The Impacts of Parliamentary Devolution on Education Policy in Wales[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a framework for analysing the impacts of parliamentary devolution in Wales on education policy. The advent of parliamentary devolution has created circumstances in which education policies have become increasingly distinct from those in other parts of the UK. However, there are important continuities between the pre- and post-Assembly phases of devolution too; and the 'British system' continues to exert a significant influence. In exploring these issues more deeply, it is important to distinguish between changes and continuities in: the processes through which education policies are formed; the nature of the policies which are adopted; and the impacts of policies on educational provision. At the moment, it is only really the first two of these for which systematic evidence is available. The analysis presented here suggests that those groupings in civil society which have historically exerted a powerful influence over the policy process in Welsh education continue to do so. Indeed, it can be suggested that parliamentary devolution has created new opportunities through which such influence can be applied. This suggests, in turn, that the distinctiveness of Welsh education policy should be interpreted as a continuation of established, social democratic policy themes; in contrast with the radical changes being effected by New Labour in England.

Parliamentary devolution and education policy

Education policy provides a particularly fertile arena in which to explore the effects of the regime of devolved governance in Wales which was ushered in with the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999. Responsibility for nearly all aspects of education and training has now been devolved. Therefore, the Welsh Assembly Government's policies in this area are important. Moreover, education is a policy area where the divergences with English policies have been claimed to be quite radical. When the First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, in a speech to the National Institute for Public Policy Research at the University of Wales Swansea, in December 2002, wished to demonstrate his claim that there was 'clear red water' between the policies of his administration and those of New Labour in Westminster, it was to educational initiatives that he frequently turned.

Academic analysts too have argued that, especially following the formation of the 'partnership' coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in October 2000, there has emerged an increasingly distinctive set of education policies in Wales (for example, Egan and James, 2003; Phillips, 2003; Rees, 2002). Such divergence from England is rather striking, given the dominance of an 'England and Wales' policy regime for education through most of the twentieth century (Jones and Roderick, 2003). This is not to suggest that the differences between Wales and England were non-existent during this period, but rather that they were limited. They did begin to grow, however, following the creation of the Welsh Office and its assumption of increasing powers over education during the 1970s and the more recent accumulation of quangos with responsibilities exclusively for Wales during the 1980s and 1990s (Phillips and Daugherty, 2001).

What the latest phase of devolution is claimed to offer is a governance regime which can foster the development of a system of education and training which is geared to meeting the needs of Welsh society. To a much greater extent than at any time previously, commentators are pointing to the emergence of a truly national education system in Wales. In what follows, I want to subject this kind of analysis to critical scrutiny. It is undoubtedly the case that parliamentary devolution has created the circumstances in which education policies in Wales have become increasingly distinct from those in England. Certainly, it is extremely unlikely that things would have developed in this way if the old Welsh Office regime had continued. However, there are important continuities between the pre- and post-Assembly phases of devolution too. Moreover, it is essential to recognize the limitations of the

changes that have occurred in the processes through which education policies are developed. To a considerable extent, those groupings in civil society which have always exerted a powerful influence over the policy process in education continue to do so. What this suggests, in turn, is that the impacts of Wales's new policy system may turn out to be more restricted than needs to be the case.

The emergence of a national education system in Wales?

What, then, is the evidence to sustain the case for an increasing divergence between the education system of Wales and that of England? Perhaps the most instructive starting point here is the Assembly Government's Paving Document, *The Learning Country* (National Assembly for Wales, 2001), which set out a comprehensive strategy for education up until 2010 and has recently been confirmed in a follow-up document (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006a). One of its most striking features is the extent to which it explicitly sets out to develop a policy programme which is specifically geared to what are defined as the distinctive needs of Wales. As the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, Jane Davidson, puts it in her Foreword: 'We share strategic goals with our colleagues in England – but we often need to take a different route to achieve them. We shall take our own policy direction where necessary, to get the best for Wales' (p. 2).

