field of curriculum studies and reduced the complexity and richness of curriculum work. For Macdonald, many of the curricular theories and models presented to educators at the time were organised through a ubiquitous and pervasive technical rationale that emphasised efficiency and standardisation at the expense of more holistic and humanistic approaches to, and perceptions of, education. Macdonald emphasised the need to acknowledge the significance of human experience and meaning-making in teachers' curriculum work and advocated approaches to theorising curriculum that emphasise ethical considerations, democratic educational arrangements, and interdisciplinary and holistic approaches to planning school experiences (1973, 1987).

As a result, reconceptualisation provided Pinar with an alternative category of curriculum that stood in stark contrast to what he calls 'traditionalist' and 'conceptual-empiricist' approaches (Pinar, 1978) to curriculum. For Pinar, traditionalists prioritise continuity with past perspectives and practices, often drawing on seminal works such as the Tyler Rationale (2013) and, more contemporarily, *Understanding by Design* (McTighe and Wiggins, 2005) which emphasise clear objectives, carefully curated conditions, and measurable outcomes. From this perspective, traditionalists view curriculum development as a technical endeavor for organising curriculum content

rather a critical questioning of the underlying assumptions and structures that frame understandings and experiences of curriculum. Conceptual-empiricists, unlike traditionalists, engage in theoretical inquiry and hypothesis testing, seeking to develop and validate conceptual models that explain various educational phenomena. This work often involves the formulation of hypotheses based on theoretical frameworks, followed by empirical testing using methods often associated with the social sciences. According to Pinar, these perspectives over-emphasise the object of curriculum without consideration of how curriculum is experienced. In other words, these approaches focus on the 'racecourse,' but neglect the 'running of the course.' In advocating a reconceptualisation of curriculum focused on the question of 'what is now, and has been, the nature of my educational journey?,' reconceptualisation offers educators and researchers a paradigm through which one can come to frame, analyse, and interpret their experience of curriculum.

For the past fifty years, this growing movement of curriculum theorists and educational practitioners has represented the adoption of a value-laden perspective that recognises the inherently political nature of curriculum and the research required to understand these phenomena. Even now, decades after its introduction, reconceptualist thinkers seek to liberate both themselves and those impacted by their research from existing power structures that limit human experience through increased standardisation and simplification through discourses of scientism, positivism, and technical rationality.

Kincheloe (1989) eloquently summarises these perspectives, arguing that:

The worldview and epistemology that support standardization reforms assume that absolute forms of measurement can be applied to human endeavors such as education. The teaching and learning process, advocates of standardization believe, are sufficiently consistent and stable to allow for precise measurability. The strategies that educators use and the factors that produce good and bad student performance can be isolated and even expressed in mathematical terms. Therefore, because questions based on students' acquisition of selected bits of knowledge can be easily devised and we can determine a student's and a teacher's competence with little difficulty because such measurements can be accurately made, advocates of reductionist standardization see little complexity in the effort to hold teachers accountable. Critical educators want to move beyond this simplified model. (p. 14)

As part of this desire to move beyond these limitations, reconceptualisation entails a rigorous engagement with metatheory and philosophy, and acknowledges the intellectual complexity inherent in reimagining curriculum as an emancipatory, lived

experience. Despite lacking a formal organisational structure, reconceptualists share common themes and motives and, if they are united, then it is through their shared commitment in advancing a transformative agenda within curriculum studies that seeks to enlarge and enhance the human dimensions of teaching and learning. These approaches to ‘understanding curriculum’ aim to conceptualise a holistic interpretation of curriculum (Miller, 2019) by drawing on the indelible educational experiences of teachers, as well as the ‘personal, practical knowledge’ (Connelly and Clandinin, 1985; Willinsky, 1989) gained through their educational practice.

Initially, Pinar refused to provide an exact definition of ‘reconceptualisation’ (Pinar, 1978) and to a degree, reconceptualist thinking remains somewhat ambiguous and subject to interpretation as the aims and means through which reconceptualist thinkers emphasise reflection, inquiry, critique, social justice, and democracy, as well as their value of subjective knowledge and experience, continue to challenge traditional approaches to curriculum. For Pinar, the multiplicity of perspectives and thought broadly organised through the emphases listed above is a strength of the reconceptualist movement. However, others such as Wraga (1999), Tanner and Tanner (1979), and Wraga and Hlebowitsh (2003) argue that reconceptualist approaches offer criticisms of, but few solutions to, curricular problems. Others argue that curriculum theory should focus on forms of knowledge rather than experience (Hirsch, 2019, Young, 2013), and Deng (2018, p. 692) who views the theoretical diversity of reconceptualist approaches as a disadvantage and distraction, argues that reconceptualist studies deal with ‘a dizzying array of eccentric and exotic topics’ that have replaced concerns with what he and Westbury (cited in Deng) refer to as the ‘inner work of schooling’. In short, critics of reconceptualist thinking argue that such an approach fails to provide educators with adequate curricular frameworks, models, or theories for curriculum development based on empirical research and, as a result, offers little practical benefit to teachers and their curriculum work.

Reconceptualisation, however, does not eschew empirical evidence nor the practical undertakings of educators. Rather, it is concerned with praxis (Freire, 2005) or the theorisation of educational practice (Smith, 2022) through framing curriculum as lived experience. By drawing on Macdonald’s term, Pinar mobilised reconceptualisation in an effort to articulate new trajectories for the field of curriculum studies that reflected the theoretical and methodological diversity of many curriculum theorists at the time, and this also includes methods through which researchers and educators come to study curriculum.

In short, reconceptualist approaches have emerged as responses to the perceived limitations of existing curriculum theories, models, and discourses that promote scientific perspectives, reinforce positivist foundations of knowledge and inquiry, and prioritise a technical rationale that services educators with deficient theories and models of curricula. These circumstances deny them avenues of thought and forms of practice that enable them to examine and question fundamental assumptions about curriculum in their educational practice that can lead to the educative experiences (Dewey, 1938) they hope to achieve with and for their pupils.

The Method of *Currere* and the Analysis of Educational Experience

Reconceptualist approaches attempt to reorientate educators to new articulations of the epistemological, ontological, ethical, and axiological dimensions of curriculum work. These articulations find their origins in existential and phenomenological philosophy. Grumet (2016), in citing Roche (1973), posits that the central, existential concern in the analysis of educational experience is to 'help us see the ordinary as strange and in need of some explanation' (p. 39). Phenomenologically, the aim is to examine the *Lebenswelt*, the 'lifeworld' or world of meaning that Husserl (1970) argued was the world of our immediate experience, the everyday world in which we live, act, and interact with others. For reconceptualists, one way this is accomplished is by placing educators, in an autobiographical sense, squarely within the analysis and interpretation of their educational experience. By drawing on these philosophical perspectives and incorporating psycho-analytic techniques, as well as concepts from Zen Buddhism, Pinar developed *currere* – a method through which one can investigate, analyse, and interpret educational experiences (1975). Etymologically, this method represents a shift from the study of curriculum (i.e. a racecourse, or course to be run) to that of *currere*. As the infinitive verb form of curriculum, *currere* means 'to run', and this reconceptualisation shifts the emphasis of study and analysis from 'the curriculum' to one's lived experiences of it. In other words, *currere* is an attempt to understand the 'running of the race' rather than simply the racecourse itself.

Currere is an autobiographical method of curriculum theorising informed by existential and phenomenological philosophy involving psycho-analytic techniques. The method comprises the following four stages of critical, self-reflection:

1. The Regressive – Recalling indelible educational experiences from the past
2. The Progressive – Considering/imagining aspirations for future educational experiences
3. The Analytic – Perceiving and comprehending one's current educational experiences
4. The Synthetic – The culmination of critical reflection of the previous stages in the generation of a cogent statement of curricular understanding

With *currere*, an individual recalls, contemplates, analyses and interprets indelible educational experiences from the past, aspirations for educational experiences in the future, and the realities of their current educational practice. These recollections and imaginations are then analysed and interpreted, with the findings of the research articulated through a cogent statement of curriculum understanding borne from the theorisation of educational practice and experience that can inform and enhance educators' curriculum work. Often, these efforts are organised around specific aims, such as the actualisation of socially-just and/or transformative education (Williams *et al.*, 2020; Baszile, 2017; 2023), the achievement of agency (Smith, 2022) or, and this is especially relevant to teachers in Wales, the realisation of one's pedagogical and professional identity (Gibbs, 2014, Roofe, 2022, Kanu, 2006, Kohza, 2023).

Investigating Educational Experiences in Wales: The *Currere Cymru* Project

During the *Future of Educational Research in Wales* conference held in Cardiff in 2018, the Welsh Government introduced the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE). This initiative aims to enhance research capacity in Wales and ensure that educational policy and practice are informed by high-quality research produced by both educational researchers and practitioners. One key aspect of this strategy was the generation of four Collaborative Research Networks (CRNs), each focusing on a specific theme:

- Equity and Inclusion
- Leadership and Professional Learning
- Curriculum and Pedagogy
- Bilingual Education and Welsh Language

The membership of each CRN includes educational researchers from a variety of disciplinary and methodological backgrounds, educators with rich and varied backgrounds in educational theory and practice, and an array of educational stakeholders with distinctive insights into, and experiences of, the Welsh educational landscape. Although the introduction of these collaborative research networks has contributed to a growing body of curriculum research in Wales (Chapman *et al.*, 2023; Titley *et al.*, 2020), there has been little attention to the experiential dimension of the curriculum for Wales and, in particular, teachers' experiences of curriculum as a resource to be investigated and examined. In response to this oversight, and an interest in investigating curriculum from a reconceptualist perspective, members of the Curriculum and Pedagogy Collaborative Research Network developed a research project involving researchers from several universities in Wales working with educational practitioners in co-producing narrative accounts of teacher's curricular understanding using the *currere* method.

The *Currere* Cymru Project

The *Currere* Cymru project, which began in June 2023 and will conclude in December 2024, involves teachers and educational researchers co-constructing narratives of experience and statements of curricular understanding generated through the *currere* method. The aims of the project are to support teachers in transforming assumed understandings of curriculum into 'complicated conversations' (Pinar, 2019) that are both political processes for identifying and negotiating their educational values and attempts to locate, recognise, and understand how their subjective experience as educators/learners (Freire, 2005) contribute to their curricular work.

At the beginning of the project, research teams were created by pairing teachers with educational researchers from four universities across Wales. The teams were then invited to a three day 'writing and reflection' retreat. During the retreat, the research teams deliberated over the topics of their research and devised the general outlines for their projects. Finally, they began working on the regressive stage of the *currere* method by reflecting on indelible educational experiences from their past. These episodes of data generation were supported by activities such as guided meditation and nature walks to promote mindfulness, contemplation and a general sense of wellbeing.

After the retreat, research teams continued working on their projects, with the educational researchers providing support for teachers as they navigated the *currere* method. These working arrangements created positive, meaningful relationships as the researchers worked closely with teachers as co-collaborators and mentors. This approach to 'close to practice research' (Wyse *et al.*, 2021) provided a nurturing environment in which teachers could engage in the theorisation of their practice and to orientate themselves to the demands of high quality educational research. The following are some of the themes currently being investigated:

- Academic identity and belonging
- Cultural and linguistic identities and practice at school
- Place, pedagogy and curriculum
- Acceptance
- Curriculum theory in initial teacher education
- Professional learning, curriculum making and change

For example, members of one of the research teams reflected on experiences when their use of Welsh at school was stifled or dismissed. In the restorying of these accounts, they discussed how curriculum, educational policy, and teachers' choices in the classroom impacted their cultural and linguistic identities and forms of expression. Their narrative of these experiences, in conversation with literature on the multicultural dimensions of curriculum, reflect tensions between educational policy, schooling practices, and pupils' cultural identity (Smith, 2015) and emphasise the need for educational experiences that more holistically integrate pupils' perceptions of their selves, communities and culture (Smith, 2017). These narratives of experience and theorisation of teachers' educational practice emphasise the significance of dialogue and community-building in schools, not only between educators, their pupils and families, but also, and especially, between educators themselves – a feature of professional learning organisations that has yet to be adequately realised in Wales (Smith and Horton, 2017).

Overall, these findings demonstrate the potential of the *currere* method in supporting teachers in the examination of their educational practice that can challenge traditional approaches to, and understandings of, curriculum, and provide new opportunities for teachers to develop curricula that can better prioritise inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, and the empowerment of pupils' voices in their schools, homes and communities.

Conclusion

The *Currere Cymru* project exemplifies how focusing on the ‘running of the race’ – rather than the ‘racecourse’ itself – can provide teachers with sophisticated conceptualisations of the curriculum. This theorisation of their practice aligns with the purposes of the curriculum for Wales in ways that enhance the educational experiences of both educators and pupils. By interpreting curriculum as ‘lived experience’, reconceptualist thinking advocates a more holistic, inclusive, and democratic approach to curriculum development. This shift in perspective provides teachers with a robust framework to better navigate the theoretical shortcomings of the curriculum for Wales guidance.

Additionally, reconceptualist approaches and the *currere* method offer alternatives to pervasive, technical-rational perspectives, and positivist and scientific approaches that seek to reduce complexity in educational and curricular understanding. By centering educational experience in teachers’ research and curriculum work, reconceptualist approaches embrace complexity as a necessary aspect of teachers’ professional practice and identity and argue that such considerations are crucial to the development of teachers’ professional practice. As Grumet (2016) articulately summarises:

When we refuse to reduce the educational process to training, the assembly-line production of skills and socialized psyches standardized to society's measure, we must forsake the statistic and consult the educational experience of one person. Thus my first request of a reconceptualized curriculum is the safe return of my own voice. (p. 31)

After nearly four decades of curricular stultification and professional disarmament, reconceptualist thinking and the *currere* method offer teachers the opportunity to analyse, interpret, and restore their educational experience as a means to develop richer and more sophisticated understandings of curriculum, with the outcome of these endeavours leading to the reclamation of their voices as educational professionals and experts.

As Wales, and many other countries, continue to navigate the complexities of educational reform in addressing crises of various shape and form, incorporating reconceptualist thinking and methods such as *currere* can serve as vital resources for teachers in their curricular work as they seek to create the educational experiences they believe they and their students deserve.

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The Development of Welsh Language Education since Devolution

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to consider some of the most critical factors that have been at play in the Education and Welsh language policy spheres during the twenty-five years in question. The chapter will analyse the policy development context and will also present data, focusing on statutory education, since the devolution of powers to Wales. Consideration is given to the relationship between the Welsh language portfolio and the Education portfolio at the national level as allocated by the First Ministers of Wales since 1999. In addition, there will be a focus on the development of strategies in these areas, in recognition of the importance of education in language policy and planning. It is not intended to offer a critical analysis of all strategic documentation published over the twenty-five years; however, reference is made to a selection of the areas and themes prioritized for policy and strategy development in Welsh language education. In the context of the above areas, we explore the development – or lack thereof – in Wales over the period in comparison to what happened in the Basque Country Autonomous Community during the same period. Finally, the full extent of the Welsh and Education Bill will be assessed, with consideration of whether it will be possible to achieve the necessary trajectory to meet the targets of the *Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers strategy* (Welsh Government, 2017a).

Keywords: Welsh Language and Education Bill; Welsh language; education; Welsh Government; Basque; language policy and planning; minoritized languages.

Introduction

The publication of the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill 2024 (Welsh Government, 2024b) by the Welsh Government on the 15th of July 2024 has undoubtedly marked a significant milestone in the development of Welsh language education since devolution. For the first time in the quarter of a century since the Assembly was established, which evolved over time into the Senedd,¹ a bespoke bill has been drawn up in an attempt to ensure a coherent approach to Welsh language and Education, bringing these two policy areas together.

In attempting to define the extent of an evaluative overview of the policy and practice environment in the period since devolution, several aspects of the development of Welsh language education can be considered: Welsh-medium education, or Welsh language teaching; statutory education, or the non-statutory early years, post-16 education, post-18 education, language for adults, language training through workplaces and so forth. In addition, we may trace specific pathways within these sectors: from attitudes to progression, from resources to workforces, from pedagogy to accountability, with reference to macro, meso or micro levels.

The aim of this article is to consider some of the most critical factors at play in the fields of education policy and the Welsh language during the twenty-five years in question, seeking to analyse the policy development context as well as to assess the data regarding Welsh language education as a result of the devolution of powers to Wales.

Education and language planning

Education – particularly statutory education – is central to language policy and planning, whether as the official languages of states are presented as vehicles of

¹ The appropriate terms are used when referring to the organisations according to the period in question.

learning to populations that do not speak them, or in the context of reviving or maintaining minoritized languages (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Lainio et al., 2016). The importance of education to language planning is highlighted in the formative scholarly literature of the field, as seen in the work of Fishman (1991), as well as in legislation, statutory instruments, strategies such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of the Council of Europe (1992). Education policy is key in acquiring and passing on language to younger generations, socialising aspiring adults, developing workforces and creating linguistically cohesive communities or nations (Lainio et al., 2016).

The role of governments – the macro level – is crucial in language planning which drives and leads to formal language policies being designed and adopted (Liddicoat and Baldauf, 2008). This has been seen in education at local authority level in Wales. When the Welsh Assembly was established, one of the aspirations of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* was that this body would place Welsh as the natural respective language of Wales within a framework of official bilingualism throughout the country, as outlined in their publications *Popeth yn Gymraeg*, *Y Gymraeg ym Mhopeth* (1999) and *Deddf Iaith Newydd i'r Ganrif Newydd* (2001). This echoes the relationship between Basque and Spanish in the Autonomous Community that had been articulated in the Normalisation Law of the Basque Language 1992 (Jones, 2022) and one of the cornerstones of the normalisation of the Basque language in that legislature was the education system. With the creation of an elected body at the Welsh level for the first time in centuries, how, therefore, was policy developed in Welsh language education?

