Education in Wales: How do we move from troubled and troubling to transformational?

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the historical development of the education system in Wales, and of the emergence of concerns about its standards and quality after 2007, particularly after 2011. It is argued that policy responses to the perceived problems of the system have been extensive; but that the time-scale of the changes means that they may only now be impacting. It is argued that Wales and the Welsh Government need to explore additional policy arenas and areas of change. The focus should move beyond the 'supply side' change to utilise 'within school' variation as a mechanism of educational change. The Welsh Government should build further policies in areas where there are pre-existing Welsh differences, concentrating upon change at the 'meso' or middle level, including schools, local authorities and communities. This should include giving attention to the quality of teaching and teacher training and researching further those many areas of policy where Wales is now different in provision.

Key words: education, policy, Welsh Government, 'meso' level reform

Introduction

To be Welsh and to be well educated have historically been seen as synonymous. Wales was always seen as an educated society made up of, in Welsh, the *gwerin*.[1] The Welsh trade union movement was particularly notable for its commitment to 'education' through its libraries, its Institutes and, as a

further example, the raising of the miners' pennies that went into setting up higher education and universities. Indeed, in their seminal work in the mid 1970s entitled *The Poverty of Education*, Byrne, Fletcher and Williamson (1975) used Merthyr Tydfil as their exemplar of a, for them, welcome commitment to high levels of funding, a strong commitment to education and consequently very high levels of results, that were all seen as being characteristic of Wales.

The fact that the same place – Merthyr Tydfil – forty years later now has had its education services put into 'special measures' because of their failings (as identified by the Welsh Schools Inspectorate, Estyn) is therefore deeply symbolic of what has become a troubling – and troubled – Welsh educational system (Estyn, 2012). We should begin therefore by outlining the nature of the problems that it has faced and is facing currently.

The Welsh alternative

Concern about the underachievement of pupils in Wales is not new; in the 1980s there was considerable discussion of the relatively high rates of pupils leaving school with no qualifications, what became known as the 'schooled for failure' thesis (Reynolds, 1990). There were also discussions and debates about whether the educational system of Wales was too conventional, whether it retained a strongly academic focus when other countries were adopting more social outcomes and whether it needed rapid, programmatic institutional change (Reynolds, 2002, 2003).

However, at the time of the arrival of the New Labour government in the UK from 1997, there was no public or professional belief that the system in Wales was 'failing'. The historic belief in the superiority of the Welsh system permitted the new devolved administration in Wales from 1999 to pilot a course for education that did not evidence the belief of English New Labour that their own English system was in need of radical restructuring. The English New Labour project, through David Blunkett, Michael Barber and others, was highly critical of standards in England, criticising the teaching profession in tones and with content not dissimilar to those of Chris Woodhead, the then Chief Inspector of Schools in England.

Whilst there was a clear blueprint for English education when Labour became a government in 1997, for schools in Wales no comparable thinking to inform policy development was being done, because there was no belief

anything substantial needed to be done. Whilst in Scotland the presence of devolved powers in all areas of education (including pay and conditions, training and indeed professional standards) had been aided by a fertile growth in think tanks, policy institutes and pressure groups, in Wales only one such organisation existed at the time of the late 1990s – the Institute for Welsh Affairs (although an organisation entitled the Bevan Foundation now exists additionally).

Wales had exercised devolved powers in education since the establishment of the Education Department of the Welsh Office in the 1960. There was a separate Welsh curriculum and assessment organisation, and a separate curriculum that incorporated Welsh as a compulsory subject in the 'core' requirements of the Welsh national curriculum as it emerged in the 1990s. There had also been distinctively Welsh approaches to education and training in the mid to late 1990s that indeed became an example for subsequent English approaches (Rees, 2002).