Moreover, as the First Minister's 'clear red water' speech in 2002 suggests, the rationale for pursuing this 'Welsh route' in educational policy is as much about ideology as efficiency; it expresses profoundly held beliefs about how the education system and the learning opportunities it provides *ought* to be organized in Wales. The commitment here is to what in many ways can be interpreted as deep-seated social democratic virtues, albeit in changed and unfamiliar circumstances: equality of opportunity through universal provision; the necessity of the state's role in ensuring this; the rights and obligations of citizenship, expressed through the notion of the 'entitlements' of children and young people; partnership between the central state, local education authorities and professional groups. Indeed, as Paterson (2003) has argued, it is not possible to understand the *British* Labour Party's educational priorities except by reference to the tensions between the ideologies of what he terms 'New Labour', 'developmentalism' and 'new social democracy', with the latter most clearly represented within the devolved administrations of Wales and Scotland. Crucially, here, the differences between these ideological

strands are not so much over the goals of educational policy, but rather over the means of achieving them.

Hence, for example, in Wales as elsewhere, there is a widespread acknowledgement of the need to improve levels of attainment and to widen educational opportunities. To these ends, the Welsh Assembly Government has pursued an extremely active agenda of policy initiatives, especially within the compulsory sector of education in schools. However, in contrast with what is happening in England, policies such as the abandonment of published 'league tables' of test scores for individual secondary schools, are intended to soften the competitive edge of relationships between schools. The promotion of higher standards of pupil attainment through enhanced support and continuing professional development for teachers, rather than centralized and competitively driven approaches being pursued in England, also reflects an emphasis on partnership and collaboration between the Assembly Government, the local education authorities and the teaching profession and other employee groups. Similarly, the strong commitment to the maintenance of comprehensive schooling in Wales, ruling out the adoption of the English pattern of specialist secondary schools and even partial selection, is an important re-affirmation of a traditional Labour principle (Phillips, 2003): 'we want a confident, characterful, and comprehensive system in Wales … We remain committed to non-selective, comprehensive school provision in Wales. This pattern of provision serves us well' (National Assembly for Wales, 2001: p. 25).

Curriculum and assessment reform too has embodied distinctive approaches. The abolition of testing, initially for 7-year-olds and subsequently at Key Stages 2 and 3, following the recommendations made in the Daugherty Review (2004), clearly sets out an approach to assessment which diverges strongly from that being pursued in England. The introduction of a Foundation Phase for 3- to 7-year-olds reflects an almost Scandinavian model where formal education is delayed, but schooling starts as early as possible; this is certainly a very different approach from what happens in England (and, indeed, the other parts of the United Kingdom).

In the later stages of educational provision, the development of 14–19 Pathways is aimed at breaking down the barriers between learning in academic and vocational settings, strengthening students' experience of employment and work, as well as other aspects of citizenship (for example, Welsh Assembly Government, 2006b). Of particular interest here is the piloting of a Welsh Baccalaureate, with a view to providing a framework for the accreditation of different types of qualification and the provision of a

'core' of key skills, personal and citizenship education with a distinctively Welsh orientation. As Egan and James (2003) comment, these changes '... promise [...] to see in Wales the demise of the National Curriculum framework created by the Education Act of 1988. The possibility of distinctiveness in the curriculum in Wales is provided by the 2002 Education Act' (p. 104). Again, then, what is being developed in Wales is distinctive from provision in other parts of the UK and, in particular, England, where the rejection of the Tomlinson recommendations has left considerable uncertainties amongst the educational community. Certainly, the decision to introduce 'employer-designed' Specialised Diplomas does not seem to have resolved these (Nuffield Review, 2006).

In other areas of education policy too, the Welsh Assembly Government has followed a divergent path from elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Most notably, perhaps, in higher education (HE), its approach to the restructuring of arrangements for student funding differs not only from that in England, but also from that adopted by the Scottish Executive. Initially, the National Assembly simply did not have the powers to abolish up-front tuition fees (and replace them with a graduate endowment scheme), as had been done in Scotland following the recommendations of the Cubie Report (1999). However, the alternative of introducing a means-tested Assembly Learning Grant was regarded by many as highly imaginative, especially given the inclusion of students in further education (FE) and those studying part-time. Moreover, the extension of funding to support access and to support students at Welsh institutions in hardship was also widely welcomed (Rees Review, 2001).

