

RESEARCH NOTE

The Learning Country

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Historical background

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of *The Learning Country*, a 'paving document' published by the National Assembly for Wales in September 2001, not only in terms of the policy statements it contains but also in terms of its place in the history of state education in Wales.

Not since the end of the nineteenth century has there been a similarly significant publication, the 1881 Report of the Aberdare Committee which advocated the establishment of two university colleges in Wales and a system of secondary education which eventually resulted in the only Act of Parliament to apply solely to Welsh education, the Welsh Intermediate Education Act of 1889. Both Report and Act acknowledged that what was appropriate for education in England and Wales as an entity was not always adequate or appropriate for Wales. The acceptance of that willingness to legislate and the mindset behind it, in the relatively early years of a state system of education, laid a founding flagstone for a paving document of similar historic weight. There is insufficient space here to rehearse all the elements in the incremental devolutionary process which has, to a greater or lesser extent, punctuated the twentieth century and acknowledged, sometimes grudgingly, the right of the people of Wales to have a say in their education system (see T. Jones, 2000).

What we can say is that, in the recent past, separate decision-making in education in Wales has been prompted by a meshing of political and

institutional devolution with policy centralization. In 1964, for the first time, a secretary of state for Wales was appointed, to be served by the Welsh Office. The Welsh Office had an education department which, by 1970, had assumed responsibility for primary and secondary education in Wales, subject to the edicts of the UK government in London. In the 1980s the significance of this element of Welsh educational devolution became apparent because of the new drive towards centralized control of the education system encapsulated in the 1988 Education Reform Act and subsequent legislation. Paradoxically, therefore, despite the rejection of wider political devolution in 1979, an increasing element of divergence in Welsh education became possible because of intensifying central control.

This was particularly apparent in the case of the National Curriculum. Once the government decided that it should be a broad rather than a core curriculum, a different National Curriculum for Wales was inevitable. In the period since the Second World War there had been institutional lip service to differences in Wales. After the 1944 Education Act, Wales was granted its own Central Advisory Council for Education but it only occasionally came to life. With the Schools Council in 1964 came a committee for Wales. However, when the 'National' Curriculum Council was established in England by the 1988 Act, an autonomous Curriculum Council for Wales (CCW) was set up at the same time. Given the National Curriculum, if the CCW chose to be proactive, it was in a position to enhance Welsh distinctiveness – as it did in 1993, with the Curriculum Cymreig (CCW, 1993).

These changes happened without further political devolution. So did the translation to Wales of frenetic activity by the new Labour government from 1997, under Peter Hain. Nursery school vouchers went immediately, before any announcement from England, and the Welsh Office published the *Building Excellent Schools Together* White Paper in July 1997. But what then transformed the situation was the coming of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, bringing enormously enhanced, if still circumscribed, political devolution. The Assembly has secondary rather than primary law-making powers, but has education as one of its main responsibilities. The auguries did not seem good at the time of confusion accompanying performance-related pay for school-teachers which was defined as a 'reserved' matter, with the relevant decisions still retained at Westminster. That contretemps seemed to highlight the Assembly's limitations.

However, looked at from the perspective of early 2002, this now appears to have been a false start. The structure of responsibilities in the Assembly has been rationalized and since October 2000 there has been a Labour/Liberal

Democrat administration with a dynamic and able Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, Jane Davidson. *The Learning Country* represents the first fruits of policy development from the Assembly administration in the new era of political devolution.

A distinctive policy agenda

The scope of *The Learning Country* agenda for education in Wales is impressively wide and its emphases intriguingly distinctive. The overwhelmingly positive initial response to the document is indicative of the extent to which its assertions of the principles on which education in a devolved Wales should be developed differ from the perspectives on education that carried weight in the pre-1999 era of administrative devolution (Daugherty, Phillips and Rees, 2000). Chapter headings such as 'Learning and equality of opportunity in Wales' signal an underlying value system that is quite different from the English mindset of 'New Labour' in Millbank, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and 10 Downing Street.

Under the equally significant chapter heading 'Comprehensive education and lifelong learning in Wales' can be found statements that many would applaud as celebrating what is already distinctive about education in Wales. The commitment to a system of non-selective comprehensive secondary schools is expressed in startlingly direct terms: 'they have been successful' (p. 23). This contrasts with the rhetoric of chapters such as 'Excellence, innovation and diversity' in the parallel DfES paper, *Schools Achieving Success* (DfES, 2001). But to summarize and evaluate *The Learning Country* by comparing it with its English counterpart would be to interpret it in the old 'England and Wales' terms appropriate to the pre-1999 era of administrative devolution. That would be a mistake.

To understand *The Learning Country* and its significance for education, and for education research, in Wales, it has to be seen as 'the first comprehensive strategic statement on education and lifelong learning in Wales' (Ministerial Foreword, p. 2).

The parameters of the debate have changed dramatically for education at all levels and for all age groups in Wales. A closer view of two of the most prominent policy areas in the document may help to clarify the terms of that debate and the way in which it challenges all who will engage with it, whether as policy-makers, practitioners or researchers.