The role of education in minoritized language policy and planning

The key relationship between Education and Minoritized Language Planning was articulated by Colin H. Williams (2002: 95) at a conference in the early days of devolution:

The role of education, as a key agency of socialisation, has become central to the language struggle. It is the most fundamental feature of language revitalisation in Wales and has been very well documented. (Williams, 1998; Baker, 1993; Jones and Ghuman, 1995; Williams, 1999a)

This suggests that there is a strong case for combining the two policy areas in one ministerial portfolio. At the same time, there is a recognition that policy needs to consider factors beyond education to complement what is delivered through the education system, such as language acquisition and transfer, socialisation and language use, workforce development and the creation of linguistically cohesive communities. Liddicoat (2007: 12) notes:

Education does not itself mean that languages will come to be used, or even usable, in valued contexts within a society, other than admitting the language to the school context itself. In fact, by developing language capabilities that have little or no opportunity for use outside the classroom, they may further undermine the perceived prestige and value of the language.

Although the above quote is used in the context of Australia's indigenous languages, it is recognised as being relevant to Wales in a minoritized language context, where there is an undeniable reliance on the education system to meet ambitious targets for increasing the number of speakers, as seen in *Cymraeg 2050: Welsh Language Strategy* (Welsh Government, 2017a). This is further supported by research in specific areas of Wales which points to the lack of need and lack of practical opportunities to use Welsh outside of school (Hodges, 2009), particularly when the use of Welsh by pupils within school walls is already challenging (Thomas and Roberts, 2011).

Furthermore, Davies's work in her review *One Language For All* states that it is the eleventh hour for Welsh second language (Davies, 2013: 1), stating:

According to the evidence, this is a very tedious experience for large numbers of them [pupils studying Welsh second language] – they do not regard the subject as being relevant or of any value to them. They are not confident enough to use Welsh outside the classroom – the opportunities to do so are actually very limited – and there is no incentive therefore to learn the language.

In the above arguments, the significant relationship between Welsh language and Education is debunked, recognising that overarching linguistic planning in other key areas is necessary to lead to successful language outcomes in education policy. Similarly, it could be argued that linguistically successful education policies are necessary to enable effective language planning across other policy areas. In short, cohesive policies should be developed and implemented between the Welsh language, Education and other fields.

The development of the relationship between Welsh language and Education in the ministerial portfolio

Over the quarter of a century and during Wales's constitutional evolution, the journey of the Welsh language and Education policy areas can be followed by tracing the responsibilities of holders of the Education portfolio and the Welsh language portfolio over the years.² Table 1 below identifies the ministers who have been responsible for the Welsh language portfolio during devolution and Table 2 identifies the ministers who have had responsibility for the Education portfolio including statutory education in the same period.

These two tables demonstrate that very rarely during the devolution period have the two policy areas come together within the portfolio of a single minister or cabinet secretary. Indeed, the ministerial portfolio has only combined Education and the Welsh Language on three occasions – one of which was for a very short period – for a total of around five years over a period of twenty-five years.

Table 1: Ministers responsible for the Welsh language, their official roles and their time in post in the Senedd since devolution

| <i>Minister responsible for the Welsh language</i> | <i>Portfolio / Role³</i> | <i>Period</i> |
|--|--|-------------------------|
| Tom Middlehurst | <i>Education and Training</i> | May 1999–October 2000 |
| Jenny Randerson | <i>Culture, Welsh Language and Sport</i> | October 2000–April 2003 |

2 From 1999 to 2002, the Assembly was a single corporate body, with Secretaries as members of the Assembly's Executive Committee acting as portfolio holders. In 2002 the term Welsh Assembly Government was coined to describe the body responsible for the policies and actions of the Cabinet. In the Government of Wales Act 2006, the Welsh Government (including the First Minister of Wales, Welsh Ministers, Deputy Ministers and the Counsel-General) became responsible for the making and implementation of decisions, policy and secondary legislation (Welsh Parliament, 2021).

3 Note that the order of the wording of responsibilities differs in the Welsh version and the English version of the portfolio, e.g. Alun Davies, *Y Gymraeg a Dysgu Gydol Oes/Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language*.

The Development of Welsh Language Education since Devolution

| <i>Minister responsible for the Welsh language</i> | <i>Portfolio / Role³</i> | <i>Period</i> |
|--|--|---|
| Alun Pugh | <i>Culture, Sport and the Welsh Language</i> | May 2003–June 2007 |
| Carwyn Jones | <i>Education, Culture and the Welsh Language</i> | June–July 2007 |
| Rhodri Glyn Thomas | <i>Heritage</i> | July 2007–July 2008 |
| Alun Ffred Jones | <i>Heritage</i> | July 2008–May 2011 |
| Leighton Andrews | <i>Education and Skills (including the Welsh Language)</i> | May 2011–June 2013 |
| Carwyn Jones | <i>First Minister with responsibility for the Welsh Language</i> | June 2013–May 2016 |
| Alun Davies | <i>Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language</i> | May 2016–November 2017 |
| Eluned Morgan | <i>Welsh Language and Lifelong Learning International Relations and the Welsh Language Mental Health, Wellbeing and Welsh Language</i> | November 2017–May 2021 |
| Jeremy Miles | <i>Education and Welsh Language</i> | May 2021–March 2024 |
| Jeremy Miles | <i>Economy, Energy and the Welsh Language</i> | March 2024–July 2024 |
| Eluned Morgan | <i>Health, Social Care and the Welsh Language</i> | July 2024–submission of this article ⁴ |

As highlighted in the tables, and unlike Education, in this quarter of a century the Welsh language has not been a portfolio in its own right, but rather was combined with a range of other policy areas. This is arguably compatible with an attempt to respond to the narrative that Welsh needs to be mainstreamed horizontally across all policy areas. Similarly, it could be claimed that placing the Welsh language in the

4 This chapter was finalised during one of the most turbulent weeks in Welsh politics. A day after he introduced the Welsh Language and Education Bill, Jeremy Miles MS resigned from his role as Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and the Welsh Language along with two other Cabinet Secretaries and the Counsel General. Within hours Vaughan Gething MS declared that he was initiating the process of resigning as First Minister of Wales and two days later he announced that the Welsh language portfolio would be in the hands of the Health and Social Care Secretary, Eluned Morgan MS.

Table 2. Ministers responsible for Education, their official roles and their term in post in the Senedd since devolution

| <i>Minister responsible for Education</i> | <i>Role</i> | <i>Period</i> |
|---|--|---|
| Rosemary Butler | <i>Minister for pre-16 Education and Children</i> | May 1999–October 2000 |
| Jane Davidson | <i>Education and Lifelong Learning</i> | October 2000–June 2007 |
| Carwyn Jones | <i>Education, Culture and the Welsh Language</i> | June–July 2007 |
| Jane Hutt | <i>Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills</i> | July 2007–December 2009 |
| Leighton Andrews | <i>Children, Education and Lifelong Learning (2009–11) Education and Skills (including the Welsh Language) (2011–13)</i> | December 2009–June 2013 |
| Huw Lewis | <i>Education and Skills</i> | June 2013–May 2016 |
| Kirsty Williams | <i>Education</i> | May 2016–May 2021 |
| Jeremy Miles | <i>Welsh Language and Education</i> | May 2021–March 2024 |
| Lynne Neagle | <i>Education</i> | March 2024–submission time for this chapter |

First Minister's portfolio, as happened between 2013 and 2016, is an attempt to bring this policy area to the heart of Welsh political power.

It could be argued that there are also other factors behind the decisions made regarding the consolidation of portfolios in relation to the Welsh language and Education. These include the balance of responsibilities and the distribution of portfolios between the Labour Party and the parties or individual elected members that formed the government at different times.

During the first eight years of the Assembly, the Welsh language portfolio holder did not have communication skills in the language. However, as shown in Table 1, since 2007 all ministers who have been responsible for the Welsh language can communicate in the language, enabling them to discuss the portfolio in the language itself.

When considering the Welsh language skills of the Education portfolio holders since 2007,⁵ the two policy areas were combined only when the Education portfolio holders were Welsh-speakers. This pattern of political appointments suggests that the First Ministers of Wales from 2007 onwards have been of the view that the Welsh language portfolio cannot be given to those who do not speak the language. Consider also the recent transfer of the Welsh language to the Minister for Health and Social Services and not to the Minister for Education around the time of publication of the Welsh Language and Education Bill.

Therefore, one could consider the extent to which these factors relating to the distribution of ministerial portfolios has influenced the development of coherent policy between the fields of Education and the Welsh language.

Welsh Language and Education Strategies over the devolution period

In 2021, the Collaborative Research Network: Bilingual Education and the Welsh Language presented a Scoping Paper to the Welsh Government outlining the priorities for research in the field. It referenced over 30 strategic documents commissioned by the Government and by Senedd, or Assembly as it was previously known, Committees since devolution, where there was a clear focus on Welsh language and Education.

Among the most significant are the three strategic documents focusing on the Welsh language. *Iaith Pawb* was published in 2003 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2003) as an action plan that considered actions to support the Welsh language and try and promote bilingualism with the aim of increasing Welsh speakers by 5 per cent by 2011. However, despite these targets, the number of Welsh speakers fell between 2001 and 2011, down from 20.8 per cent to 19 per cent. This was followed in 2012 by *A Living Language: A Language for Living* (Welsh Government, 2012) which aimed to promote and facilitate the use of Welsh in everyday life in six specific areas: children

5 The One Wales Government was formed between Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru in July 2007. The Government of Wales Measure (2008) was passed. Both of these events could be interpreted as significant political and constitutional turning points in the devolved context.

and young people, the family, the community, the workplace, Welsh-language services and infrastructure. In 2011 came the publication of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 (Welsh Government, 2011), giving the Welsh language official status in Wales, and the establishment of the role of Welsh Language Commissioner. The Commissioner has legal powers to investigate cases brought before the Welsh Language Tribunal for failure by county councils to comply with laws and policies relating to the Welsh Language Standards Regulations 2015 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011.

In 2017, the Welsh Government's long-term strategy, *Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers* (Welsh Government, 2017a) was published, with the aim of doubling the number of Welsh speakers and doubling daily use of Welsh by 2050. However, the 2021 Census (Welsh Government, 2022c) saw a further decline in the number and percentage of Welsh speakers.⁶ In addition, recent statistics from the Annual Population Survey (Welsh Government, 2024dd) show around 44,100 fewer three-year-olds or older people being able to speak Welsh compared to last year. Dyfodol i'r laith (Evans, 2024) states that 50% of the Million speakers target goal cannot be reached by 2050 unless the effort to build more Welsh schools is tripled.

Furthermore, strategic documents focusing specifically on Welsh-medium education have been published, including the *Welsh-medium Education Strategy* (Welsh Government, 2010) along with a revised version (Welsh Government, 2016a) which set out the vision for an education and training system to enable people of all ages to develop their Welsh-medium skills. *Evaluation of the Welsh-medium Education Strategy* (Welsh Government, 2016a) showed support for the vision and aims of the strategy among officials (at national and local level) responsible for delivering it, and among stakeholders and practitioners. This was followed by *Welsh-medium Education Strategy: next steps* (Welsh Government, 2016b) which outlined the priorities for the development of Welsh-medium and Welsh language education during 2016–17, while a long-term policy for the language was developed. Next came *Taking Wales Forward 2016–2021* (Welsh Government, 2016ch), which set out the priorities for ensuring an 'ambitious and

6 The 2021 Census was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic period when schools were closed and it is argued that this has led to a reduction in the Welsh language skills of statutory education pupils (Estyn, 2021).

learning' Wales along with priorities for achieving this. It also stated that the programme for government would 'work towards one million people speaking the Welsh language by 2050' and committed to reshaping Welsh teaching in our schools to enable young people to utilise their Welsh language skills in wider society'. In 2017, Aled Roberts conducted a Review of the Welsh Language in Education Strategic Plans and published *Welsh in education: Action plan 2017–21* (Welsh Government, 2017b) in 2017, followed in 2019 by *Improving the Planning of Welsh-Medium Education – Recommendations of the Welsh in Education Strategic Advisory Board* (Welsh Government, 2019).

In the documents outlined here, there is an increased emphasis for all pupils to acquire language skills during their time in statutory education and be able to use of them outside and beyond school. The same emphasis can also be found in the *Curriculum for Wales* documents online (Welsh Government, 2022b; Welsh Government, 2024c). Donaldson's review (2015) led to the adoption and publication of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021). This act refers to the four purposes of the curriculum by law and one of the mandatory elements within the *Curriculum for Wales* is the Welsh language. In addition, the Curriculum refers to the learning continuum where the focus is on 'supporting each individual learner to make progress along the same continuum at an appropriate pace, ensuring that they are both supported and challenged to reach their potential' (Welsh Government, 2024a). It is also significant to this discussion that a focus on progress along the learning continuum also includes Welsh language skills (see Lovell, 2023).

The intention in this article is not to offer a critical analysis of all the strategic documentation referenced above, which in turn is a selection of all the documents that were published during the period. Rather the selection is a recognition of the areas and themes prioritised for policy and strategy development in Welsh medium education. To what extent is there truth in the *cliché*, as seen in other policy areas, that Wales is strong in its policies but weak in their implementation?

Data

When considering the longitudinal data available from the Welsh Government to track the number and percentage of schools in Wales according to their teaching medium, together with the number and percentage of pupils in those schools, it

appears that different categorisation systems⁷ have been used to designate the medium of schools in the period between 2003/04 and 2022/2023. This complicates the process of comparing and analysing the statistics, which should be providing unequivocal insights for researchers and policy planners alike to be able to evaluate the actual situation over a period of time.

However, the data below suggests (although there has been no consistency in the categories) that there has been no significant increase in the number or percentage of Welsh-medium schools between 2003/04 and 2022/23. The total number of schools fell from 1,871 to 1,463 during the two decades. There has been an increase in the percentage of bilingual schools but there has been no significant change in the percentage of Welsh-medium or English-medium schools.

When considering the number and percentage of learners in these schools, similar patterns are found. We see a decrease of 24,289 in the number of learners in the schools during the period, there is an increase of 7 per cent in the bilingual medium, a decrease of 6 per cent in the English medium and of 2 per cent in the Welsh medium.

These statistics also support comments made by the former chief executive of the Welsh Language Board, Meirion Prys Jones, back in 2017, when he noted that the Welsh language had suffered a 'lost decade' since devolution (ap Dafydd, 2017). These statistics can be compared with similar data in the context of teaching models by language in the Basque Country Autonomous Community. There, there was a decrease in Model A (Spanish medium with Basque as a subject) from 68 per cent of pupils in 1986 to 15 per cent by 2021, an increase in the same period in model D (Basque medium with Spanish as a subject) from 15 per cent to 67 per cent, along

7 Up to 2007/08 the following six categories are used: (1) Primary: Welsh is the only or main medium of instruction; (2) Primary: Welsh is used for part of the curriculum; (3) Primary: Welsh is taught only as a second language; (4) Secondary: Welsh-medium school; (5) Secondary: English-medium school; (6) Not applicable (Nursery and Special).

Table 3 and Table 4 interpret the data as follows: (1) and (4) Welsh medium; (2) Bilingual; (3) and (5) English medium.

Since 2008/09 the following ten categories are used: (1) (Welsh medium; (2) Dual stream; (3) Transitional; (4) Bilingual – AB; (5) Bilingual – BB; (6) Bilingual – CB; (7) Bilingual – CH; (8) Predominantly English medium but with significant use of Welsh; (9) English medium; (10) Not applicable (Nursery and Special).

Table 3 and Table 4 interpret the data as follows: (1) (Welsh medium; (2)-(8) Bilingual; (9) English medium.

Table 3. Schools by local authority, region and Welsh medium type 2003/04–2022/23

| | <i>Welsh medium</i> | <i>Bilingual</i> | <i>English medium</i> | <i>Excluded</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|---------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 2003/04 | 502 (27%) | 58 (3%) | 1,256 (67%) | 55 (3%) | 1,871 |
| 2012/13 | 434 (26%) | 117 (7%) | 1,043 (63%) | 62 (4%) | 1,656 |
| 2022/23 | 378 (26%) | 96 (7%) | 944 (65%) | 45 (3%) | 1,463 |

Source: Schools by local authority, region and Welsh medium type, StatsWales, Welsh Government. (Welsh Government, 2023a; Welsh Government, 2023b)

Table 4. Number of learners by school medium of teaching 2003/04–2022/23

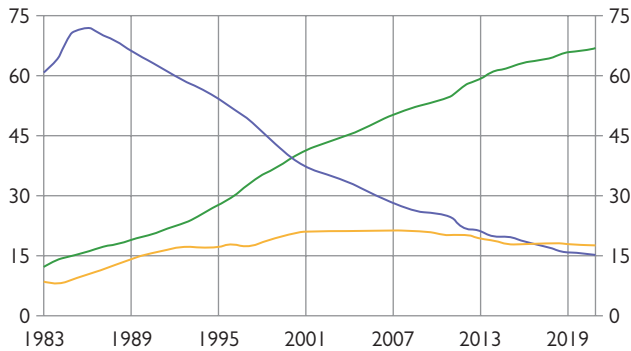
| | <i>Welsh medium</i> | <i>Bilingual</i> | <i>English medium</i> | <i>Excluded</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|---------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 2003/04 | 91,300 (19%) | 8,930 (2%) | 389,340 (79%) | 4,591 (1%) | 494,161 |
| 2012/13 | 73,888 (16%) | 42,776 (9%) | 342,449 (74%) | 5,755 (1%) | 464,868 |
| 2022/23 | 77,922 (17%) | 42,160 (9%) | 343,700 (73%) | 6,090 (1%) | 469,872 |

Source: Pupils by local authority, region and Welsh medium type, StatsWales, Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2023a; Welsh Government, 2023b)

with an increase in model B (Basque and Spanish bilingual medium) from 12 per cent to 17 per cent, with Model D (Basque medium) overtaking Model A (Spanish medium) at the turn of the century.

It should be noted that this increase is in this administration of the Basque language territory and not in the other Basque language territories in Navarre and in France, where Spanish and French alike remain the main learning mediums for the vast majority of the pupils. In drawing comparisons between Wales and the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, however, some structural differences between them must be acknowledged, such as the economic power and capital organisation of the Basque people, the persecution of the language under Franco's dictatorship and

Figure 1: Learners in education centres (excluding universities) by Language Model in the Autonomous Community (Basque Country).