But much of the effort – emotional and practical – of the embryonic Welsh educational state had been focused on improving the status of the Welsh language, not on the broader issues of enhanced effectiveness and improvement in student outcomes that influenced the English policy paradigm from 1997. Also, within Wales there was little of the micro-level work into 'effective' schools that was to become so influential in England. High-quality work existed in Wales in a wide range of areas, such as assessment (e.g. Daugherty, 1995) and the history of education (e.g. Evans, 1990; Jones, 1997). There was additionally high-quality material on the effects of parental choice on social inequalities (e.g. Gorard, 1997; Gorard and Fitz, 2000a, 2000b) and on adult/lifelong education (e.g. Rees et al., 1997).

But there was in Wales considerable hostility to the educational effectiveness and improvement research (EEIR) knowledge base that was involved and implicated in English educational policy-making, that involved trenchant critiques of some of those studies (e.g. Gorard, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c) and a clear dislike of the paradigm. Gorard (2002: 82) noted that 'school effectiveness has become a kind of a cult . . . the movement is becoming more and more part of the official discourse, mixed with economic vocabulary about targets for lifelong learning and market driven performance indicators'. Hostility to EEIR in Wales seems to have been widespread.

In the absence, then, of any clear school- and classroom-level policy levers in Wales equivalent to those provided by the EEIR literature in

England, and with hostility to the English policies, Welsh Labour policies were marked by a principle of not doing what England did, since England was seen as embracing prescription of practice. Thus, the English Literacy and Numeracy strategies that involved a comprehensive series of programmes, delivered to all primary school teachers from 1998, had no Welsh parallel, other than some brief recapitulation of what was effective practice, in hard copy and video format, but produced in limited numbers and available only 'on request', not distributed to all. The English National College for School Leadership, likewise, which was intended to resource heads and senior managers with notions of what was 'effective leadership', was set up in 2001 with no Welsh parallel.

For the schools sector these attempts have been called 'new producerism' (Reynolds, 2006), in that they rejected the New Labour belief that the methods of ensuring that quality improved was through changing the outside contingencies within which the education system was situated, through publication of information on quality/results, and through parental choice and an enhanced variety of schools from which parents could choose. This English consumerism was, of course, likely to be much less appropriate in Wales, since there were long traditions of parents choosing their local community primary and/or secondary schools, since there was no competitive independent sector that parents could opt into, and since many areas of Wales, such as the rural and small town communities, may have had only one school within reasonable travelling distance from home in any case, thereby removing any possibility of effective choice.

But the 'new producerism' of Wales extended beyond a simple rejection of the English, and indeed international, trend to 'consumerism'. It believed that working 'with', rather than 'on' or 'to', educational professionals was likely to be more effective than the emphasis in the consumerist paradigm about the accountability of them. Discussion on education in Wales, as in Scotland, was therefore notably less critical of the professionals than in England. They were to be trusted, to be listened to and to be respected, rather than criticised and 'shamed', as in some English educational policy discourse. Indeed, the historic closeness between the teaching unions and the Welsh Labour Party, and the emphasis within the Welsh Assembly Government on a 'team Wales' approach, were further reinforcers of the consensual approach to education policy that evolved during Jane Davidson's tenure as Education Minister, in which policy moved from being reactive (not doing as England did) to proactive (outlining new policy means) from 2001.

There was also in Wales a commitment to the community-based comprehensive school, and a refusal to differentiate the secondary school system into the variety of 'types' of school, such as academies, as in the English consumerist model. Additionally, whilst Wales had never published the achievement test data (or SATs) of its individual primary schools, as had England, the results of secondary schools that were published in both England and Wales in the form of national 'league tables' were in Wales, from 2003, published only by individual local authorities about their own schools rather than in a national 'league table'.

There were also changes in the curriculum area that had no English equivalent – the introduction of the Foundation Phase, which was designed to root children's development in a more 'holistic' and 'child-centred' set of practices, and the Welsh Baccalaureate, which was a 'wrap-around' qualification that took existing qualifications, both vocational and academic, and 'wrapped' around them a core of additional curriculum and assessment methods (like the well-known 'Wales and the World' project). Also, in Wales, Learning Pathways became a mechanism within which individuals chose from a series of offers containing both a learning core and a range of individually determined support and provision involving careers advice and differentiated provision.

