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Editorial

Improving Schools in Wales

DR HOWARD TANNER
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At the time of going to press, Education in Wales continues to be a site for contention and for many a cause for concern. The relatively poor performance of Wales in the 2006, 2009 and 2012 PISA studies in comparison with the rest of the UK and OECD nations has created a political climate that demands a system-wide response to a perceived problem (Bradshaw et al. 2007; 2010; Wheater et al. 2013; Lewis 2013). The extent to which the PISA studies can be used for tracking longitudinal progress is limited by their sampling procedures, but they have been used politically as indicators of a downward trend (Andrews 2011a; Lewis 2013).

In 2010, Leighton Andrews, who was at that time the Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning, announced a policy for the next decade that would ‘focus simply on three inter-related priorities: improved literacy levels, improved numeracy levels and reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment’ (Andrews 2010).

It was undoubtedly the case that standards of Literacy and Numeracy were then (and still are now) a cause for concern in Wales. The National Survey for Adult Skills in Wales 2010 reported that amongst 16 to 19 year-olds (English medium) 20% had literacy skills at entry level or below, and 60% had numeracy skills at entry level or below (Welsh Government Statistics 2011).

The relatively poor performance of Wales in the 2009 PISA study (Bradshaw et al. 2010) led to a focus on PISA style assessments and a target from the Minister that ‘[w]e should aim to be in the top 20 of school systems measured in the PISA scores in 2015’ (Andrews 2011a). In February 2011, twenty action points were published to achieve this aim, including ‘I will be looking to integrate PISA assessments into school assessment at 15’.

This was followed, in June 2011, by an announcement of the intention to introduce a new National Literacy and Numeracy Framework, including National tests of literacy and numeracy (Andrews 2011b). The National Literacy and Numeracy Framework was published in 2013 and National Testing of Literacy and Numeracy began in the summer term (WG 2013).

The annual testing regime introduced in 2013 assessed a set of skills and knowledge which were somewhat different to those assessed by PISA and which have been criticised as being too focused on procedural and curriculum knowledge (Tanner and Jones 2013). In contrast to the Welsh Government annual tests, PISA assessment focuses on the ‘ability to use their knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges, rather than merely on the extent to which they have mastered a specific school curriculum’. This approach is called ‘literacy’ and is applied in language, mathematics and science (OECD 2009). Teaching towards the Welsh Government procedural tests is unlikely to lead to success in PISA assessments and the achievement of the ambitious targets set for 2015 (Tanner and Jones 2013).

In December 2013, the PISA 2012 results were published (Wheater et al. 2013) and showed a further decline, with pupils in Wales scoring below their counterparts in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and the OECD average in Mathematics, Science and Reading by a statistically significant margin. The new Minister Huw Lewis responded:

The results present no surprise. Welsh Government is on record as saying it would be unrealistic to expect significant improvements in the 2012 PISA results. Systemic change takes time if it is to have a lasting impact. Experience tells us that quick fixes are seldom sustainable. (Lewis 2013)

The Minister did not underestimate ‘the gravity of the results’, but claimed that policies were in place that were not ‘quick wins’, which would lead to ‘education reform and long-term sustained improvement’, and that ‘[w]e will hold steady to the course we have set and keep faith with our reforms’ (Lewis 2013).

PISA has clearly had a significant influence on policy in Wales, as it has in many other nations. In an open letter to the director of PISA, which has been signed by many respected academics and teachers worldwide, it is claimed that PISA’s three yearly cycle of testing and league tables has led many countries to ‘short term fixes’ and a focus on the measurable aspects of learning, ‘dangerously narrowing our collective imagination regarding what education is and ought to be about’ (Meyer and Zahedi 2014).

Although the annual testing policy introduced in response to the PISA crisis in Wales may be criticised for a short term focus on measurable

objectives, other Welsh Government policies might be seen as longer term and more widely based.

The incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into law represents a step that should impact significantly on schools in Wales as it is implemented in future years (Williams 2013; see review of this book in this issue). The UNCRC might be seen as sitting uncomfortably with quick fixes and annual testing.

The recent OECD report on improving schools in Wales (OECD 2014) recognised strengths in the Welsh education system that should be built upon, including:

- the emphasis on equity and inclusion;
- that student performance is less dependent on socio-economic background than the OECD average; and
- that schools offer positive learning environments with good teacher-student relations and classrooms conducive to learning.

The report also identified challenges that included:

The pace of reform has been high and lacks a long-term vision, an adequate school improvement infrastructure and a clear implementation strategy all stakeholders share

(OECD 2014, p. 7).

The Minister welcomed the report and identified in particular his support of the recommendations for ‘improvements to teacher training and Continuing Professional Development’; ‘stronger school to school collaboration’; ‘improved school leadership and raising the esteem in which teachers are held’ (Lewis 2014).

In the papers that follow in this issue of the *Journal*, Williams and Wainwright consider Professional Development for adventurous activities – an aspect of education that runs counter to a narrow assessment-led curriculum based on measurable items of knowledge, emphasising instead adventurous activities that encourage active engagement and a positive aptitude for learning.

Whyte, Beauchamp and Alexander report on the development of an analytical framework for the observation and analysis of interactive whiteboard (IWB) use in the foreign language (FL) classroom. The coding instrument developed was applied to a wide range of European educational contexts and adds to the existing body of literature on the use of interactive technologies in general education.

Lomax-Hancock and Booth consider student perceptions of Education Studies degrees, which many follow with the intention of gaining access to PGCE Primary teacher training courses.

Alderson, Hall and Latrielle examine the transition from school to university and the expectations held by first-year students that frame their experiences. The paper analyses the qualitative findings from an online pre- and post- entry student survey.

A Research Note follows, reporting on the development of Cardiff University Q-Step Centre for Excellence in Quantitative Methods, and the creation of a new 'A' level in Social Analytics.

The issue ends with three book reviews on significant topics for the development of Education in Wales:

- *Effective Action Research: Developing Reflective Thinking and Practice*;
- *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Wales*;
- *Parents, Personalities and Power: Welsh-medium Schools in South-east Wales*.

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