Moreover, it is an indication of the growing confidence of the National Assembly that, following protracted negotiations with the Westminster Government, the 2004 Higher Education Act transferred full powers over HE (and FE) student finance to Cardiff. This enabled the Welsh Assembly Government to proceed with a second Rees Review (2005), which, unsurprisingly, recommended the introduction of flexible top-up fees for full-time students in HE in Wales, along broadly the same lines as England (albeit with a National Bursary Scheme to be targeted at low-income and other under-represented groups). However, in an extraordinary demonstration of the *politics* of parliamentary devolution, the opposition parties were able to exploit the Labour administration's minority support in the Assembly to reject the introduction of top-up fees, thereby sabotaging the Review's principal recommendation even before it was published. Ultimately, a compromise was negotiated, whereby flexible top-up fees are to be introduced from 2007–8, but Welsh-domiciled students studying at Welsh HEIs will

receive a grant, which is not means-tested, equivalent to the difference between existing fees and the new levels to be introduced. More than any other issue, the controversy over student fees and the financing of HE in Wales illustrates the significance of the political dimensions of the devolution settlement. Whether the current resolution provides a stable basis for the financing of Welsh HE remains to be seen.

In short, therefore, there is considerable evidence from the Assembly's first term to support the view that education policies in Wales are diverging significantly from those in England (and elsewhere in the United Kingdom). It is very difficult to see how this distinctive Welsh agenda would have been possible under the previous Welsh Office regime. Indeed, it would appear that the establishment of the Assembly has created the circumstances in which the Welsh Assembly Government has been able to pursue a set of policies based on an explicit – and explicitly ideological – vision of how a Welsh educational system ought to be organized. It is important, however, not to overstate the extent of this change.

The National Assembly and the process of education policy-making

It is important to remember that devolution did not begin with the creation of the National Assembly. There was an established regime of 'administrative devolution' long before the advent of parliamentary devolution. In particular, by the 1990s, the Welsh Office had accumulated major powers over most aspects of education and training, responsibilities which were delivered through the local education authorities and a number of quangos, such as the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC) and the Further and Higher Education Funding Councils for Wales. Although this policy system remained in a very real sense an 'England and Wales' one, it is important not to lose sight of the limited divergences between Wales and England which it brought about. Certainly, it was the interpretation and perhaps adaptation of policies which originated in Whitehall and Westminster – a process of policy 'mediation' (Raffe et al., 1999) – which this regime of administrative devolution produced. It is true that in some areas – most notably the development of the National Curriculum – the distinctiveness of Welsh policies was quite marked (Jones, 1994). However, it is symptomatic that Welsh difference from England was most frequently described in terms of the absence, or low take-up, of many of the new initiatives adopted in England (such as grant-maintained schools, city technology colleges) (Fitz, 2000).

It is important to emphasize that it is by no means *inevitable* that parliamentary devolution will produce policy outcomes which are increasingly distinctive to Wales. Education policies continue to reflect highly complex processes of negotiation and brokering between political parties, professional bodies, interest groups, civil servants and so forth. Whilst the new constitutional arrangements may have opened up new avenues through which such negotiation and brokering can take place, they have not removed the indeterminacy of the outcomes which emerge (Morgan and Rees, 2001; Rees, 2002).

This greater openness in the policy-making process is not confined to the obvious fact that the Assembly has sixty members through whom pressure can be exerted on the executive process. The operation of the Assembly Committees, for example, has also provided much more open access for interest groups and individuals of all kinds to express their views in the process of policy development (Jones and Osmond, 2001). It is clear that the Committees have, on occasion at least, provided a potent source of policy innovation. Certainly, the restructuring of the learning and skills sector in Wales reflected this clearly, the form of this restructuring being changed substantially as the Education and Training Action Plan (ETAP) was debated through the Assembly. In particular, the role of business interests in the new National Council-ELWa was restricted, in face of the capacity of local education authorities and other educational groupings to persuade the then Post-16 Education and Training Committee to broker changes to the ETAP proposals with the Cabinet (Morgan and Rees, 2001).