Blue line = Model A: Spanish medium with Basque as a subject

Orange line = Model B: Bilingual medium

Green line = Model D: Basque medium with Spanish as a subject

Source: Eustat, Basque Country Government 2021

the priorities of their political parties over the past forty years, and its current social power as manifested with the language requirements in public sector jobs. Nevertheless, this comparison is appropriate – and among the most demographically suitable between minoritized languages – to consider levels of investment and governance arrangements. Relevant to the discussion of this chapter, the responsibility for strategic and operational planning in education lies at the Government level of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, and is not the responsibility of individual local authorities. This has not been the case in Wales during the first quarter century of devolution. With the publication of the bill, there is an attempt to try to address this aspect.

The Welsh Language and Education Bill (2024): the way forward?

According to the Welsh Government, the main provisions of the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill (Welsh Government, 2024b) will provide a statutory basis for

the target of having one million Welsh speakers by 2050, as well as other targets relating to the use of the language, including in the workplace and socially (Welsh Government, 2024e). It will establish a standard method for describing Welsh language ability based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020). It will designate statutory language categories for schools, along with requirements relating to the amount of Welsh language education provided (including a minimum amount), and Welsh language learning goals for each category.

It will link the linguistic planning carried out at the three levels as follows:

- at a national level (by placing a duty on Welsh Ministers to produce a National Framework for Welsh Language Education and Learning Welsh),
- at local authority level (by placing a duty on local authorities to prepare Welsh in Education Local Strategic Plans), and
- at school level (by placing a duty on schools to prepare Welsh language education delivery plans).

It will also establish a statutory body, the National Institute for Learning Welsh.

In setting the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as a standard method (B2) for describing learners' Welsh language skills when leaving statutory education, this vision is compatible with the foundation of the continuum of learning presented in the Curriculum for Wales. Putting language categories for schools on a statutory basis to provide stability to the categorisation and imposing a minimum requirement for Welsh language education required in all schools, with the expectation of seeing an increase – not a decrease – over time, can be seen as steps forward.

However, significant challenges remain, not least the lack of capacity in the education workforce (see Welsh Government, 2022a; Welsh Government, 2024d; Lovell, 2023, p. 89). Overcoming this requires a commitment to invest in increasing teacher skills, and attracting and retaining a bilingual workforce in all sectors.

In resetting the chain of accountability, between schools, local authorities and Welsh Ministers, this bill arguably seeks to address one of the main stumbling blocks for progress in Welsh-medium and bilingual education in Wales over the past twenty-five years. Such a change through a legislative process takes several years to set in motion. Time will tell whether it is through this Bill that the necessary trajectory to achieve one million speakers by 2050 will be reached.

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Developments in inclusive education and additional learning needs in Wales

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ABSTRACT

In relation to inclusive education and additional learning needs, developments in Wales reflect global trends elsewhere. Whilst there has been a longstanding commitment to inclusive education in schools, progress towards this has been slow, accompanied by growth in special education and persistence of belief in segregated practices as in the best interests of some learners. This chapter explores developments in the area of inclusive education and additional learning needs in Wales over the last two decades. First, we consider the policy context, specifically the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales and its alignment with the new system for learners with additional learning needs. Following this, we focus on practice and the response to educational reform by schools and local authorities. We conclude that systems for inclusion and learning support currently being developed in Wales have the potential for enhancing well-being and achievement for a wider group of learners if certain conditions are in place.

Keywords: inclusion, additional learning needs, curriculum reform

Introduction

There has been widespread commitment globally to the agenda of inclusive education, seen as a way of ensuring good educational outcomes for all learners, especially those

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who are most disadvantaged (Slee, 2018). This commitment, however, has been hampered by a persistent lack of clarity about what inclusive education means, both as a concept and in practice (Hernández-Saca *et al.*, 2023). Inclusion has been defined as the education of learners from marginal groups within their local schools, but this association with placement has raised issues about the participation of learners in academic and social life and their sense of belonging (Ainscow, 2020). Inclusive education often means an emphasis on the development of schools and teachers, with a focus on values that support and shape certain kinds of practices (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020). Inclusion is a movement away from the idea of a 'norm' towards a wider consideration of the diversity of learners and ways of responding effectively to everyone in a school setting (Florian and Graham, 2014). Inclusive practice has been described as an inquiry stance that allows teachers to problem-solve around issues of teaching and learning, and to question basic assumptions that underpin practice (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010). Collaboration and constructive dialogue between professionals, learners and families is seen as an important part of a 'reculturing process' (Woodcock and Hardy, 2017) that transforms whole schools as interactive and dynamic systems.

Despite the development of this understanding, it is apparent that progress towards inclusive education has been slow around the world (OECD, 2020a). Explanations for this are varied and wide-ranging. Policy contexts have been found to promulgate inconsistent messages about enabling environments alongside deficit views of the learner (Lehane, 2017). The discourse of inclusion has been appropriated by educational movements that seek to segregate learners (Slee, 2019), and it is notable that the agenda of inclusion has been accompanied by exclusionary practices and the growth of special education (Rix, 2015). It is apparent too that there has been inadequate focus on practice, for example, on the role of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for inclusive education (Nilholm, 2021). Research also suggests that local contexts often intersect with the rhetoric of inclusion to enact policy in ways that undermine inclusive principles (Artiles and Kozleski, 2016).

To a great extent, developments in Wales reflect this global picture of inclusive education. *The learning country*, which set the policy agenda for Welsh education in the first decade of this century, made a commitment to the development of inclusion in schools, though conceptualised this as concerned with learners with special educational needs (SEN) and disability, but also as the raising of standards for a wider group of learners (National Assembly for Wales, 2001, pp. 18; 62). Twenty years on,

developing inclusive schools remains an aspiration in policy documents (Welsh Government, 2020a). Alongside a commitment to inclusive schools, Wales has seen a growth in its special education sector, with numbers of pupils in special schools increasing year-on-year for the past 10 years (Welsh Government, 2023a), and 529 local authority designated 'special classes' are currently operating in mainstream schools (Welsh Government, 2024). Research suggests that 'soft' exclusions within mainstream schools is an expanding though hidden area of practice in Wales (Power and Taylor, 2020). In terms of inconsistency of messaging about inclusive education – enabling learning environments for all learners versus a focus on deficits in some learners – Welsh education policy is illustrative here too (Knight and Crick, 2022). There also appears to be a policy-practice gap with schools developing their own practices in consideration of local as opposed to national alignment (Estyn, 2023).

Yet it is apparent that widespread educational reform, which is currently taking place in Wales, particularly the introduction of the new curriculum, holds promise for inclusive education. In its emphasis on high-quality teaching, teacher development and collaborative practices, developments in Wales appear to promote an approach to education that could be described as naturally inclusive (Welsh Government, 2020b). The aim of this chapter is to explore these developments with reference first to the policy context and the introduction of a new curriculum but also new system of additional learning needs (ALN), and secondly, to practice and the response to reform by schools. Finally, we consider some potential problems in the education system for inclusive education in Wales and outline some possible future directions.

Developments in the policy context

Alongside changes to teacher education, qualifications and standards, educational reforms in Wales include the development of a new curriculum and changes to the statutory SEN/ALN system. These developments aim to promote high standards and aspirations for all learners by addressing inequities in education, removing barriers to participation and supporting all learners, especially those who are disadvantaged (Welsh Government, 2020a). The newly introduced *Curriculum for Wales* is considered the 'cornerstone' of educational reform (OECD, 2020b) and is seen in some measure as a response to successive disappointing Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (Ware, 2019). The new curriculum

aims to broaden learning, support schools to be more flexible in their approaches, and provide education leaders and practitioners with greater agency to innovate and be creative in what they teach and how they respond to learners (Welsh Government, 2019, pp. 3).

The reform to the statutory system of ALN, which is also taking place, has been anticipated for many years (Ware, 2014). Numerous reviews, evaluations and consultations into the effectiveness of the SEN system have taken place throughout successive Welsh Assemblies, with inquiries frequently identifying an unsatisfactory system (Dauncey, 2016). Recommendations for changes to the system were identified as early as 2002 and continued well into the subsequent decade. Persistent weaknesses of the SEN system related to stigmatising terminology underpinned by the medical model of disability, challenges with the continuity of provision for those not of school-age, and a complex, costly and bureaucratic assessment process which often led to delayed support (Welsh Government, 2014). Variation was also frequently acknowledged between local authorities regarding the level of provision offered to learners and how they interpreted the SEN Code of Practice. Other important failings related to parent distrust throughout the system (Welsh Government, 2014; Welsh Government, 2018a). Interestingly, the surfeit of challenges noted were not unique to Wales; similar difficulties were also persistently identified in the English SEN system (DfE, 2011; Lamb, 2009) and have also led to reform.

The Welsh Government has introduced legislation for reform of the ALN system under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (2018), along with support for its implementation in the form of the ALN Code for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) and ALN transformation programme (Welsh Government, 2018b). Currently, schools in Wales are working between the existing SEN system (phased in from September 2021) and the new ALN system and the transition is due to be completed in 2025 (Welsh Government, 2023b). The new system seeks to preserve the strengths of the old SEN system whilst addressing problematic features, with the broad goal of providing an inclusive system in which all children and young people can reach their full potential (Welsh Government 2018b). Key features include the creation of a single framework supporting children and young people from 0–25 years, implementation of an integrated, collaborative process of assessment, planning and monitoring to aid timely and effective support, and greater transparency for information, advice, and appeals (Welsh Government, 2014). Other significant features include the legal adoption of the term ‘ALN’ and the

protection of provision through statutory individual developments plans (IDPs). To aid these changes the ALN Code was developed to set out mandatory requirements and guidance for settings, agencies and professionals supporting learners with ALN. This includes the additional learning needs coordinator (ALNCO) and other key roles to aid multiagency working (Welsh Government 2021).

In considering these two reform programmes, there appears to be a degree of alignment, but a number of tensions are apparent. Curriculum for Wales notably focuses on flexible, high-quality teaching and the development of teachers, alongside increased emphasis on learner voice and participation, and improved community practices (Welsh Government, 2020b). Progression is seen to depend on the actual progress of individual learners rather than according to pre-ordained stages of development. The curriculum is seen by school leaders as offering greater potential for flexibility, therefore, and for embedding inclusivity in classrooms, alongside individual supports (Welsh Government, 2023b). Greater responsibility for all learners is more clearly that of ordinary classroom practitioners under new arrangements (Welsh Government, 2021). ALN reform references these progressive elements within its documentation, drawing on the same language of equity, inclusion and children's rights. Closer inspection of policy documents relating to ALN and curricular reform, however, suggests that the two systems are not that aligned, with minimal reference made to inclusion and ALN in curriculum documentation and a continued focus on individual learner deficits in the system for ALN (Knight and Crick, 2022). Indeed, the 'parallel' implementation will be important to evaluate in greater detail moving forward (Welsh Government, 2023b). It has been recognised that for real change, there is a need for greater collective agency for inclusion throughout all parts of the education system. This needs more integration of reform programmes and a movement away from a belief in hierarchies of learners within schools where groups of learners are defined by perceived learning capacity (Conn and Davis, 2024).

Developments in practice in schools and local authorities

Following introduction of the programme for educational reform, Wales has seen a reduction in the overall number of pupils identified as having ALN or SEN, although as noted by Estyn (2023), there has been an increase in the number of pupils with a

statutory plan, either through an IDP or a statement of SEN over the same period. As of January 2023, 63,089 pupils were identified with ALN or SEN in maintained schools (13.4 per cent of all pupils) in comparison to 74,661 (15.8 per cent) in February 2022 and 92,688 (19.5 per cent) pupils in April 2021 prior to implementation of ALN reforms (Welsh Government, 2023b). A reduction in the proportion of pupils receiving specialist provision was anticipated, but what was less expected was the emergence of inconsistencies in practice in schools and local authorities. In a recent thematic review of the implementation of ALN reform, Estyn (2023) reports that whilst many schools indicated a generally secure understanding of the definition of ALN, some local authorities and schools were unclear of the legal definitions and what this meant in practice. Local authorities and schools described using their own definitions and were waiting for further clarification following tribunal outcomes. Some schools and local authorities expressed dissatisfaction that the ALN Code does not provide clear enough practical guidance on how to apply the definitions and, as a result, relied upon local guidance rather than the Code.

Such findings help explain what Estyn (2023) suggest as evidence of schools developing their own terminology to categorise the support and provision offered in practice. Whilst previous SEN categories of 'School Action', 'School Action Plus' and 'Statement' are being removed, schools indicate using terminology such as 'universal', 'universal plus', 'targeted', 'specialist' and, 'specialist including multi-agency support', a potential rebadging of previous ways of working (Estyn, 2023). Estyn further report a lack of a common understanding as to what these terms constitute, what provision is offered within these categories and a lack of clarity about whether provision constitutes additional learning provision.

Although the number of learners identified as ALN has decreased, research into the role of the ALNCo indicates they have oversight over a much wider range of learners than those on the ALN register or under investigation for this. ALNCos describe having oversight of all learners within their setting and getting to know anyone who might require extra support, regardless of whether they met the ALN criteria (Conn *et al.*, in press). Taken together with the development of alternative categories of support as described above, this suggests a lack of clarity in relation to reforms, or possibly confusion around the operation of dual SEN and ALN systems whilst the transformation programme comes into effect, or again, an on-going resistance to change in practice. Indeed, there is some evidence of early lack of support for reform of the ALN system by professionals and parents. A consultation

entitled 'Statements or something better?' (Welsh Government, 2008) found that, although there was overwhelming belief that the SEN system was not working effectively, there remained a consensus that the system already offered most of what was desirable in a statutory framework. A further consultation on the 2014 White Paper legislative proposals for ALN also found a level of disagreement amongst stakeholders. Of the five of questions about the proposed changes set out in the consultation, for example, more respondents disagreed with the statements than agreed in all cases (Dauncey, 2016).

What is of significance are tensions between perpetuation of a separate system of support in schools and the aims of the new Curriculum for Wales. This places emphasis upon 'raising the aspirations for all learners' and guidance has been developed to 'support schools to design inclusive school curricula' (Welsh Government, 2020b). However, a study by Knight *et al.* (2022) suggests that, whilst teachers subscribed to the ideal of inclusion, they also expressed limits for learners with ALN in mainstream classes relating to behavioural issues, training and preparedness, and physical and financial constraints. Inclusion requires the operation of an 'ethic of everybody' (Hart, 2012) and a widening of what is available within ordinary classrooms. Knight *et al.* (2022) found a level of implicit 'othering' of learners with ALN by teachers, some viewing these learners as not naturally belonging within mainstream education. This reinforces the marginalisation of learners, despite the promotion of inclusion within curriculum, through a persistent belief in segregated practices as being in the best interests of some learners.

The problem here is that marginalisation of learners with ALN has the potential for negative impact on the attainment of this group. As previously noted, the overall number of pupils identified as having ALN or SEN in Wales has reduced, but a study by Knight *et al.* (forthcoming) suggests that identification has been far more pervasive within the Welsh education system over the last two decades. This study found that, of children born in 2002/3, 47.9 per cent – almost half of all learners – were identified with SEN/ALN at some point between Reception to year 11, challenging the notion that SEN/ALN is an issue affecting a minority. Whilst these findings underscore the interplay of a range of factors influencing the identification and impact of SEN/ALN, they highlight that identification of SEN was the most influential predictor of learner attainment with an increased proportion of time spent diagnosed with SEN having a corresponding decrease in the likelihood of achieving nationally expected educational outcomes, for example, a learner

identified with SEN during their KS2 education having a 97 per cent reduction in the likelihood of meeting national expectations.

There are indications of encouraging developments however. From research to date, a key theme emerging is the development of cluster working across regions. Estyn (2023) report many schools have developed positive collaborative approaches with local authorities and further highlight the importance of cluster working for ALNCos. This has supported schools in implementing ALN reforms through the sharing of practice and specialist resources, though Estyn notes that the sustainability of a co-ordinated approach to cluster working at this time is unclear. Cluster working between schools appears to have supported collaboration around implementing ALN reforms (Welsh Government, 2023b), whilst evidence suggests that ALNCos regularly seek advice from their network groups to ensure practice in their settings is regionally aligned (Conn *et al.*, in press).

Schools and local authorities are united in their enthusiasm for person-centred planning (PCP) as an initiative that pre-dates but runs alongside reform of the ALN system and introduction of the Curriculum for Wales. Relationships between schools and parents have been described as strengthened as a result of the use of a range of PCP practices and there is evidence of PCP as an approach aligning home and school in relation to priorities for a learner (Conn *et al.*, in press; Estyn, 2023). Estyn (2023) cautions, however, that inconsistencies in practice remain including identifying effective approaches to learning support and challenges related to increased workload in particular for ALNCos in organising and administering PCP meetings.

Finally, there is a suggestion that schools feel confident in their practice relating to ALN (Estyn, 2023). It is possible that professional development opportunities as part of the ALN transformation programme had impact in upskilling practitioners along with initiatives, such as the national MA Education (Wales), offering opportunities for teachers to develop knowledge and practice. However, an explanation may lie in the fact that school practice has changed very little for learners with SEN/ALN despite reforms. Conn and Hutt (2020) found strong belief amongst school practitioners that arrangements for ALN learners would continue largely in their previous form following reform, and that this was underpinned by the language of ability and associated practices. The current situation as surmised by Conn and Davis (2024) is one where despite apparently real change being enacted at policy level, less change may have taken place in practice.

Conclusions and future directions

The question we would like to raise is whether the systems for inclusion and learning support currently being developed in Wales are likely to result in enhanced well-being and achievement for a wider group of learners. It is not clear that the progressive aims of the reform programme will be realised given that, as Estyn (2023) notes, there is a lack of joined up thinking at policy and practice levels to integrate Curriculum for Wales and the new ALN system. The historical developments that we have outlined above, in relation to the over-identification of SEN in Wales and the negative impact of this on attainment, suggests not. It is clear from research that there is a problem with categorising learners in terms of inflexible groupings and the development of negative learner identities (Francis *et al.*, 2017), something that has also been found within the Welsh context (Conn *et al.*, 2024).