Policies, powers and possibilities

Since 1997, first the Welsh Office and now the Assembly administration have seen the strengthening of 'early-years' provision for children aged between three and seven as a high priority. *The Learning Country* builds on the work of the Early Years Advisory Group and Task Force to signal a 'cohesive approach' to childcare and nursery provision and the intention to 'seek explicit powers to give an appropriate legislative basis to childcare and early years development partnerships' (p. 16). The document also proposes 'a statutory foundation phase with a curriculum extending from age 3 to 7' (p. 20), a major departure for an age group where the distinction between 'pre-school' and 'key stage 1' has increasingly been seen as an obstacle to coherent planning and provision. The proposed radical reconfiguration of this phase of childcare and education is further emphasized by the intention to discontinue, at the end of the phase, the national testing of seven-year-olds.

In one sense, the Assembly administration is picking up and running with a policy direction that was already in place before 1999 and it is making use of an evidence base commissioned by the Assembly's original pre-16 Education Committee (Hanney, 2000). But it is also doing much more than that, not least in allocating an extra £12 million annually for early-years provision from 2003. And, perhaps most significantly of all, it has negotiated with the DfES the inclusion of the necessary enabling clauses in the 2002 Education Bill to make it possible for the Assembly, rather than the UK government, to determine the curriculum and assessment arrangements for all school-age children in Wales. Those powers, though they take the form of secondary legislation, are extensive. It is now open to the Assembly in future years to reshape all the curriculum and assessment requirements, including the testing of eleven and fourteen-year-olds and the National Curriculum structure, that were put in place by the 1988 Education Act.

A second and contrasting policy area is that of higher education. There are a few similarities with the early-years area, for example, in the fact that its designation as a priority area is attributable to the role of the Assembly's committees in helping to shape the agenda (Egan and James, 2001). But for the most part higher education illustrates more of the problems than the possibilities in the fulfilling of the Assembly administration's ambitions to make a significant difference to educational provision in Wales. Chapter 7 of *The Learning Country*, 'Access and the future of higher education', rehearses familiar concerns about, and policy directions for, the higher education sector in Wales, such as widening access, the exploitation of knowledge to benefit

the economy and the fact that the sector comprises '13 relatively small institutions' (p. 57). As with early-years provision, a committee-led review was the focus for policy development, though in this case the review commissioned by the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee (ELL) was being undertaken concurrently with the drafting of *The Learning Country*.

Published in January 2002, the ELL Committee's *Policy Review of Higher Education* (NAfW, 2002) covers every aspect of higher education (HE) from aims through funding and institutional structures to outcomes, in relation to both student learning and research. But the evidence on which the committee has based its conclusions is insubstantial. Indeed, there would appear to have been more effort (and money?) expended on the review, commissioned by the Minister, of one aspect of higher education policy – student support in further and higher education (IIGSHFW, 2001) – than on all the other aspects of higher education put together.

Though the Minister intends to use the committee's review as the starting point for a ten-year strategy for higher education in Wales, she also faces potential obstacles in terms of the Assembly's powers in this policy area. Not only does the university sector retain more power to shape its own destiny than any other sector in education but also the Assembly does not currently have the 'planning powers' the HE review suggests the Assembly needs if it is to implement the changes the review recommends. That would require primary legislation in Westminster, something that, for a variety of reasons, may not be seen by the UK government as either desirable or urgent.

A role for education research?

Publication in February 2002 of a review of education research in Wales (Furlong and White, 2002) has been timely, both because much of the research relevant to *The Learning Country* agenda takes place in the higher education sector that the administration is seeking to reform and because the minister has expressed herself strongly in support of the principle of 'evidence-based policy'. In the Assembly's policy formulation to date the early-years and student support policy areas can be seen as examples of a real commitment to learning from research evidence, from Wales, the UK and elsewhere in the world. But there have been other policy areas where little or no attempt has been made to access available research evidence at any point in the 'policy cycle' (Furlong and White, 2002: 12).

Those of us who believe that education research can play its part in shaping, evaluating and critiquing the evolution of education in the new Wales will be

encouraged by some of what we see now emerging in the era of political devolution. Yet there is also a stark warning in the report by Furlong and White about the current low level of capacity in Wales to undertake education research. Even if it were to be assumed that all the eighty or so 'research active' education academics in Wales (supplemented by a few researchers elsewhere in Wales and beyond whose research may from time to time focus on Wales) are specialists in the policy areas highlighted in *The Learning Country*, how far would that take us in responding to the demand for evidence-based policy? The truth is that the capacity within Wales to undertake policy-related research, for example in the priority areas of post-16 education, higher education and lifelong learning, is currently totally inadequate. A disposition to make use of relevant research evidence will need to be matched by a commitment to enhancing the capacity of the research community to meet that challenge.

Conclusion

The Learning Country is not a blueprint but rather a series of position statements which, taken together, offer a framework of ideas for an education system that is increasingly designed and developed in Wales. Fleshing out that framework so that it becomes a coherent, realistic and affordable set of policies is a formidable task facing Wales's fledgling indigenous processes of policy formulation. More specifically, it challenges the small cohort of education researchers whose work is relevant to that policy agenda to contribute the evidence, analysis and independent critique that our emerging policy-making system will need.

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