In part, this reflected quite fundamental features of civil society in Wales, where the role of the public sector (and local authorities, in particular) has historically been extremely powerful (Jones, 2002). However, it is clear that the new mechanisms through which policy-making occurs provided a vehicle through which these social groupings in civil society were able to exert important influences over the policy-making process, in ways which had not occurred under administrative devolution. Although the power of the Committee was undoubtedly enhanced by the fact that at this time there was a minority Labour administration, these events also indicate the emergence of a somewhat more open form of policy formulation. However, whether this produced better policy outcomes remains a moot point (Morgan and Rees, 2001).

There is also a wider issue of how organizations and social groupings in civil society relate to the processes through which the devolved state in Wales generates education policy. It has been argued that in Scotland the

experience of working in the Constitutional Convention during the years preceding the establishment of the Scottish Parliament provided a relatively consensual basis on which these relationships between civil society and the state could be redrawn. Even here, however, the extent to which these relationships have been re-ordered is hotly disputed (Paterson, 2000). In Wales, before the creation of the National Assembly, the debates – such as they were - about what parliamentary devolution involves, were conducted almost wholly inside the Labour Party and were directed to a considerable extent at the electoral interests of that party (Morgan and Mungham, 2000).

Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, there is relatively little evidence to suggest that the new mechanisms for the formulation and development of education policy in Wales have – as yet at least - opened up avenues of influence to groupings in civil society which were previously excluded. Rather, what appears to have happened is that the advent of parliamentary devolution has served to improve and intensify the interaction between those groups which have been central to the policy-making process all along: politicians, civil servants (amongst whom the inspectorate exerts an especially powerful role), professional organizations (such as the teacher unions and now the General Teaching Council Cymru) and the local education authorities. It is these established groupings, for example, whose views are most clearly reflected in the distinctive policies on the schools curriculum and comprehensive schooling which have been adopted by the Welsh Assembly Government (which I discussed earlier). Moreover, it is arguable that these views reflect the 'assumptive worlds' of this established policy community as it was constituted during the era of administrative devolution and the changes since 1999 have done little to transform things (cf. McPherson and Raab, 1988). Substantive policy issues continue to be conceptualized within what are essentially conventional ways of thinking.

It is true, of course, that commitments such as that to state comprehensives and the avoidance of selection probably accord quite closely with the views of the bulk of Welsh citizens too. However, in terms of the policy-making process, the crucial point is that it is the established groupings which have exerted the critical influence over the development of policy initiatives, rather than the views of the wider electorate. This is (almost) as true under parliamentary devolution as it was under the previous regime of administrative devolution. And it is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that major elements of the divergent pathway followed by the Assembly Government can be argued to consist of avoiding the initiatives being undertaken in England (such as specialist secondary schools, differential 'top-up' fees,

public– private finance and so forth) in favour of established patterns of provision and ways of ordering educational opportunities.

It remains to be seen, of course, how far the relationships between civil society and the state can be restructured in the future in ways which will permit the wider inclusion of social groups and, indeed, individuals in the shaping of Welsh education policy. In April 2006, ELWa, ACCAC, the Wales Youth Agency and a number of smaller organizations were absorbed into the Welsh Assembly Government itself. This 'bonfire of the quangos' was justified in terms of increasing the democratic accountability of decision-making in respect of education policy and had been a key element in the debates about the 'democratic deficit' in Wales prior to the devolution referendum. Certainly, the newly restructured Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills represents a powerful executive capacity. It will be instructive to see how far its creation will produce different priorities and organizational structures for educational provision.

Parliamentary devolution and educational outcomes

The discussion so far has focused on the policy-making process and the policies which emanate from it. Ultimately, however, the impacts of parliamentary devolution are to be assessed in terms of changes in patterns of participation in learning, the effectiveness of the teaching and learning that takes place and the levels of attainment (however defined) achieved by learners. Judgements on these complex issues are difficult to make at present. Nevertheless, some preliminary observations can appropriately be made.

There is substantial evidence that, over recent years, there have been significant improvements – at least measured in conventional terms – in the performance of the Welsh educational system. Perhaps most strikingly, the performance of Welsh primary school pupils has improved significantly since 1999. For example, the percentage of pupils achieving the Core Subject Indicator at Key Stage 2 (level 4 or above in English or Welsh, mathematics and science) rose by some 11 percentage points between 1999–2000 and 2004–2005 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006a). Although the most recent data – for 2006 – suggest that there has latterly been some deterioration in performance at Key Stages 1 and 2, overall the picture is one of real improvement over the period as a whole (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006c). Certainly, the Targets set by the Assembly Government have been met and even surpassed for these age groups.