However, developments in Wales are strongly influenced by developments in education systems around the world, most notably perhaps, the non-prescriptive, teacher-developed curricula of Scotland, New Zealand and the Netherlands (Sinnema *et al.*, 2020). It is possible to identify international education systems that successfully support a large number of learners by operating a low threshold for obtaining additional input. In Finland, for example, the 'everyman additional need service' provides large numbers of learners with short-term support that is viewed as preventative rather than stigmatising (Graham and Jahnukainen, 2011). Assessment within the primary phase is focused on whole school populations and important practices include co-teaching, catch-up work, the teaching of small groups and special education teachers retrained to understand how to address additional support in the context of mainstream classrooms. If this is the system that is currently being created in Wales then the future looks promising. The prospect is one of high-quality, effective support that is often short-term and applied in ways that do not marginalise learners. If, however, the system continues to focus on hierarchies of learners and a dual system of mainstream and specialist education, then perhaps the future will reflect the past and may not be quite so promising.

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Are we nearly there yet? Twenty-five years of initial teacher education policy in Wales

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ABSTRACT

Initial teacher education (ITE) policy in Wales over the past twenty-five years has, in many ways, reflected wider global concerns around the need to produce sufficient high-quality teachers to ensure that pupil outcomes are comparable with those of other nations, in order to enable Wales to remain economically competitive. Having inherited the legacy of Westminster ITE policies in 1999, there was no sudden move by the Welsh Government to reform existing provision, but three distinct ITE reviews over the decade from 2005 to 2015 have led to significant changes both in the structure of ITE in Wales, and the pedagogical approaches underpinning all programmes. We examine each of these three sets of reforms in relation to the distinct context, content and processes involved, as well the key policy actors, and discuss the evolution of ITE policy-making over the twenty-five years since devolution.

Keywords: initial teacher education, teacher education policy, teacher education in Wales, policy reform in Wales

Introduction

When taking the long view of initial teacher training (ITT) or initial teacher education (ITE)¹ policy-making in Wales over the past twenty-five years, it seems clear that the approach taken by the Welsh Government has not been immune to wider global influences. Such influences have driven widespread policy reform in many countries across the world (Darling-Hammond and Lieberman, 2012; Kosnik *et al.*, 2016; Menter, 2019), with these various reforms often demonstrating features of what Sahlberg (2011) has called the Global Education Reform Movement (or GERM), characterised by a focus on high-stakes accountability, a competitive market-driven approach to education, increased moves towards standardisation and, in terms of school education, a focus on raising achievement in core subjects. The driver for reform has, in many cases, been the perceived imperative to improve a country's performance in international tests, most noticeably the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Cochran-Smith (2021) outlines the way in which success in these international test scores is understood by policy makers to be the key to a nation's success within a global economy. Improvement in a country's PISA ranking is, so the argument goes, determined by the quality of individual teachers which is, in turn, determined by the quality of teacher education. The result is that teacher education (and particularly ITE) has become 'a site of struggle internationally' (Ellis *et al.*, 2019, p. 101). Tatto summarises the way in which this approach is realised, arguing that:

[A]s the nation state has taken more interest in teachers and their education as a possible vehicle to increase education's quality, it has in many cases also taken charge of teacher education reform using monitoring and accountability measures and performance standards as mechanisms to justify or jump-start drastic changes. (Tatto, 2006, p. 234)

Wales's nearest neighbour, England, has adopted a series of successive ITE reforms which have been well documented within the literature (see, for example, Childs and Menter, 2013; Ellis and Childs, 2024; Spendlove, 2024; Mutton *et al.*, 2021; Mutton and Burn, 2024), although the nature of these reforms (the deliberate

¹ In Wales, the term 'initial teacher training' (ITT) was replaced with 'initial teacher education and training' (ITET) and then initial teacher education (ITE). ITE is generally used throughout this chapter, except where one of the other terms is required for clarity or when using the name of specific policy documents.

marginalisation of university teacher education, the pursuance of alternative routes to qualification, increasing central control over the structure and content of ITE programmes) has led to England being seen as something of an ‘outlier’ even within the wider context of international policy and particularly within the UK (Loughran and Menter, 2019). The retention of the name ‘initial teacher training’ by policy makers implies a certain view about the process by which new teachers are educated when compared with those countries, such as Wales, which have replaced the word ‘training’ with ‘education’. Wales has, by contrast with England, taken a very different approach over the last twenty-five years. So, in what way specifically has ITE policy making in Wales evolved since devolution and what have been the key policy drivers during this period?

ITE policy in Wales since devolution – an overview

When the National Assembly for Wales took over responsibility for teacher education in 1999 there was a general continuation of the policies and practices that had, up until that time, been determined by the Westminster government’s Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), previously the Department for Education (DFE), and the Welsh Office. The main features of these policies were: an increasing focus on the nature of the ITE curriculum; revision of the Standards for the Award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS); the role of schools in ITE, and the promotion of partnership working; and the development of alternative (employment-based) routes into teaching. In terms of partnership working, it was the implementation of Government Circulars in 1992 and 1993 that had brought about a statutory requirement for higher education institutions (HEIs) to enter into formal partnership arrangements with schools, with the expectation that the latter would take joint responsibility for the planning of programmes and for the ‘selection, training and assessment of students’ (Department for Education, 1992: para. 14). Bassett (2003) identifies some of the challenges of implementing the new requirements in Wales (including the issue of adequate resourcing) and raises a number of important questions for the Welsh Assembly Government of the day as it was about to embark on a consultation around potential revisions to the QTS Standards. Bassett (2003) highlights, moreover, that the initial consultation document signalled the expectation that, except in relation to specific issues such as the Welsh language, all ITE

programme requirements and any revision to the QTS Standards would be broadly similar to the requirements that were currently in place in England.

During this period, it was a number of reports following Estyn inspections of individual ITE providers in Wales that highlighted concerns both about the quality of school-university partnerships and the lack of apparent preparedness for teaching of some trainees² as they completed their ITE programmes (Grigg and Egan, 2020), prompting the first of three major reviews of ITE over the next 10 years. The first of these reviews was carried out by a team led by John Furlong, and its 36 recommendations (Furlong et al., 2006) resulted in, among other things, the establishment of three regional centres across Wales, along with significant reductions in the number of trainees accepted each year (particularly for primary teaching, where it was recommended that numbers be reduced by 50 per cent). The second review, again triggered to some extent by Estyn concerns about the quality of ITE provision but also by Wales's relatively poor performance in the most recent set of PISA results, was carried out by Ralph Tabberer in 2012, who judged that there had been slow progress in developing a more effective and more coherent approach to the training of teachers in Wales. Tabberer's report (2013) begins by setting the review within the context of the second McKinsey Report (Barber and Mourshead, 2009) and draws heavily on a series of OECD publications (Musset, 2010; Schleicher, 2013), thus demonstrating the influence of global factors in determining the report's fifteen recommendations. One of these recommendations was that the Welsh Government should 'appoint a senior adviser with specific responsibility for ITT' (2013: 18), which it duly did with the appointment of John Furlong to the role in 2014. Furlong carried out his second review of ITE in Wales the following year and the subsequent report, *Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers* (Furlong, 2015), resulted in widespread systemic change, the rationale for which Furlong set out elsewhere (Furlong, 2016). The report produced nine recommendations, closely linked to a number of options for the Welsh Government to consider, resulting in a revised set of criteria for accreditation that all ITE providers would be required to meet, a revised set of Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (PSTL), an enhanced role for schools in ITE partnerships, and an increased emphasis on research and

2 We have used the term trainee where this reflects the terminology used in policy documentation at the time. The term 'student teacher' is also generally used, and has been the preferred designation during the recent reforms.

enquiry within teacher education programmes. Kirsty Williams, the Minister for Education at the time, signalled the link between high-quality teacher education and the delivery of the new Curriculum for Wales, saying that:

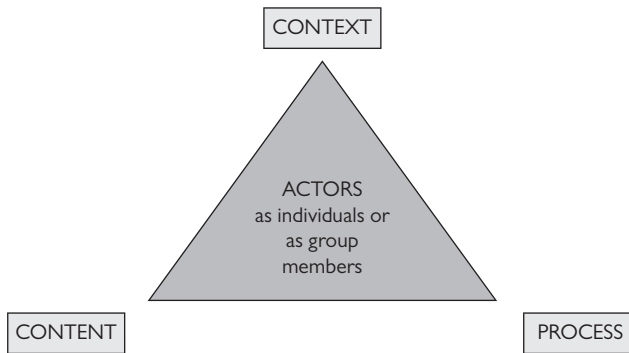
All teachers need to develop the right teaching and assessment skills to enable them to use the new curriculum to support learning and teaching successfully. (Williams, 2017, Cabinet Statement)

Central to these reforms was one key document – the *Criteria for the accreditation of initial teacher education programmes in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2018) which set out both the vision for teacher education in Wales, and the means by which this is to be realised. Furlong (2016) was clear that collaborative partnerships (Furlong *et al.*, 2000) were at the heart of this reconceptualised vision, with programmes required to be underpinned by clear principles and an approach to teacher learning that required theory and practice to be fully integrated within a model of research-informed clinical practice (Burn and Mutton, 2015). Following this round of ITE reform in Wales, those who successfully achieved accreditation against the new criteria began to deliver their revised programmes from September 2019 onwards. All providers have subsequently been required to apply to the Education Workforce Council (the body responsible for ITE provider accreditation in Wales) for re-accreditation against the ‘refreshed’ criteria for ITE in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023) in order to continue providing ITE programmes after the expiry of their initial period of accreditation.

Methods

Our analysis draws on policy documentation produced by the Welsh Government and others between 1999 and 2024 that relates directly to ITE during the three key points of review and reform (see Appendix I for a full list). These policy documents fall into two main categories: first the reports of the three key policy reviews that have taken place (Furlong *et al.*, 2006; Tabberer, 2013; Furlong, 2015); and second Welsh Government publications and related ministerial statements. Using a ‘mainstream approach’ (Browne *et al.*, 2019: 1034), that is to say, one that addresses: the values at stake; which voices are heard; and how political priority is generated, we draw on Walt and Gilson’s (1994) policy triangle which is predicated on the idea

Figure 1. A model for policy analysis (adapted from Walt and Gilson, 1994).



‘that an understanding of policy should be informed by an analysis of policy context, content, process and actors’ (Browne *et al.*, 2019, pp. 1036-7). Walt and Gilson present their model (originally designed for the analysis of health policy) as a triangle in which context, content and process are each shown at a different point of the triangle, within which policy actors interact with all three areas (see Figure 1).

Three ITE policy moments

The Furlong Review, 2005

The Terms of Reference for the 2005 review of ITE in Wales indicate that the focus was primarily on addressing issues of capacity and the supply of new teachers within Wales in order to meet the needs of Welsh schools. At the time, the fact that a significant number of trainees were leaving ITE programmes without having secured a post in Wales was of concern not least because of the resource issues involved. The report (Furlong *et al.*, 2006) states that figures for the previous four years indicated that those securing a teaching post in Wales after qualification ranged between 28 per cent and 43 per cent for primary, and between 54 per cent and 57 per cent for secondary, although employment statistics by individual provider did not seem to be available. As in England, there was also government interest in exploring, through

the review, the potential for developing alternative routes to achieving QTS, such as the Graduate Teacher Programme or the Registered Teacher Programme, in order to increase the supply of teachers in shortage areas, particularly some secondary school subjects. Finally, the review was charged with looking at issues around quality of provision across all programmes. The wider context of the review was the vision for education in Wales set out by Jane Davidson, Minister for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills in the policy document *The Learning Country* (National Assembly for Wales, 2001), which Daugherty and Elwyn Jones (2002) argue 'represents the first fruits of policy development from the Assembly administration in the new era of political devolution' (109). This was followed five years later by *The Learning Country: Vision into Action* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006), which acknowledged that:

improving the quality of initial training, induction and continuous professional development of teachers and post-16 education and training staff has an important part to play in achieving our goals. (p. 17)

The ITE policy context was therefore situated within the wider ambition to improve education provision (and particularly school provision) across Wales, but also reflecting the inherent assumption that education (and teacher education) policy in Wales needed to diverge from the legacy of policies established by the Westminster government (Rees, 2007). The report of the review (Furlong *et al.*, 2006) highlighted what appeared to be fairly widespread concerns around both quality and quality assurance within and across programmes but was also clear that ITE provision in Wales had to develop a different approach to that being followed by the English government at the time. The authors were therefore keen to frame the problem not as one of quality control, but instead as one of the nature of the ITE curriculum and partnership working. The following quotation from the report is lengthy, but encapsulates the thinking behind many of the review's recommendations. It argues that the problem needs to be re-framed so that it focuses on:

the challenges facing HEIs and schools in working together to develop high quality school-based teacher education and training. Above all, this means developing the school-based component of the ITT curriculum that currently is commonly viewed and referred to as 'school placement' or 'school experience'. While the Standards provide a framework of learning outcomes and a means by which the competence of trainees may be assessed, they do not constitute a curriculum. An ITT curriculum embraces both what needs to be learned and

the learning processes that will facilitate that learning. The priority task, we believe therefore, is to develop a planned, structured curriculum for ITT that covers the trainees' experience in schools as well as in the college. We are firmly of the view that issues of quality control and assurance are secondary to the development of rich learning opportunities within the system. (Furlong *et al.*, 2006, p. 71)

While the review addressed many other areas (funding, alternative routes into teaching; induction provision, revision of the QTS Standards), it had two radical recommendations. First that there should be a significant reduction in trainee numbers over a period of five years – a 50 per cent reduction in primary and a 25 per cent reduction in secondary. Second, that ITE provision in Wales should be totally re-organised and that:

Wales should establish three main Schools of Education and that HEFCW should, in the future, assign ITT numbers to each of these three Schools with a view to ensuring strong, regionally based provision that meets the national need. (Recommendation 14)

Most of the recommendations outlined in the report were broadly accepted by the Minister for Education, albeit with some provisos.

The review itself was set up to be independent, evidence-based and was to be carried out in a consultative and collaborative way, eliciting a wide range of stakeholder views (as evidenced in Annex B of the report which outlines all of the review activities). Those commissioned to carry out the review subsequently produced an analytic account of their experiences (Furlong *et al.*, 2007) in which they highlight the complexity of the policy review process and point out:

a paradox in policy analysis, arising from a mismatch between notions of how the policy process should work and its actual messy, uncertain, unstable and essentially political realities. (p. 117)

Their account reveals the tensions inherent in 'rational' policy making and the often competing interests of those involved in the process, confirming Cairney's assertion that 'comprehensive rationality and the policy cycle' is something of a 'fiction', to be understood as an 'ideal-type to compare with more realistic stories of complexity and unpredictable policymaking' (p. 201). While Furlong *et al.* argue that their review did provide 'an opportunity for a wider range of "voices" to be heard in the policy debate' (p. 130) they also acknowledge the influence on the process of other actors, such as 'civil servants (especially the Inspectorate), professional organizations and

trade unions and local education authorities' (p. 130) in what was recognised to be a high stakes exercise.

The Tabberer Review, 2011

What, then, led the Welsh Government to carry out a further ITE review just seven years later? In terms of content, the remit of this second review makes clear that it was to have a very different focus: not the rationalisation of provision in order to address issues of over-capacity (training too many teachers for the needs of Welsh schools), as had been the case in 2005, but rather addressing issues around:

- a) the quality and consistency of teaching, training and assessment in ITT
- b) ITT course structure and the coverage of specific issues in ITT (Tabberer, 2013, p. 4)

This was to form part of a wider 'multi-faceted reform plan designed to raise standards in Welsh schools' (Tabberer, 2013, p. 2) deemed necessary as a response to Wales's recent 'disappointing results from international assessments of student performance' (p. 7). As noted above, the review was highly influenced by wider global considerations, drawing heavily on policies and practices emanating from the OECD (in particular, Musset, 2010 and Schleicher, 2013) and focused specifically on addressing the 'ultimate question' as to 'whether ITT is capable of playing the part that it should in raising standards in Welsh schools' (p. 7). Tabberer indicates that it is 'reasonable', therefore, to assess ITT in Wales 'against an international quality benchmark' (p. 8) and is clear that the starting point for the review is that the 'evidence from inspection and self-evaluation shows that ITT provision in Wales is not meeting the standards set by the highest performers globally' (p. 14). The context was therefore one in which the drivers for reform were both external (international comparisons) and internal (Estyn reports that highlighted strengths, but also some areas of concern). There is little to discern in relation to the process of the review; whereas the report of the Furlong Review (2006) had set out in meticulous detail the wider consultation process, Tabberer (2013) mentions only a few specific organisations in the acknowledgements section of his report (referring in general to senior colleagues in these organisations who provided support), and speaks warmly of visits to ITT centres, as well as noting discussions with other related stakeholders. There is, however, little evidence cited to support the conclusions and recommendations in

the report. There is, however, little evidence cited to support the conclusions and recommendations in the report, such as the assertion that ‘there are historical and structural reasons for the fracture between ITT and research, and the position has possibly got worse since the Furlong Review in 2006’ (p. 24). Instead, the report contains a large number of statements indicating what ITT ‘should do’ or other normative formulations such as ‘it would be helpful if ...’. Whilst undoubtedly drawn from the review evidence, it is not always clear what specific evidence is being drawn on in relation to the review’s conclusions and recommendations.

As for the key actors involved in the process, the Tabberer review follows the model for education reviews in Wales more generally, that is to say, inviting an independent expert to lead the review process. In this case, the report appears very much to have been authored by one individual and there is little sense of ‘messy’ policy making or any conflicting perspectives.

The Furlong Review, 2015

Within three years the Welsh Government had embarked on yet another ITE review. Following one of the key recommendations of the Tabberer review, the Welsh Government appointed an ITT Adviser for Wales – namely Professor John Furlong, who had led the 2005 review. Furlong’s report to the Minister for Education a year after his appointment as ITT Adviser picks up where Tabberer left off, and focuses on ‘evidence about the current strengths and weaknesses of teacher education and training in Wales’ (Furlong, 2015:1), before proposing a range of options for the Welsh Government to consider. The focus of the report is wide-ranging, addressing the need that Furlong identifies for significant re-structuring at all levels, a new set of professional standards for teachers and school leaders, a radically revised set of accreditation criteria for ITE providers (Welsh Government, 2017), and a reconceptualisation as to how ITE would operate in Wales from 2019 onwards, particularly within a partnership model which was to reflect what was mostly a new approach to ITE pedagogy. Research was to play a central role in provision under the new criteria. The Welsh Government did not ostensibly set the parameters for *Teaching Tomorrow’s Teachers*; rather the content of the report was determined by Furlong’s analysis of the challenges identified over the previous decade.

Teaching Tomorrow’s Teachers (Furlong, 2015) also has to be considered in relation to the wider vision for education in Wales (Evans, 2022) and in particular the proposed

changes to the school curriculum that had been proposed by Graham Donaldson's review in 2015. Furlong acknowledges the implications of the implementation of the new school curriculum for both ITE and teachers' continuing professional development, but *Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers*, like the Tabberer Review before it, highlights what it sees as the urgent need for Wales to address wider global imperatives. More specifically, this would include responding to the challenges emerging from the OECD country-specific report on Wales (2014) which re-affirmed the quality of the teacher as the single most important determinant in pupil learning and achievement and that 'raising teachers' and leaders' professional capital will therefore be important to improving the performance of the Welsh school system overall' (OECD, 2014, p. 67). One aspect of professional capital, it argues, is 'human capital', which 'refers to the quality of teachers' initial training and ongoing professional development; their skills, qualifications and professional knowledge' (p. 67). Thus, ITE has an important part to play in realising Wales's global potential. Furlong also draws, like Tabberer, on continued Estyn calls for more consistency in the quality of ITE nationally (Estyn, 2013).

The process by which Furlong came to his conclusions was very much determined by his own thinking ('the analysis and proposals contained in this report are my responsibility and mine alone', 2015: 2). Although he reports having had discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, including Welsh Government which, he says 'scrupulously' observed his independence (p. 2), this very much appears to be a process led by one key actor, since this was the policy-making model determined by government. As noted above, the report had significant implications for the ITE sector in Wales, not least because it led directly to the publication of new accreditation criteria (Welsh Government, 2018) and a re-conceptualisation of teacher learning within school-university partnerships.

Discussion

The most recent set of ITE reforms became inevitable after Estyn's 2010–15 cycle of inspections (see Estyn, 2015). The 2014–15 Annual Report made it clear that the previous reforms had been successful in relation to reducing the number of newly-qualified teachers produced by Welsh ITE institutions, and de-duplicating programmes provided by adjacent HEIs. However, HEIs involved in the reforms had focused on these administrative changes to the exclusion of any strategy for development of

high-quality education. Combining HEIs to create regional centres had diverted the energies of leaders towards the creation of administrative and quality-control layers to enable this, distracting them from producing and sustaining a clear vision for teacher education.

In defining an aspirational set of demands for ITE (see Furlong, 2015), subsequently realised through the criteria for the accreditation of ITE programmes (Welsh Government, 2018), Wales's vision for ITE was in many ways moving in step with its ambitious vision for the curriculum in schools (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government 2020). In seeking to emulate research-informed, collaborative partnership approaches such as the Oxford Internship Scheme (Benton, 1990; Burn and Mutton, 2015), policymakers in Wales hoped to transplant a 'relatively small-scale' and 'well-resourced' model (Ellis, 2010, p. 107) to a whole country, rendered even more labour-intensive through the need to deliver it in two languages. Since the introduction of the reformed ITE programmes in Wales in 2018, a limited amount of early data from Estyn inspections, as well as Education Workforce Council (EWC) monitoring and reaccreditation events, has become available. These data indicate mixed success in the endeavour so far, with geography and scale becoming important factors. While larger providers are able to provide capacity (both in the university and across the wider partnership) in setting up a partnership, this does produce challenges for ensuring consistency of provision. The 'lead school' partnership approach built in to the ITE criteria means that, by definition, there are also 'non-lead' schools which may be at risk of having a 'peripheral' status, taking longer to assimilate developments in teacher education pedagogy within programmes that have been co-constructed between the university and lead schools. Meanwhile, smaller ITE partnerships, especially those facing significant geographical challenges (with fewer student teachers and commensurately fewer staff), have found it noticeably more difficult to meet the new aspirations for ITE in Wales.

Concerns continue to be expressed about the education system in Wales more broadly, namely the widening attainment gap between rich and poor (Rees and Rees, 2023) the country's low standing in PISA compared to the rest of the UK (Senedd Research, 2023) and an ongoing perception that school curriculum reforms, as they stand, risk exacerbating inequity and incoherence in the pupil experience (Power *et al.*, 2020). These concerns are linked to a lack of high-quality professional learning, teacher autonomy and teacher workload capacity (Hughes and Lewis, 2020; Sinnema *et al.*, 2020; Evans, 2022). At this point in time, ITE may find itself at an important juncture – either being relegated to the policy background in the face of greater

concerns elsewhere, or being seized upon by policymakers as a proxy for addressing issues within the wider education system, with the temptation for further change to be implemented in order to give the appearance of positive action for the education system at large. A comparison between the Welsh Government's 2017 and 2023 versions of the ITE Accreditation Criteria shows an increase in the number of individual criteria, and points to the possibility of a 'checklist' approach which aims to address much more complex and deep-seated problems in the wider teaching profession through their inclusion in ITE curricula. This would be in marked contrast to the school curriculum framework, where specific content remains undefined. Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that existing pressures in schools, including funding shortages (Scott *et al.*, 2024), post-Covid recovery (Marchant *et al.*, 2021), and an ongoing recruitment and retention crisis (Ghosh and Worth, 2020), have an impact on schools' capacity to develop the partnership model further at pace. All of these factors point to a need for ITE partnerships to develop in a sustainable way, taking account of both universities' and schools' capacities when setting the pace of change.

Wales has, nevertheless, adopted a less adversarial approach to ITE policy-making than has been the case in England (see Ellis, 2024 for an overview of the latter) and has so far resisted the temptation to de-couple the award of QTS from an academic qualification, gained through participation in a university-based ITE programme. The move to school-based teacher education in England has been significant, but has not resulted in improvements to teacher recruitment. Instead, it has led to more fragmented provision through a range of different routes into teaching (Whiting *et al.*, 2016), with policy driven by a market-led model and ultimately leading to the recent ITT Market Review (DfE, 2021) which has had far-reaching consequences. The move by Estyn towards more longer-term, dialogic inspection (Estyn, 2023) which results in a narrative outcome is, perhaps, another indication of this less adversarial approach.

Conclusions

ITE policy-making in Wales under devolution has had to respond to a number of challenges which have not been unique to Wales, but which have required a particular Welsh solution. As has been the case elsewhere, the key focus has been on the capacity to produce sufficient numbers of high-quality teachers to meet the nation's needs. Policies, driven by both national and international imperatives, have thus

focused on both structure and programme content, whilst always taking account of the distribution of provision across what remains a small but geographically challenging country. The first solution to the structural problems that characterised ITE during the first few years of the devolved government, whilst taking quite radical measures to address the issue of over-capacity, failed to achieve any noticeable increase in quality. It took a decade and a half before a particular vision for ITE could become part of the wider vision for education in Wales. Even then, the model for policy reform retained one of its characteristic features – the appointment of an external, independent expert to provide the policy solutions. It is perhaps inevitable that ITE partnerships between universities and schools would lie at the heart of Furlong's 2015 report, given his interest in partnership working over such a long period (see for example, Furlong *et al.*, 2000), but this new way of conceptualising the role of partnerships was further influenced by the evidence from the BERA-RSA Inquiry (2014), which he had also led. This resulted in the conceptualisation of ITE in Wales as a pedagogical endeavour, informed by the best available research. One significant factor over the past twenty-five years (and in direct contrast to what has happened in England) has been that policymakers in Wales have retained the award of QTS with the requirement to attend a university-based ITE programme leading to an academic qualification, thus maintaining the link between academic study and practical experience that is at the heart of any integrated partnership model. It is encouraging, from our perspective, that Wales has been determined to pursue approaches to ITE that are rooted in collaborative partnerships in which:

teacher education is a collective, co-constructed endeavour to which each partner brings unique forms of expertise and perspectives that are subject to change in an ongoing collaborative and dynamic process. (Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers, 2020)

The question now is whether such approaches are given the time to become fully embedded before policy-makers decide that, for whatever reasons, another round of ITE review and reform is required.

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Appendix I: Key ITE policy documents in Wales 1999–2024 (in chronological order)

The following list is not exhaustive, but represents an overview of the key documents related to ITE policy in Wales.

- National Assembly for Wales (2001). *The Learning Country – a Paving Document*.
- National Assembly for Wales (2005). *Consultation on Qualified Teacher Status Standards and the Requirement for the provision of Initial Teacher Training Courses*.
- HEFCW (2005). *Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Partnership: Consultation Outcomes and Next Steps*.
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Early Childhood Education in Wales: Policy, Promises and Practice Realities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines two critical aspects of the education policy-practice landscape for early years education (EYE) provision in Wales in 2024. First, it addresses the emblematic attention given to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in education and care policy contrasted with the inconsistencies in EYE practice. Second, it explores the increasing fragmentation of the educational experiences of three- to four-year-old children. The chapter outlines the robust policy framework that reflects Wales's commitment to the UNCRC, tracing developments from the flagship, post-devolution Foundation Phase Curriculum Framework for Children aged three to seven years old to the diverse educational provision which is available for three- to four-year-olds in 2024. It critically examines the intention, purpose, and coherence of the collective educational offer for young children in Wales, considering the potential implications for children, particularly those facing additional structural and personal challenges. In a context where the emerging risks of large-scale disapplication of the curriculum offer for young children persists, despite the *Curriculum for Wales* being intended for children aged three to sixteen years, the chapter questions the extent to which the rhetorical policy commitment to ensuring all children experience their rights and a promising start to life through a consistent early years offer is genuinely meaningful. The analysis is supported by findings from two doctoral studies focusing on these issues in Wales (Stewart, 2024; MacDonald, forthcoming).

Keywords: early years education, Curriculum for Wales, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, foundation learning, education policy, curriculum fragmentation, Wales

Introduction

This chapter considers two aspects of the education policy-practice landscape for early years education (EYE) provision in Wales in 2024, addressing (i) the emblematic attention paid to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, United Nations, 1989) in policy and the inconsistent attention paid to this in EYE practice, and (ii) the increasing fragmentation of the educational experiences of three- to four-year-old children. We set out the robust policy framework inherent in Wales's commitment to the UNCRC and trace developments from the flagship, post-devolution, Foundation Phase (FP) Curriculum Framework for Children three to seven years old (Welsh Government (WG), 2008; 2015) to the mixed economy for education provision for three- to four-year-olds that we see in 2024. We ask questions about the intention, purpose and coherence of our collective education offer for young children in Wales and consider the possible implications of the current situation for children, especially those who may face additional structural and/or personal challenges. In a landscape where there is large-scale disapplication of the curriculum offer for young children, despite the *Curriculum for Wales* (CfW, WG, 2024a) being designated for children aged from three to sixteen years old, we ask questions about the extent to which the rhetorical policy commitment to ensure all children experience their rights and a flying start to life is meaningful. The chapter draws upon two doctoral studies focussing upon these issues in Wales (Stewart, 2024; MacDonald, forthcoming).

(i) Commitment to Children's Rights is embedded within the CfW

The pro-active adoption of a visible and pronounced stance on children's rights has been described as emblematic of WG policy since devolution (Rees, 2010). Children are seen as rights-holders and in 2004, WG issued *Rights to Action*, a policy document adopting seven core aims for children. These are presented as a direct translation of the UNCRC's articles into the following broad policy aims:

- A flying start in life;
- A comprehensive range of education and learning opportunities;
- Enjoy the best possible health and freedom from abuse, victimisation and exploitation;
- Access to play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities;
- Be listened to, treated with respect and have their race and cultural identity recognised;
- Have a safe home and community which supports physical and emotional well-being;
- Are not disadvantaged by poverty.

(Children's Rights in Wales, n.d.)

There has been significant policy activity around provision for young children in order to secure the commitment to 'a flying start in life' and 'a comprehensive range of education and learning opportunities', not least the policies surrounding early education, described below. The underpinning philosophy for the FP sat within an overarching and emancipatory vision for children (Waters, 2016) and promoted a responsive pedagogic approach to learning for three- to seven-year-olds (Payler, 2009). Such a pedagogic orientation remains within the Foundation Learning (FL) guidance and also within the CfW framework's pedagogic guidance for learners aged from three onwards. Rights are emphasised as being at the heart of the CfW as they are embedded within the four purposes which act as the key drivers for the curriculum framework (Children's Commissioner, 2018). The United Nations (2012) emphasises the importance of teachers as key actors in enabling children's rights, and within the CfW, teachers have been established as duty-bearers with specific responsibilities regarding teaching children *about, through and for* their rights (Murphy *et al.*, 2024). All three aspects must be meaningfully experienced by children to achieve an effective children's rights education in school. Adopting such a rights-based approach can enable greater child-centred approaches, innovative school decision-making and even facilitate transformed pedagogic practices (Jerome, 2016), but requires teachers to plan to adopt a participatory and capacity-building approach to their pedagogy (Murphy *et al.*, 2022). Within CfW guidance, this approach is embedded within the vision of the enabling teacher who is deeply knowledgeable about children's development and has a conscious praxis to guide and facilitate the child's progress. Yet, to achieve this, such an approach clearly goes beyond teaching children 'about'

rights to the heart of the teacher's own practice, and their values and beliefs about children's agency and competence.

ii. The Policy-Practice Gap

The UNCRC places a legal commitment on children's rights at a governmental level, but for children their reality is dependent on the practitioners who support them (Nutbrown, 2019). There is limited empirical research into how teachers engage with children's rights (Cassidy, Bruner and Webster, 2014) or to what extent rights education is present within schools (Robinson, Phillips and Quennerstedt, 2020) with specific indications that knowledge of rights remains limited in Wales (Children's Commissioner, 2018). This implementation gap (Hudson, Hunter and Peckham, 2019) has been noted regarding the enactment of policy regarding children's rights in early education contexts in Wales. When considering the youngest learners in Wales, participatory experiences are found to be largely unreported, with tensions between the high level of rhetoric regarding children's rights alongside limited evidence of their actual enactment (Lewis *et al.*, 2017; Murphy *et al.*, 2022).

A recent case study, by Stewart (2024) explored the CfW and the conceptualisation of children's rights theory, policy and practice within it. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study analysed curriculum guidance, surveyed sixty teachers across Wales and interviewed a further three teachers. The study suggested that primary school teachers in Wales reported positively about an enhanced role for children's rights in the CfW and within their own practice, identifying a child-led approach in pedagogical guidance as paving the way for a holistic approach to enhancing children's rights of all ages at school. However, this was not always consistent in respect of younger learners. For example, one participant noted that while children's rights were central to their practice, its articulation to younger children was perhaps less relevant:

It's more relevant to some pupils than others as some children are too young to understand although my values reflect their rights (Participant 4). (Stewart, 2024)

Such a deficit view of younger children has been reported elsewhere with regard to early years practice (e.g. Waters-Davies and MacDonald, 2022; Waters-Davies *et al.*, 2024). Whilst teachers in the study cited the UNCRC often, they also expressed a wide range of views about the meaning and purpose of children's rights, including

identifying rights outside of the UNCRC (for example, the right to be loved; the right to happiness). At other times, they gave examples of rights-based practice which were inconsistent or general, reflecting Waldron and Oberman's (2016) findings that teachers' rights practice is not often located within a framework of professional practice but rather from a more 'common sense' approach.

Stewart (2024) also noted that teachers' responses tended to frame their thinking around the experience of the learner, with a focus placed on the child-led nature, rather than adult-enabled aspects, of learning. So, whilst learner voice was celebrated, the pedagogical approaches needed to support that, or the subsequent responses to children's views were not considered. Yet, it is this focus on children's experiences of participation which Lundy (2018) stresses is critical to avoiding a tokenistic approach. When asked about making changes to their rights-practice in anticipation of the CfW, Stewart (2024) reports that very few primary teachers believed that they would need to adapt their existing practice. The study also found that whilst teachers were confident teaching 'about' rights, they were much less confident teaching 'through' or 'for' rights, the elements of a human rights education which arguably require a more participative pedagogic approach. Teachers were enthusiastic about the CfW's emphasis on the role of participation, but Stewart (2024) argued that there was a lack of clarity in guidance about the intended nature and purpose of children's participation to practically guide practitioners. Teachers may conceptualise rights-based pedagogy as opportunities for children to rehearse the skills needed to become a participative citizen later in life rather than value participation for children to experience and claim their rights in the moment, reflecting Prout's (2005) concerns about children being viewed as *becoming* as opposed to *being*.

Stewart (2024) noted that when teachers in the study shared examples of pedagogic practice, this tended to relate to whole school implementation approaches such as school assemblies, mascots or charters, rather than individual practices. In the example below, mascots helped to raise awareness of rights within the school in a way considered appropriate to the age and the stage of the children, providing a sense of shared purpose within the school community:

So, there's even a teddy bear seals [mascot]. When we do a daily check in, the teddy bear seal comes round with the children and they know he's there to protect them. He's there. The little ones say he's there to protect us and help us know our rights. The older ones understand what Sammy does, you know, and that... But they will then talk more about the Children's

commissioner actually her role and what her role is to make sure that children's voices are heard (Miss.Williams, Interview 3).

(Stewart, 2024, p. 152)

However, unless enacted alongside wider pedagogic approaches which are inclusive of schools' youngest learners such approaches may not go beyond raising awareness of rights to a fuller enactment of rights-based approaches within the school in which children are rights-subjects able to fully claim and experience their rights (Conn and Murphy, 2022). Teachers are likely to have their own contested moral or philosophical discourses of rights, but if sidestepped, this can lead to less buy-in as they may experience a reduction in agency and become passive implementors who receive training in specific implementation processes and use pre-prepared resources to enact rights (Jerome, 2016). This perhaps also offers further explanation as to why teachers may be more comfortable teaching *about* rather than *through* or *for* rights. Stewart (2024) consequently identifies a risk of teachers marginalising the impact of their own practices, negating the teachers' own sense of agency as a rights-enactor. Additionally, the prominence of whole-school discourses about rights approaches may inadvertently mask gaps in individual teachers' practice.