The attainments of pupils in secondary schools in Wales at Key Stages 3 and 4 have also been rising. For example, between 1999–2000 and 2004–2005, pupils achieving the Core Subject Indicator at Key Stage 3 (level 5 or above in English or Welsh, mathematics and science) rose by some 9 percentage points (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006a). The percentage of 15-year-olds (at the beginning of the school year) in Wales achieving 5 or more GCSE grades A*–C has increased from 48 per cent in 1999 to 54 per cent in 2006; and those gaining at least grade C in English or Welsh, mathematics and science (the Core Subject Indicator for Key Stage 4) rose from 36 per cent to 40 per cent during the same period (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006d). In addition, in 2006, the proportion of 15-year-olds (at the beginning of the school year) leaving school without any qualifications at all has been reduced to just over 2 per cent of the cohort (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006e). This exceeds the target established by the Assembly Government, although concerns continue to be expressed over the true quality of general education amongst a proportion of these school-leavers.

Amongst the older age groups, far more students are staying in full-time education beyond the minimum school-leaving age; by 2004, 72 per cent of 16-year-olds were in full-time education (although this figure declined rather rapidly to 57 per cent of 17-year-olds and 42 per cent of 18-year-olds) (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006f). In 2006, 68 per cent of the 17-year-olds (at the beginning of the academic year) entered for 2 or more A levels or equivalent achieved 2 or more A levels (or their equivalent) (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006d). Similarly, almost 40 per cent of the age cohort in Wales now go on to university-level studies, whether within Wales or outside (Rees and Taylor, 2006). Moreover, Wales has generally higher rates of participation in higher education of people from state schools, working-class families and neighbourhoods with low participation rates than the other parts of Britain (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006g).

For the proponents of parliamentary devolution, these trends constitute a demonstration of its efficacy in instituting distinctively Welsh policies which make a difference to educational outcomes. It is clear, however, that we should be cautious in accepting this analysis at face value. Careful comparisons need to be made with the rising trends of attainment in other parts of the UK. For example, it is important to note that the most recent comparisons (for 2005) with England indicate that performance levels are poorer in Wales at Key Stages 1 and 4 and in English and Mathematics at Key Stage 3; only at Key Stage 2 did Wales performance exceed that in its larger neighbour (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006h). Of course, comparisons of this kind

take no account of differing social and economic conditions and a host of other complicating factors. Nevertheless, they begin to illustrate the pitfalls of simplistic analyses.

Account also needs to be taken of what was happening prior to the introduction of new initiatives by the Welsh Assembly Government. Certainly, it is unlikely that its proponents would attribute the continuing *shortcomings* of Wales's education system relative to other parts of the UK to the impacts of parliamentary devolution. Hence, for example, the relatively poor Welsh performance in terms of skill levels and workplace learning is attributable to long-term features of the Welsh economy and, more specifically, of Welsh employers. At best, therefore, the impacts of new policies on educational outcomes measured in these terms are indeterminate as yet.

It may be, however, that we should be looking for other kinds of outcomes altogether. Despite the reservations noted earlier, there has undoubtedly been the development of a denser system of education policy-making as a result of parliamentary devolution, which has a somewhat stronger relationship with Welsh civil society than existed during the period of administrative devolution. This, in turn, has led to the emergence of a regime of educational provision in Wales which is certainly more distinct from that of England than was the case for the bulk of the twentieth century. It may be somewhat premature to talk in terms of a 'national system' of education in Wales, but there have undoubtedly been shifts in that direction.

As Paterson (2000) reminds us, national systems of education have been important shapers of national identities (Gellner, 1983). To the extent, therefore, that a national system of education does emerge in Wales, it may be that its most profound impacts will be on the ways in which the Welsh understand themselves, especially, perhaps, in relation to the other national groupings of the UK, rather than on the easily measurable, technocratic outcomes which currently preoccupy so much educational debate.

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Note

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