The curriculum is positioned as a progression of the rights agenda for children in Wales and as an 'important vehicle for embedding the [UNCRC] in the experience of learning and teaching for our children and young people and for giving them an understanding of their rights' (WG, 2024a, n.p). As a country, Wales seeks to commit to all children experiencing their rights throughout their educational journey, from three to sixteen. Yet, the policy-practice gap with regard to the pedagogies required to support such ambition may continue to hamper this realisation. Furthermore, in the next section, this paper identifies emergent risks which may not only exacerbate existing gaps in practice, but also pose threats to the consistency of provision for young learners. We now contrast the promise of the CfW as an important vehicle for the systematic implementation of high-quality foundation learning and children's rights for learners from three to sixteen, with the reality of increased fragmentation of provision for three- to four-year-olds which further jeopardises this vision.

(iii) Fragmentation of provision for three- to four-year-old children

This section provides a concise policy overview that sets out the curriculum policy journey from the Foundation Phase (FP) framework (WG, 2015) to Foundation

Learning (FL) within the CfW (WG, 2024a) and explains the association between CfW, the Curriculum for Funded Non-maintained Nursery Settings (CfFNNS, WG 2022) and the guidance for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales for Children 0–5 years (WG, 2024b).

Devolved responsibility for education and care from the United Kingdom central government to the then Welsh Assembly at the turn of the century marked a swathe of policy activity regarding the provision of education and care for young children in Wales. Since then, a divide between education and care within Wales has been established through ministerial responsibility, curriculum, policy and regulation (WG, 2022a; MacDonald, 2018). The policy divide in effect splits education from early education and care since education is seen to be provided within schools as *maintained* provision, and early care and education outside of schools provided as *non-maintained* provision.

The maintained and the non-maintained sectors are each governed by a separate suite of policies, overseen by separate ministerial responsibility and hold separate regulation and accountability structures. For example, Estyn (the education inspectorate for Wales) undertakes inspection of maintained provision, whilst Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) inspects non-maintained provision. Children who are three and four years of age may experience maintained provision or non-maintained provision - or even both. This prompts us to ask questions about the consistency of the early education offer available to three- and four-year-olds in Wales.

First, to understand where we are now, we explore the path from the FP framework (WG, 2015) to the current position. The development of the FP curriculum framework has been set out in detail by Waters (2016), here we consider the shift from the FP to the CfW.

The FP was recognised by Donaldson (2015), architect of the CfW, as a jewel in the crown of the Welsh curriculum landscape prior to the reforms. Achieving support from across the Welsh educational landscape (Donaldson, 2015, p. 19) the pedagogy underpinning the FP has broadly been carried forward into the pedagogic guidance for the CfW. However, as was noted in two major evaluations, as well as by Donaldson himself, the pedagogy underpinning the FP was not consistently understood or applied within or across schools (Siraj 2014; WG, 2015b) indicating that this curricular jewel came with professional learning challenges, even before the CfW was constructed. One of the drivers for CfW was the aligning of the education journey for learners from three to sixteen years of age; Donaldson (2015) critiqued the

separation of education into key stages (FP, key stages one to four) and WG (2015c) responded by enacting dramatic curriculum reform in the shape of the CfW for all children. However, the opportunity to align maintained and non-maintained sector provision was missed as children under three were omitted from CfW. Whilst both CfW and *Education in Wales: Our National Mission* (WG, 2017) begins for children aged three in funded (maintained) provision, this excludes an estimated 23,300-strong workforce providing non-maintained early education for over 53,000 children from CfW (Lunsden et al., 2024). The tension inherent in this ongoing divide arises from the transition and alignment between maintained and non-maintained provision for three- to four-year-olds, as well as the value each sector places on the other.

In Welsh education and care provision, there is a crossover point where some settings offer *both* maintained and non-maintained provision. A WG initiative funds non-maintained settings to provide maintained curriculum provision for three- to four-year-olds (WG, 2022) and therefore become subject to inspection by Estyn. This means that non-maintained providers who accept children with funded places, in addition to children who are privately funded, find themselves subject to policy and regulation from both maintained and non-maintained spheres. This specific practice scenario is subject to research that seeks to explore policy meaning and experiences of those working within this dual responsibility (see MacDonald, forthcoming).

There has been a need, since the term FP has been removed from the CfW, to ensure that the needs of younger learners are met within CfW pedagogical guidance. This is where, arguably, there is some blurring of previously entrenched boundaries between education and care provision (MacDonald, 2018; MacDonald, forthcoming). WG have set out that the term 'Foundation learning' is not a direct replacement for FP, since it 'forms part of the 3 to 16 Curriculum for Wales and is designed to reflect the specific learning and development needs of children up to the age of 8 or learners who have additional developmental needs' (WG FAQ, n.d, n.p.). The CfFNMS (WG, 2022) has set out the context for provision for three- to four-year-olds who are funded to receive the CfW in non-school settings. This is where the variation in provision for three- to four-year-olds is established. The CfFNMS is non-statutory, though the documentation indicates that it is aligned with the CfW, and curriculum design is achieved through consideration of three enablers: enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments. While the CfFNMS is aimed specifically at one group of early educators working outside of schools with funded three to four-year-olds, school teachers of young children (three- to five-years-old) and early

childhood practitioners working with children from birth to five years are *all* directed towards guidance regarding Early childhood play, learning and care in Wales (WG, 2024b) since ‘Wales is on a journey to implement a high-quality, *integrated*, rights-based approach to Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC)’ (WG, 2024c, p. 4. our emphasis). This suite of materials includes a Quality Framework which is intended to ‘ensure we offer well-evidenced, well-informed and successful approaches to early childhood play, learning and care’ (WG, 2024c p. 4). There are therefore three different forms of policy and/or curriculum guidance for those working with three- to four-year-olds: Curriculum for Wales; Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings; and the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales guidance.

The provision of funded education for three- to four-year-olds is universal across Wales, although the number of available funded hours varies. All three-year-olds are entitled to ten hours of funded education, and for well over a decade (Welsh Government, n. d.) this has commonly been provided in schools as nursery provision. Depending on household circumstances, entitlement may extend to thirty hours as part of the scheme, which includes ten hours of funded education and an additional twenty hours of funded childcare (WG, 2023). The consistency issue facing the sector at present is where those hours are undertaken. Any three-year-old in Wales may experience their educational offer in a number of different settings. They may undertake their ten hours funded education in a nursery class in a school; however, increasingly and to save money, Local Authorities are having to make difficult decisions around early years provision and are reconsidering their rising three and four provision (e.g. Carmarthenshire County Council, 2024), leading to increased fragmentation in the school-based offer. Our notional three-year-old may also be receiving additional funded childcare hours at one or more non-maintained settings. Alternatively, our three-year-old may receive their funded early education provision fully in the non-maintained sector. As explained above, mechanisms to ensure consistency between maintained and non-maintained funded provision is limited other than via Estyn inspection. In addition, consistency within the non-maintained sector is a challenge, not only due to the policy spheres they must navigate as identified in this paper, but also through the varied nature of delivery. Non-maintained provision may be delivered through day nurseries, sessional care, crèche or childminders. The challenge for WG and indeed, the education and the edu-care sectors, is how to ensure consistency and quality of provision for three- to

four-year-olds within a complex policy landscape. We argue, further, that this situation threatens realisation of the CfW specifically for those who are three- to four-year-old.

A substantial amount of work by WG and the non-maintained sector has gone in to developing the CfFNMNS and associated documentation through a co-constructed collaborative approach, where the fundamental principles and pedagogy of CfW has been embedded in the documents. However, since CfFNMNS is not statutory, ensuring all three-year-olds experience CfW principles and pedagogy as part of the intended three to sixteen education continuum may not be realised. The Quality Framework set out within the ECPLC guidance is explicitly built upon the same three enablers as the CfFNMNS (WG, 2024c, p. 7) and is intended to support those working with children from birth to five years in non-maintained settings and schools to ‘embed all children’s rights into practice’ (WG, 2024c p. 6), amongst other aims. In this document we see, explicitly, a blurring of the divide between birth to three and three to five years provision, as well as the interweaving of pedagogic guidance for the birth to five years sector, the realisation of children’s rights and the realisation of CfW / CfFNMNS.

Discussion

We have set out two specific aspects of the early years landscape in Wales; firstly, the robust policy framework that supports the enactment of WG’s commitment to children’s rights and secondly the suite of policy and quality guidance that replaces the former FP framework for young children’s learning. We have highlighted the gap that has been evidenced by empirical studies indicating that teachers are not yet well supported to enact pedagogies that embed young children’s rights, particularly those related to participation. We have also highlighted the threat posed by further fragmentation in the education offer to three- four-year-olds to the realisation of CfW for our youngest learners, and the curriculum’s ability to take a systematic approach to young children experiencing their rights. Here we simply pose a few questions that are worthy, we think, of careful consideration as Wales continues its journey. These questions are about intention and coherence in our collective education offer for young children in Wales, especially for those children who may face additional structural and/or personal challenges.

We appear to be in a landscape where there is the potential for large-scale disapplication of the curriculum offer for young children, despite the CfW (WG, 2024a) being designated for children aged from three to sixteen years. This seems to be affected by budgetary restrictions to local authorities meaning that school-based education provision for Wales's youngest learners may be under threat, and a complex environment for those working with children of this age outside of schools in terms of policy, finance and guidance. When there is compelling evidence internationally of the value of relational, rights-based, responsive early education for children's long term academic and social outcomes, especially for those who face additional challenges (e.g. Jones, 2023; Lewis, Fler and Hammer, 2019; Sylva *et al.*, 2014; Papatheodorou, 2009), we must ask whether this disapplication of CfW is intentional and if so, what the goals are for our youngest learners, and what the impact may be on our most vulnerable learners.

While the possibility of a joined-up approach for education and care for children from birth to five years across the maintained and non-maintained sector, as implied by the Quality Framework (WG, 2024c), is welcome, we are aware, anecdotally at least, of the pressures on the non-maintained sector to meet demand for places. A report by Cwllwm (the consortium of umbrella organisations for ECEC in Wales) for Senedd identified that only 8.8 per cent of day nurseries surveyed stated they could sustain the current childcare model for the next five years (Senedd Cymru, 2024); additionally Dallimore (2019) identified that the availability of childcare places for children in Wales varies from less than twenty five places per one hundred children (Merthyr Tydfil/Gower) to fifty four places per one hundred children (Clwyd West, North Wales). We might ask, therefore, to what extent there is an equitable offer for early education and care provision that is based around young children's realisation of their rights across Wales. Ultimately, we ask about the coherence of the offer for children in terms of both early education and experience of their rights. We may reflect on the paving document that guided Wales's early education provision after devolution, *The Learning Country* (NAfW, 2001) which set out the intention to 'build stronger foundations for learning in primary schools with a radical improvement for early years provision' (p. 12) and ask whether the legacy of the FP, and the promise of the CfW are actually now under some significant threat. We emphasise here the value inherent in the statement of intent set out by WG that the early childhood education and care sectors are on a shared journey towards an 'integrated, rights-based approach' to Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (WG, 2024c, p. 4) and

highlight the need for targeted professional learning for teachers and EY practitioners to be supported to embed pedagogies to meet such aims. We also emphasise the need to ensure that the systematic vehicle for children's rights that is inherent in CfW is not undermined by the current fragmentation of provision and the lack of professional confidence in this area.

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The ‘Welsh way’, outdoor learning within the primary curriculum: a ‘fringe add-on or mainstream pedagogical practice’?

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ABSTRACT

The increasingly robust evidence base from across the globe highlights a range of potential benefits for children in engaging with outdoor environments including increased physical development, improved mental health and wellbeing, increased resilience and higher levels of engagement. However, children’s access to outdoor environments may be limited by factors such as a lack of available ‘safe’ spaces, concerns such as ‘stranger danger’ and a focus on more structured extra-curricular activities during ‘out of school’ hours. We suggest that schools therefore play a key role in providing opportunities for all children to engage in outdoor environments through outdoor play and learning. This paper provides a reflection of key policy and curriculum changes over the last twenty-five years in relation to outdoor learning within Wales. It identifies that professional learning is a key factor in ensuring that all primary school educators appreciate the value of outdoor learning. It highlights the need for consistency across primary school settings so that all children within Wales have access to high quality outdoor learning experiences as part of mainstream pedagogical practice. Moreover, it proposes that as we look forward to the next twenty-five years, accountability should be afforded via the Estyn inspection framework.

Keywords: outdoor learning, primary schools, policy, professional learning, pedagogical approach

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate the effectiveness of outdoor learning within primary schools in Wales, over the last 25 years, *per se*. Instead, it aims to identify some key points for reflection, which we consider to be of importance as we contemplate the role that outdoor learning can play in children's holistic development over the next twenty-five years. A recurring theme within this paper is 'variability' including in interpretation, knowledge, application, and quality and how this may impact on the experiences of outdoor learning for individual children. There are clear examples of excellent outdoor learning practices in some schools, but not all, and this may be for a host of reasons that we will try to unpick. The key point is that whilst the evidence suggests that outdoor learning as a pedagogical approach is of benefit to all children, there is the potential that not all children are receiving high quality outdoor learning experiences on a regular basis within primary schools in Wales, particularly within the older primary year groups and this needs to be addressed moving forward. Within this chapter, the focus is on mainstream primary schools and as such, the term 'teachers' has been used in a wider context to encompass the role of the teacher and teaching assistants.

Literature review

Perhaps a key starting point as we reflect on the role of outdoor learning within the primary curriculum in Wales, is to examine why outdoor learning, as a pedagogical approach, is considered of value by drawing upon wider research. It is difficult to define outdoor learning: too broad a definition can become meaningless, whilst too narrow a definition may fail to account for the wide range of activities and locations encompassed within the term. French *et al.* (2023, p. 7) in their evaluation of the state of outdoor learning in Wales, cite the definition from The Institute for Outdoor Learning report (Anderson, 2021, p. 1) of 'an umbrella term for actively inclusive

facilitated approaches that predominantly use activities and experiences in the outdoors which lead to learning, increased health and wellbeing and environmental awareness'. A criticism of some of the earlier research into the benefits of outdoor learning included the lack of rigour in the design of studies, often relying on perceptions-based data with no control groups and with data analysed by researchers who were already invested in outdoor learning. However, this has changed in recent years with the evidence base consisting of high-quality peer reviewed studies incorporating approaches such as 'wait list' controls and 'blind to condition' measures (Kou, Barnes and Jordan, 2022). It should be noted however, that there has been very little research within Wales over the last decade within this area, perhaps signalling that a review of outdoor learning pedagogy is timely.

In a critical review of the existing international evidence base, Kou, Barnes and Jordan (2022, p.48) confirm that 'experiences with nature do promote children's academic learning and seem to promote children's development as persons and as environmental stewards'. They state that 'Nature-based instruction (NBI) is, on average, more effective than traditional instruction (TI) with incorporating nature adding value to instruction' (e.g., Camasso and Jagannathan, 2018; Ernst and Stanek, 2006 cited in Kou, Barnes and Jordan, 2022). 'Nature' within this context includes experiences of nature across a wide range of contexts ranging from in-wilderness to largely human-made contexts (e.g., a classroom view of a garden). There is also evidence of a 'dose response' relationship, as the dose of outdoors increases, so do the outcomes. They also suggest that 'The nature-learning connection holds up across topics, learners, instructors, pedagogies, places, and measures of learning' (Kou, Barnes and Jordan, 2022, p.50). A striking finding from the review of the evidence base is that nature-based instruction can benefit all children, including disadvantaged (McCree *et al.*, 2018; Sivarajah *et al.*, 2018 cited in Kou, Barnes and Jordan, 22, p. 57), uninterested (Dettweiler *et al.*, 2015; Truong *et al.*, 2016 cited in Kou, Barnes and Jordan, 22, p. 57) and low achieving students (Camasso and Jagannathan, 2018 cited in Kou, Barnes and Jordan, 22, p. 57). There is also evidence to suggest that experiences of nature help children acquire skills and behaviours such as perseverance, self-efficacy, resilience, social skills, leadership skills, and communication skills (Kou, Barnes and Jordan, 2022). To illustrate, McCree, Cutting and Sherwin (2018) undertook a small scale, longitudinal England based study which tracked 11 disadvantaged children aged 5–7 over 3 years as they participated in forest school activities for one day per week (including school holidays) for three years. The

findings suggest positive increases in self-regulation and resilience as well as increased physical and social wellbeing. In addition, there was favourable academic development across subjects compared with their equivalent peers. A key underlying aspect for the effectiveness of this project was identified as the 'emotional space', i.e. the provision of a physical space and the time for children to freely be themselves and express their emotions. In a randomised controlled trial in the US, Wells *et al.* (2015) examined the effects of a school garden intervention on science knowledge for children aged 6–12 from low-income backgrounds. They found a significant, though modest, positive effect on science knowledge and suggest that time outdoors, experiential learning, and engagement with nature foster the development of the 'whole child'. It is important to note that children differ in their likes and dislikes and some children will respond more positively to outdoor activities than others. Where children find it difficult to conform to an indoor environment, the space and freedom to move and make noise may be liberating, whereas for others, the security of an indoor environment may be preferred, at least initially, until confidence levels can be built. In summary, there are a range of developmental benefits for children in engaging in outdoor learning opportunities which are of a high quality, and ideally, on a regular basis.

Policy context

The policy landscape in Wales over the past twenty-five years, has highlighted outdoor learning as an important pedagogical approach, documented in key curriculum changes. For example, the introduction of the Foundation Phase was a pivotal moment in the movement from the more formal, competency-based approach associated with the previous Key Stage 1 National Curriculum (WISERD, 2014). The Foundation Phase was designed to provide a developmental, experiential, play-based approach to teaching and learning and drew upon practices in Scandinavia, Reggio Emilia and New Zealand (*Te Whāriki*). The policy was progressively 'rolled-out' so that by 2011/12 it included all 3 to 7-year-olds. The approach highlighted the importance of children's wellbeing and advocated a balance of child-initiated and practitioner-directed (or practitioner initiated) activities within stimulating indoor and outdoor environments which provided opportunities to 'take risks' and 'become confident explorers' (DCELLS, 2008, p. 16). Subsequently, a recommendation from

the evaluation of the Foundation Phase (WISERD, 2014, p. 7) was that ‘Practitioners should be encouraged to use a variety of ‘learning zones’, both indoors and outdoors, more frequently. Exemplar materials should be developed for practitioners as a reference on how best to utilise these ‘learning zones.’ In October 2014, the Welsh Government published further guidance to schools, *Further Steps Outdoors: making the most of your outdoor spaces for schools and early years settings*, to develop their outdoor practice and provision in the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2014). This guidance mirrored findings from the research literature and as such, had the potential to provide a solid basis for the development of outdoor provision. Advice included: ‘There should be opportunities for children to follow their own interests and lines of enquiry through free play balanced with adult-led activities that support skills development outdoors, every day, whatever the weather’ (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 3). The guidance highlighted the importance of giving children the time and space to develop their play, learning and understanding. It identified that, outdoors, ‘children are often observed being more absorbed in their own thinking, learning and exploration and so it is important that they are afforded the time to develop their lines of enquiry and skills. How long children spend outdoors will depend on the setting/school, the activities and their levels of engagement but they should be afforded as much time as possible in order to consolidate learning and skills’ (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 4). The examples given cover a range of opportunities for adventure, fantasy and imaginative play and for developing skills such as empathy and working with others. It does not promote a ‘drag and drop’ approach whereby typically indoor based activities are moved outdoors on sunnier days. Perhaps a key message from this document is that children need time to engage with the outdoor environment on a regular basis.

More recently, driven by a desire to raise standards for all and to tackle the attainment gap, the Curriculum for Wales was introduced from 2022. The new curriculum, spanning from ages 3-16 years, enables schools to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of their pupils whilst following the curriculum framework (Welsh Government, 2022). Within the guidance provided on pedagogical approaches (Welsh Government, 2023a, n.p.) it states that ‘[b]eing outdoors is particularly important for learners in this period of learning’, suggesting that this is important for learners across all age ranges. It states that a range of benefits can be gained from learning outdoors including high levels of well-being, confidence and engagement with opportunities for social, emotional, spiritual and physical development, as well

as providing authentic opportunities for learners to develop and consolidate cross-curricular skills. It suggests that the use of the outdoors can help learners to explore, practise and enhance their skills. Perhaps in line with the ethos of the new curriculum, the guidance seems rather broad and is open to interpretation by settings as part of their curriculum planning. As Bilton and Waters (2017) in a comparative study of early years outdoor provision in Wales and England identified, the values underpinning the practice of teachers in both countries were influenced by the related curriculum documentation. This highlights the importance of the policy documents to 'get it right' in terms of providing an appropriate level of detail and communicating it in a suitable way to the teachers who are putting the policy into practice.

Curriculum context

The Curriculum for Wales guidance acknowledges that, in order to fully harness the benefits of outdoor learning, it is essential to have enabling adults who understand its significance and value (Welsh Government, 2023a). Without this, outdoor learning may be seen as a 'bolt on', or filler or reward and this may impact on the quality of experience for children and the regularity of outdoor activities. Some teachers may also find it difficult to 'let go' and allow children to take the lead in their learning (Maynard and Chicken, 2010). The Wales Council for Outdoor Learning noted in their response to the 'Draft Curriculum for Wales consultation document' (2019) that the guidance in the new curriculum lacked sufficient detail for inexperienced and less knowledgeable teachers, therefore the existing inconsistencies in the quality of outdoor learning provision could be compounded. They proposed that training should be provided to upskill teachers but noted that there was little time or financial support available for training in this area.

The bottom line is that each teacher will be responsible for planning the opportunities for outdoor learning and as such, have control over both the quality and frequency. There are a few caveats to this, however. Individual teachers need to feel supported by their leadership team and this must be sustained over time, irrespective of other curriculum pressures. As highlighted by Edward-Jones, Waite and Passey (2018) in a study in Southwest England, teachers experienced challenges in balancing outdoor learning with other dominant performance measures, new competing directives and externally driven initiatives. For example,

There was great excitement about four years ago with forest skills, where much training and effort was put in, but then other priorities came along. (Primary, Deputy Head) (Edwards Jones, Waite and Passey, 2018, p. 53)

There was also pressure placed on teachers, in this English study, to prove the value of their pedagogic practice, largely through dependence on written records and to make specific curriculum links (Edwards-Jones, Waite and Passey, 2018). Another caveat, is that teachers need appropriate and safe outdoor spaces and the resources needed to provide high quality learning experiences, including appropriate staffing levels.

Pedagogic context

The importance of teachers being highly skilled in outdoor learning is also apparent within the findings of French *et al.* (2023) in a recent Welsh Government-funded study of the state of outdoor learning in Wales. Whilst the sample size was very small ($n=9$) and may not be representative of the wider school population, the study identified that outdoor learning is seen as insufficient for covering all aspects of the curriculum, and teachers need more assistance if they are to use the pedagogy effectively. Whilst 50 settings were approached to take part in the evaluation, only 9 schools chose to take part in the survey; ($n=4$) Primary schools, ($n=2$) Secondary schools, ($n=2$) Independent schools and ($n=1$) Special school and only one school completed the survey over a 4-week period, the rest provided one response only. However, based on the findings, the authors conclude that it:

demonstrated the need for teachers and other education stakeholders to be educated about how outdoor learning can be used as a teaching approach to deliver the whole curriculum. Additionally, practitioners need to learn how, when, and why to use outdoor learning to benefit the development of children and enhance teaching and learning experiences. If teachers and support staff believed in the value of outdoor learning and were supported in their endeavours to accomplish these aims, it is possible that outdoor learning would turn from a fringe add-on to a mainstream pedagogical practice throughout Wales. (French *et al.*, 2023, p. 26)

Teachers therefore need to be skilled at implementing outdoor learning as a pedagogical approach. As such, this requires it to be embedded within professional development. This is echoed in the work of Bozkurt (2021 cited in French *et al.*,

2023) who highlights the importance for all teacher education programmes to include pedagogical expectations for outdoor learning and how this pedagogy can become an integral part of the entire school curriculum. Professional learning will play a key role in equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills that they need to provide high quality outdoor learning opportunities. Over a decade ago, Waite (2010) in a study in the Southwest of England, identified that teachers had very little or no input in their professional learning on the use of the outdoors. It is noted that the newly released *Criteria for the accreditation of initial teacher education programmes in Wales: Teaching tomorrow's teachers* (Welsh Government, 2023, p. 37) makes one brief mention of outdoor classrooms as an authentic learning environment and one mention of 'outdoors' as a form of learning environment under the heading 'Blended learning experiences' (Welsh Government, 2023, p. 48). The danger here is that unless there is appropriate taught coverage of outdoor learning as a pedagogical approach, then pupils are at risk from a 'lottery' of whether their newly qualified teacher has the knowledge and skills required to provide high quality outdoor learning experiences.

This is reinforced by the Wales Council for Outdoor Learning who noted in their response to the 'Draft Curriculum for Wales (2019) consultation document', that since the outdoor environment is mentioned in the pedagogical principles of the new curriculum, it is important that student teachers are given opportunities to learn about and practice the skills for delivering in the outdoor environment. To encourage consistency across Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers, it would seem to make sense for this to be incorporated within the taught element by each provider. In addition, professional learning is considered essential to develop the confidence levels and knowledge of those already employed in primary settings. This includes teachers and support staff. The need for all staff to be trained is highlighted within the observations of outdoor learning as part of the evaluation of the Foundation Phase, back in 2014, (WISERD, 2014, p. 63), where:

Children were more likely to be observed outdoors with an additional practitioner, or alone, as opposed to being in the presence of a teacher. Of the 410 individual child observations recorded outdoors, 51% were with an additional practitioner; whereas only 17% were with a teacher. The remaining 32% were recorded as 'child acting without adult support'.

The authors proposed that this may indicate the specific value teachers place on outdoor learning. Similarly, Maynard, Waters and Clement (2013) found that the

outdoor context for Foundation Phase learning was often undervalued, with vague or ill-defined understandings of outdoor learning as a pedagogical approach and a perception that 'real work' took place inside the classroom and was focused on specific learning outcomes and the learning of 'subjects'. Whereas the outdoors was seen only for informal learning and play.

As well as professional development, teachers must also have the willingness to engage with this form of educational development. Whilst the availability of professional learning is considered essential to 'up-skill' teachers, this also requires teachers to engage with such opportunities. Referring back to the Foundation Phase, WISERD (2014) in its evaluation found that only 66 per cent of teachers and, only 37 per cent of school 'Additional Practitioners' had completed all eight Welsh Government Foundation Phase professional learning modules. Whilst this does not directly relate to outdoor learning, it does highlight that staff need the motivation and time to engage with professional learning.

Impact of teacher's own childhood experiences

Another factor which may impact on the perceived value of outdoor learning may be the practitioner's own outdoor experiences in their youth (Waite, 2010). As a teaching team on an outdoor play and learning module, one of the first activities that we ask undergraduate students to engage with, is to reflect on their first play memories. For over a decade, the overarching response was 'outdoors' with adjectives such as fun, autonomy, freedom, adventure, risk and 'with friends' used to describe their experiences. However, our perceptions are that there has been a noticeable shift in recent years with an increased focus on 'indoors', 'in my bedroom'. There are a number of possible reasons for this including physical location and a lack of safe outdoor spaces, 'stranger-danger', lack of outdoor opportunities within the curriculum and a lack of perceived value from parents and carers who may favour more structured play activities such as attending sports clubs (Little, Elliott and Wyver, 2017). However, in many cases, our future teachers are our current pupils and if they are not gaining first hand experiences of regular, high quality outdoor learning then this may impact negatively on their perceptions of the importance of this pedagogical approach. Edwards-Jones, Waite and Passy (2018) suggest that senior school leaders have a key role to play in supporting staff with professional

learning. Where there is enthusiasm from senior leaders, Waite (2010, p. 114) suggests that 'local socio-cultural expectations about the use of the outdoors may serve to override personal disinclination or other external barriers to this powerful pedagogic approach'.

Future accountability

The current approach seems to compliment those settings which make the most of the outdoor areas available with many examples within inspection reports of schools performing well in these areas and receiving positive feedback. However, there seems to be little steer towards encouraging this pedagogic approach more widely. For there to be accountability for providing high quality outdoor learning opportunities across Wales, we suggest there needs to be the targeted evaluation of outdoor learning provision by Estyn in their inspection framework.

Conclusion

To conclude, providing regular access to safe, outdoor spaces where teachers facilitate well thought-out opportunities for children to learn, consolidate and extend their learning, whilst connecting with nature provides a valuable pedagogical approach. It can enrich curriculum delivery, whilst also providing opportunities to develop important skills such as self-regulation, resilience, and empathy. Whilst free play is considered an important aspect of outdoor pedagogy, as Maynard, Waters and Clements (2013) suggest, providing children with the opportunity to explore and play in the outdoor environment is not, in itself, enough. This call for learning to be focussed, rather than ad-hoc, is further supported by Gilchrist and Emmerson (2016, cited in French *et al.*, 2023, p. 27) who highlight that 'schools require support to build their knowledge and confidence to deliver curricular learning outdoors in a creative and effective way; thus, recasting outdoor learning as a pedagogy'. This is further supported in the recent evaluation in Wales by French *et al.* (2023, p. 8), that:

understanding outdoor learning takes time, and this project clearly indicates that further work must be done to understand teachers' perspectives and beliefs about the power of outdoor

learning, and to determine how best to educate teachers and schools about its pedagogical power.

To achieve the level of outdoor learning that really benefits children, teachers need to be skilled at implementing outdoor learning as a pedagogy. This requires professional learning and teachers' willingness to embrace this form of educational development (Maynard, Waters and Clements, 2013). In addition, teachers need to feel supported by the school leadership team and have an appropriate outdoor area and resources available to them. We also need to give additional attention to the needs of older children within the primary school. French *et al.* (2023, p. 11) note that 'as children get older, there are less references to the need for outdoor learning; instead, the concept is portrayed as more of a 'bolt on' to the 'normal' curriculum instead of something that is at its heart. Even with the development of the new Curriculum for Wales, there are very few references to the benefits and need for outdoor learning in the curriculum' (French *et al.*, 2023, p. 11). As we move into the era of the new Curriculum for Wales, we are drawn back to the need for consistency in experience for all pupils, with all pupils in Wales experiencing regular, high quality outdoor learning opportunities, provided by knowledgeable teachers who understand the value that this pedagogical approach can bring. To enable this, as a starting point, we need all student teachers and classroom teachers to receive appropriate professional learning allowing for knowledge and skills development and the sharing of best practice for utilising the outdoors as a purposeful learning area. To raise and sustain the profile of outdoor learning, the Estyn Inspection Framework needs to recognise and value the importance of outdoor learning and incorporate it within the inspection framework to provide an element of measurement and accountability. These are important first steps in encouraging the embedding of outdoor learning within the curriculum and by doing so, shift its position from a 'fringe benefit' to a mainstream pedagogical practice.

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Educational Leadership in Wales Since Devolution

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the evolution of educational leadership in Wales since devolution, highlighting key developments, challenges, and reforms. Despite a slow start in adopting leadership as a policy driver, Wales has made significant strides in recent years, recognising leadership's crucial role in pupil outcomes. Political and ministerial leadership styles have varied, influencing major educational reforms such as the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales. The impact of international assessments like PISA, alongside OECD reviews, has underscored the need for effective leadership at all levels. Initiatives like the National Academy for Educational Leadership and the new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership reflect Wales' commitment to fostering educational leadership. However, challenges persist, including recruitment and retention issues, workload concerns, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter advocates for a proactive approach to leadership development, emphasising professional learning, support systems, and a cultural shift to elevate the status of educational leaders. By building on past achievements and addressing current challenges, Wales can ensure sustainable educational improvement and a vibrant learning environment for all students.

Keywords: educational leadership, devolution, Wales, educational reform, professional development

Introduction

Education in Wales has evolved significantly over the first quarter of the twenty-first century since devolution (Reynolds and McKimm, 2021). However, the development of education leadership as a key policy driver was slow to be adopted in Wales compared with other nations undergoing reform until more recently (Reynolds and McKimm, 2021). Yet we know that leadership is second only to teaching and learning for its impact on pupil outcomes (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020), so why has Wales been so slow to grasp this leadership mantle?

The authors of this chapter bring a wealth of expertise and experience, each with over three decades in leadership roles within the field of education in Wales. Their extensive careers encompass both secondary and primary education and senior positions in Local Authorities, providing them with a broad and nuanced perspective on educational leadership.

Reflecting on the literature, significant discussion surrounds the development of leadership in Wales since devolution (Egan and Marshall, 2007; Hopkins, 2016; Egan and Keane, 2018; Evans, 2022). As we approach the 25th anniversary of these changes, it appears that educational leadership in Wales is in dire need of revitalisation. A recent study (Aleynikova *et al.*, 2024) commissioned by the National Academy for Educational Leadership Wales (NAEL) highlights the acute challenges in recruiting and retaining senior leaders, exploring factors such as leader shortages, regional recruitment variations, workload concerns, and training needs. Connolly *et al.* (2018) identified an emerging recruitment crisis, particularly for specific categories of schools, such as Welsh Medium and rural schools. This research aligns with findings from Davies *et al.* (2018) regarding the recruitment processes in Wales, emphasising the urgent need to address these leadership gaps to enhance recruitment quality and improve leader retention. This research underscores the importance of supporting senior leaders' well-being, ensuring suitable candidates for vacancies, and recognising these leaders' vital role in education. Although much has already been done and will be examined later, this paper argues for a proactive future approach in developing educational leaders to sustain and advance the quality of education in Wales.

In this chapter, we consider leadership in its broadest sense, from political and ministerial leadership through the tiers of education to school leadership. We define leadership as the ability and opportunity to influence and lead others.

Political Educational Leadership Since Devolution

Since devolution, Wales has experienced an unprecedented era of political stability. Despite this, the volume of policy changes for leaders to implement has been relentless. Significant challenges have arisen, including underachievement in international comparisons, as well as major transformations like the introduction of the Foundation Phase, Additional Learning Needs provision, and the Curriculum for Wales.

Over the years, the leadership styles of those in charge of the education portfolio in Wales have varied considerably (Jones and Harris, 2020), reflecting diverse visions and strategies for educational reform. Jane Davidson, recognised for her visionary and supportive leadership (CFPP, 2024), emphasised the need to rethink early childhood education. Inspired by Scandinavian models, she introduced the Foundation Phase, which focused on experiential learning for pupils up to seven. In contrast, Leighton Andrews AM, serving as Minister from 2009 to 2011, adopted a more direct approach. His tenure was marked by a sharp focus on literacy and numeracy, leading to the controversial use of standardised tests (All Wales Reading and Numeracy Tests) and categorisation (Welsh Government, 2019) to hold schools accountable.

By 2016, methods previously employed were deemed unsuccessful in achieving the desired uplift in educational standards. A shift occurred with the appointment of Kirsty Williams, a Liberal Democrat AM, as Education Cabinet Secretary by the Labour Government, serving from 2016 to 2021 in a coalition with Labour. This period of significant reform followed on from initiatives begun by her predecessor, Huw Lewis AM, who had initiated significant reforms based on numerous comprehensive reviews of the Welsh education system (OECD, 2013; Donaldson, 2015; Furlong, 2015; Waters *et al.*, 2018)

Kirsty Williams's tenure was particularly notable for its ambitious drive to overhaul the education system, driven by school leaders. Central to her strategy was the collaborative and co-creative development of a new curriculum, heavily influenced by Professor Graham Donaldson's 'Successful Futures' report (Donaldson, 2015), which made sixty-eight recommendations for educational improvements in Wales. The government embraced all these recommendations, formulating the national action plan '*Education in Wales: Our National Mission – Action Plan 2017–2021*' (Welsh Government, 2017). This document highlighted inspirational and collaborative leadership as one of four critical 'enabling objectives' (pp. 28–9) necessary for successfully realising the transformative new curriculum. Subsequent actions from

this plan impacted various aspects of the educational system, including establishing a leadership academy, developing professional standards for teaching and leadership, and introducing a new pay and conditions framework. This chapter will now consider some main factors that have shaped leadership development.

Leadership Judged by Outcomes

Since the devolution, Wales has significantly diverged from English educational policies (Simkins, 2014; Woods *et al.*, 2021). Over the past fourteen years, under a UK Conservative Government, political pressures on Wales to enhance educational standards have been considerable. The results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests are key benchmarks used to assess these standards. Participating since 2006, Wales has consistently scored below the OECD average across all domains and remained the lowest-performing home nation in the PISA assessments (Senedd Research, 2023).

The tests often have mixed reception among academics and education professionals in Wales, as in many other places, opinions vary. Some academics and policymakers support PISA as they believe these tests provide valuable comparative data that can help gauge the effectiveness of the national education system against global standards. However, many more critics, including academics like Caro, Kyridakides, and Leonidas (2019), Metsapera (2024), and Zhao (2020), argue that the PISA assessments are fundamentally flawed. They contend that these tests do not comprehensively measure student development and that policies derived from PISA results rely on imperfect data. It is argued (Baird *et al.*, 2011) that this has had a varied yet significant effect on policy direction worldwide. Despite these criticisms and continuing poor results in the 2022 PISA assessments, the Welsh Government has maintained its commitment to long-term educational reforms. This steadfast approach highlights a belief in the importance of stability and sustained policy efforts over reactionary measures based on potentially flawed assessments.

The Influence of the OECD on Leadership Across the System

Because of our poor international performance, in 2012 PISA (Welsh Government, 2015), Wales commissioned the OECD to review its education system, orchestrated

by the then-Minister Leighton Andrews. The OECD provided several reports between 2014 and today, offering expert advice on policy implementation to enhance education in Wales (OECD, 2014; 2017; 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2021). These reports emphasised the critical role of leadership at all levels in implementing reforms, including the new Curriculum for Wales and professional learning reforms.

The OECD links effective leadership with school improvement, emphasising its role in curriculum implementation, learner engagement, and overall school performance. However, there are ongoing calls from current leaders and their Unions for additional resources and support to manage reforms and ensure inclusivity and equity in education. The Schools as Learning Organisations (SLO) Model (Kools and Stoll, 2016; Kools, 2018) is another initiative by the Welsh Government that offers a framework for leaders to develop a self-improving system, although its implementation varies across schools. This framework lists seven dimensions and four themes leaders can use to develop a self-improving system and learning organisation. Although initially adopted by many schools, the reality is that for many, it has become overlooked and not embedded in how schools operate. (Harris *et al.*, 2022)

While the progress made in leadership development is recognised (Harris *et al.*, 2021), challenges such as workload, the pace of reform, and the need for more targeted professional development opportunities are frequently mentioned. Both the OECD and the Welsh Government (2014b) have emphasised the role of school leaders in promoting inclusivity and equity and narrowing the attainment gap. Effective leadership is seen as key to addressing disparities in educational outcomes and ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to succeed.

The importance of leadership prompted the creation of the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL) (Harris and Jones, 2021) in 2018, which operates as an arm's length body under the Companies Act 2006. NAEL supports the Welsh Government's strategic leadership aims, enhancing leader capabilities, articulating educational leadership vision, and serving as a primary contact for educational leadership matters (NAEL, 2022). The NAEL is central to educational reforms outlined in 'Our National Mission: High Standards and Aspirations for All' (Welsh Government, 2023a) and is pivotal in endorsing leadership development programs aligned with national priorities.

NAEL also supports leaders through a two/three-year Associate programme to develop high-calibre system leaders who contribute to national policy and address

key educational challenges. Following the programme, alums can join a NAEL Federation of progressive school leaders who are supported in continuing to address leadership issues identified by the profession.

Leadership Standards and Qualification for Wales

With these significant changes in the educational system, expectations for leaders in Wales have also evolved. The introduction of the new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (Waters, 2017) has been positively received, helping to clarify roles and foster educator growth. These standards replaced an earlier version (Welsh Government, 2009) that, with over 60 criteria, was considered overly complex and unstructured.

Developed in 2018, the new standards were crafted through a broad collaborative effort that included educators, leaders, and other stakeholders across the Welsh education sector. The standards emphasise Pedagogy and include sections on Leadership, Collaboration, Innovation, and Professional Learning. They guide at two levels – teachers and leaders – with a stronger emphasis on leadership for the latter. An extensive consultation process ensured the standards were both practical and reflective of the fundamental challenges within Welsh education. They promote a holistic approach to professional development, stressing lifelong learning and aligning with the Welsh Government's educational reforms and broader ambitions.

The golden ticket for teachers aspiring to move into Headship has been the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). It was introduced in 1999 to elevate leadership standards and ensure quality for upcoming headteachers (Bush, 1998). It became mandatory for headship appointments in Wales in 2004, reaffirming the requirement in May 2017 and March 2022, underscoring the continued importance of the NPQH. Significant changes to the NPQH were implemented under the *Headteachers' Qualifications and Registration (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2011* (UK Government, 2011). The revision transformed the NPQH into a rigorous, practice-based assessment aligned with the then 'Teacher Standards', ensuring candidates met high leadership criteria. A pilot programme in 2011 tested these revisions, which stakeholders welcomed as a substantial improvement, offering a more practical and effective approach to headteacher qualification.

A Master's Degree Level Leadership Pathway

The formation of the regional consortia represented a strategic approach to school and leadership improvement, aiming to leverage regional expertise and resources to meet local needs while aligning with national objectives. The four Consortia deliver a leadership development pathway development programme nationally, from middle leader development through to experienced headteacher development.

However, an ambition of educational reform in Wales has been to elevate the workforce to a master's level profession. In 2013, newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were given a chance to enrol free of charge for a Master's in Educational Practice (MEP) degree up until 2018. After an evaluation and rethink, the Welsh Government initiated a second funded master's program targeted this time at teachers in their third to sixth year, culminating in an MA Education (Wales) (Leadership) for those who choose the leadership track. This programme, launched in September 2021, is a cornerstone of Wales's national mission for education (Welsh Government, 2024a), offering a leadership development opportunity tailored to the Welsh educational context. The National MA Education (Wales) (Leadership) is crafted to enhance the skills of current and future educational leaders, supporting their professional growth in alignment with new leadership standards and the evolving Welsh curriculum. While it is premature to evaluate the full impact of this initiative, it underscores the Welsh Government's dedication to improving education quality through leadership development. The programme aims to foster equity, excellence, and well-being principles, preparing leaders to drive school improvements throughout Wales. A national doctoral programme (EdD) is being launched in September 2025 to promote evidence-based practice's importance and help Wales grow its solid academic culture.

However, despite the MA's significance in educational reform, financial constraints and other governmental priorities challenge its continued full funding. The incentive for practitioners to find partial funding from school or self-fund will almost certainly impact the enrolment numbers (Smith *et al.*, 2024). Also, the recent rejection of a salary increase proposal 'for those teachers with an appropriate Master's level qualification, there should be an uplift of one increment and a tenth salary point' (Waters *et al.*, 2018, p. 64) further reduces the incentive for educators to self-fund their advanced studies.

High-Stakes Accountability

One of the unintended consequences of the recent extensive reform agenda has been to put a strain on the nation's headteachers, who grapple with policy, accountability, and the effects of unpredictable crises. Over the years, it has become apparent that high-stakes accountability often leads to unintended behaviours. For example, SATs led to teaching for the test, and subsequent colour categorisation led to over- and under-subscription in some schools. In a national survey carried out by NAEL Associates (NAEL, 2021, p. 7), headteachers reported that the most significant factors impacting their well-being and motivation to continue in the role were 'workload, accountability and the inspection process'. In response to the changing educational landscape in Wales, Estyn, the Welsh education inspection body, has started evolving its approach to inspection and support based on a self-commissioned report entitled 'A Learning Inspectorate' (Donaldson, 2018). This evolution includes the development of a new inspection framework, set to start in September 2024, which emphasises learner experiences and skill development. Notably, Estyn has shifted from summative judgments to providing only narrative feedback in 2022. This starkly contrasts with Ofsted in England, whose methodologies are highly criticised by Unions and professionals alike. While Estyn's reports continue to have an evaluative section on the quality of leadership as an indicator of overall quality, the Chief Inspector reports that Estyn will support leaders to build the capacity to become self-improving and develop a self-evaluative learning culture (Estyn, 2023) in line with WG aspirations.

Pioneer Schools Leading the Curriculum for Wales 2022

Welsh Government knew that to gather the support of all stakeholders, it had to give ownership to practitioners (OECD, 2020). Since the first introduction of a National Curriculum in Wales, leaders have been calling for reform to allow professional teachers to drive a contextual curriculum with the freedom to innovate and experiment, giving the best experiences to learners. A co-construction approach in Wales was designed to involve many stakeholders in leading the curriculum development process rather than having it dictated solely by government bodies or external experts.

Many progressive school leaders volunteered their schools as Pioneer Schools, which played a central and pivotal role in this process. Digital pioneers, New Deal pioneers and Curriculum pioneer schools were all established with differing roles. These schools were selected from across Wales to lead the development and implementation of the new curriculum and the required professional learning. Their roles included curriculum design, testing and refining and leading professional learning to build capacity in the system (Arad, 2018). The co-construction process, mainly through the involvement of Pioneer Schools, has been significant because it embodies a democratic and inclusive approach to curriculum development. By engaging the practitioners directly involved in delivering education, the Welsh Government aimed to ensure that the curriculum was fit for purpose and adaptable to the evolving educational landscape.

This approach has fostered a sense of ownership and commitment among most educators, which is crucial for successfully implementing any new curriculum (Sinnema, Nieveen, and Priestly, 2020). However, some school leaders not involved in the Pioneer schools feel excluded. This has raised concerns about the capacity to design and deliver a consistently high-quality curriculum across Wales (Gatley, 2020). Global educational trends emphasise teacher agency, collaborative practices, and curriculum relevance to real-world contexts. Leaders now face the challenge of overseeing the implementation phase, a critical role for instructional leaders.

Leadership in a Post-Pandemic World

On 23 March 2020, the UK went into the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown (Institute for Government, 2022). Education settings were forced to close their doors and move to an online synchronous teaching approach for most. Despite Wales being ahead of many countries with a national learning platform, Hwb, already in existence, home learning would be hit and miss depending on each individual student's home circumstances. For leaders, it was an unprecedented time of chaos, grief and rapid and unpredictable changing circumstances (Harris and Jones, 2020). The summer months brought a little relief, and schools reopened with many infection-preventative measures in place. A second lockdown occurred as the winter months allowed the infection to re-vitalise. However, little did leaders know then that it would be Easter 2021 before all students returned to school following this further firebreak and lockdown.

In May 2023, the World Health Organization officially declared the pandemic over (United Nations, 2023). However, schools are still picking up the pieces of the pandemic impact. Behavioural similarities emerge in schools that occur physically and psychologically in the outcomes of post-disaster recovery in countries that have suffered natural disasters such as earthquakes, storms, fires, floods, or events such as war or terrorism (Meyers and Zunin, 2000). The aftermath of the pandemic and the knock-on consequences are still deeply felt in schools and by their leaders (Harris and Jones, 2022). Schools were the universal service for all children and many families, to a greater or lesser extent, during the pandemic period. Teachers reached out to the home and made themselves available to parents, going above and beyond what could be reasonably expected (Marchant *et al.*, 2021). Leaders set up hubs for essential worker families to enable those parents to continue to work throughout lockdown (Waters-Davies *et al.*, 2022). Leaders are now working on re-invigorated strategies to re-engage students and compensate for lost learning (Welsh Government, 2023b). Attendance statistics (Welsh Government, 2024b) have shown a significant drop from before Covid-19, getting worse as students get older and choose to vote with their feet by not attending. Leaders also report behavioural issues and poor social skills because of prolonged absence of schooling and routine.

The Future of School Leadership

It seems the system has some significant decisions to address for the future (Harris and Jones, 2021). Leaders in secondary schools are very nervous about how future qualifications will develop (Qualifications Wales, 2024) and how vocational pathways will impact schools and Further Education (FE) colleges going forward. Many students are not engaged with the diet of education they currently receive (Welsh Government, 2024b), and societal norms are breaking down (Andrews, 2024). Lack of respect for the profession by a minority of parents means that leaders face far more complaints and sometimes abusive or aggressive behaviour from other adults and students (NAHT, 2024). This, in turn, leads to low morale and a negative leadership discourse, which in turn prevents good staff from applying for leadership roles and explains why numerous excellent leaders leave the profession early. A future proactive and strategic approach to supporting educational leaders in Wales should encompass enhanced professional learning opportunities, including coaching, mentoring, and

accreditation. This approach should also drive cultural change that values and elevates educational leadership both within and beyond the education system, thereby enhancing the status of leaders and educational professionals (Heffernan *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, strategically resourcing the school system and making significant investments in support services for young people and their families will enable school leaders to focus more effectively on engagement and learning.

This is a concern for local authorities, who are the primary legal employers of school staff. It became apparent that other agencies within the system did not support leaders well enough (Harris *et al.*, 2021). Following an independent review of leadership in Wales (Harris *et al.*, 2021), the Education Minister, Jeremy Miles, asked for a systematic review of the structure of education in Wales, particularly the Middle Tier organisations that support schools. In 2023, Professor Dylan Jones (2024) conducted a notable review to evaluate and provide recommendations for the structure and function of the middle tier within the Welsh education system. The middle tier is the organisational layer between individual schools and the national government, typically involving local authorities, regional consortia, and other educational bodies. The primary goal was to assess how the middle tier could best support schools in improving student outcomes. This involved looking at the effectiveness of the existing structures in place, such as NAEL, Estyn and the regional consortia, and determining whether they adequately supported schools and delivered on educational priorities. It also focused on how the middle tier can support educational improvement through leadership, professional development, and resource allocation.

Professor Jones's approach involved extensive consultation with stakeholders across the education sector, including school leaders, teachers, educational experts, and local government officials. This inclusive process ensured that the review captured a wide range of insights and perspectives on how the middle tier was functioning. While the specific recommendations from the review are detailed and context-specific, they generally advocate for more explicit roles and responsibilities, better coordination among different parts of the middle tier, and enhanced support for schools, particularly in areas like professional development and resource management.

The Welsh Government has considered these findings and recommendations (Jones, 2024) in its ongoing efforts to reform educational governance and improve school support systems in Wales. Jones's review has contributed to the debate on how to best structure educational governance to support school improvement effectively. Phase two of the enquiry is now ongoing.

Money is not the Answer

It would be remiss not to mention the subject of remuneration as a motivation for Headteachers and other leaders in our schools. The authority to determine pay and conditions of service for teachers and educational leaders in Wales and England was vested in the Secretary of State for Education under the Westminster Government until 30 September 2018. The Wales Act 2017 provided for the devolution of this power to the Welsh Ministers, effective from 30 September 2018.

In conjunction with this transfer of authority, the Welsh Ministers instituted the Independent Welsh Pay Review Body (IWPRB). The IWPRB was tasked with advising the Minister for Education on reforms to the pay and conditions of service for teachers and leaders in Wales. The latest review of teachers' pay and conditions in Wales (IWPRB, 2022), has made several key recommendations to improve the teaching profession. These include numerous factors affecting Headteachers' and other school leaders' salaries and working conditions. The recommendations include a review of leadership pay, including a raised minimum starting salary for Headteachers, and a workload assessment.

Headteachers are generally well-paid public servants (Welsh Government, 2023c). Going forward, it would be good to see the recommendation of the IWPRB to increase the starting salary of Headteachers of small schools, thus reducing the differential, as these leaders often have a dual teaching and leadership commitment. Where that is unsustainable, due to recruitment issues or financial pressures, local authorities must make brave decisions regarding collaboration or federation, such as those proposed for Cardiff City (Cardiff City Council, 2024). This approach would lead to more Executive Headteachers of viable federations, with the option to employ an economy of scale in sharing staff laterally, such as a bursar or human resource specialist across a Federation.

Conclusion

The journey of educational leadership in Wales since devolution has been marked by significant developments, challenges, and reforms. From the early stages of devolution to the present day, the focus on leadership has evolved, driven by the recognition of its crucial role in improving educational outcomes. Key milestones such as the

establishment of the NPQH, the influence of OECD reviews, the creation of the NAEL, the National Masters Programme, regional collaboration, and the introduction of new leadership standards all reflect a strong commitment to fostering effective leadership in Welsh schools.

However, challenges remain, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has placed unprecedented demands on school leaders. Addressing workload, recruitment, retention, and professional development will ensure that Welsh educational leadership continues to grow and thrive. The ongoing reforms and initiatives, informed by local, national and international insights, underscore the importance of continued support for school leaders in navigating the complexities of the modern educational landscape.

As Wales moves forward, the lessons learned from the past two and a half decades will be invaluable in shaping the future of educational leadership. Along with technological advances, a strong commitment to equity, excellence, and well-being will be essential in creating an education system that meets all learners' needs and supports educators' professional growth. We are in a changing world and yet to see the full impact of AI on leadership, where a strategic development plan can now be written using artificial intelligence to a very high standard. The knowledge economy is becoming far less critical than humanistic social skills such as empathy, aesthetics, vision, belonging and judgment (Sahlberg, 2021). By building on the foundations laid since devolution, Wales can aspire to a future where strong humanistic and trusted leadership drives educational sustainability and success and fosters a vibrant and inclusive learning environment for all.

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As Wales marks a quarter of a century of devolved policymaking in education, this edited volume celebrates the successes, and grapples critically with the ongoing challenges faced by Wales's education system. Researchers from across the UK education landscape pose critical questions: about the leadership of reform; about where responsibility lies for the successful implementation of a number of post-devolution policy innovations, such as the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales; about the nature and ownership of accountability; about how professionals can best be developed and supported to deliver the current ambitious reform journey; and about a great deal more.

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