A troubled and troubling system 2007–15

However, when the OECD PISA results were published in December 2007 – the first time Wales had been included in the study since its origins in 2001 – there was, for the first time in Wales, widespread concern that Wales, indeed, might have become an 'ineffective' or 'underperforming' educational system. Some commentators suggested that higher levels of social deprivation in Wales was the explanation, but of course Scotland and Northern Ireland had performances on PISA which were superior to that of Wales (although not appreciably superior), in spite of both countries' also possessing higher levels of social deprivation predisposing to a lower national performance.

In 2008, the subsequent School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) proposed an integrated set of policies that focused upon systemic change in a similar fashion to the 'simultaneous demand side/supply side' paradigm that had emerged in the international educational effectiveness and improvement community in the 2000s internationally (Welsh Assembly Government,

2008). The Framework involved some policy areas that had not been a focus for policies in education anywhere in the world at that time – on using within-school variation to enable schools to benchmark against their best, on using insights from cognitive neuroscience to potentiate the power of the Welsh classroom teacher, and on going 'beyond school' to embrace interactive systemic arrangements that jointly organised schools and their communities. But the SEF largely disappeared quickly from view as a policy vehicle.

Other evidence emerged by the late 2000s showing a widening gap with England in the proportion of children leaving school with the 'benchmark' five or more GCSEs including English and Mathematics. On the results of achievement test data at different pupil ages – 7, 11 and 16 – there were also wide differences between the nations of England and Wales in their performance in the SATs in England and the internal school assessments in Wales (Reynolds, 2008).

However, it was the publication of the PISA international data in December of 2010 that reinforced concerns about educational standards in Wales. In 2007 Wales's performance had still been quite close to that of the other 'home nations' of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but in 2010 Wales had differentiated itself out of the pack and its performance fell in all three subject areas of Literacy, Numeracy and Science.

The recently appointed Minister for Education and Skills, Leighton Andrews, building on what came close to national hysteria about educational standards, launched in February 2011, in the aftermath of PISA, a national 'twenty-point plan', that reflected much of the emerging 'simultaneous supply side/demand side' approach now axiomatic in international educational policy-making (see Reynolds and Kelly, 2013 for a review). Contents of these policies included (see Andrews, 2014 for more detail):

- utilisation of a 'banding' system of school results being placed in the public domain, to maximise 'demand side' leverage of parental educational consumers over schools;
- additional national tests in the areas of Literacy, Numeracy and Numerical Reasoning, designed both to provide more 'supply side' data for teachers to use in the improving of their pupils' results as well as to enhance 'demand side' pressure from the educational consumers (parents). These were linked with the provision of programmes of study and curricular organisation for the subject areas;

- changes to the 'meso' or 'middle' tier of education, involving stripping local authorities of their school improvement/development functions and developing four 'Supra LA' consortia to work to a national school-improvement 'model' based upon the 'empirical/rational' cycle of school improvement involving selection of priorities, collection of data on them, scoping possible solutions/actions, taking action and then judging the consequences of the actions; and
- 'supply side' policies involving a 'New Deal' for the education workforce, involving new professional standards, enhanced professional development opportunities and potentiating of teacher 'capacity' by upgrading school in-service opportunities with high-quality distance-learning materials.

Subsequent to this 2011 raft of policies, Welsh Government has also announced an ambitious set of curriculum and assessment reforms following on from the report of Professor Graham Donaldson (Donaldson, 2015). These focus on both curricular and pedagogical reform in content, modes of assessment and in pedagogy, additionally potentiating greater use of within-system formative assessment data and separating these clearly from the existing summative data currently put in the public domain.

Are existing policies sufficient?

One should be sanguine about the possibility of rapid educational changes in Wales following on from the large numbers of policies Welsh Government has announced since 2011. Wales is attempting to do in a small number of years what other countries have done over a much more extended time period. There is scarcely an area of curriculum, assessment or school/educational organisation that has not been involved in the, quite simply, massive educational changes that have been introduced. But doing such a lot of policy change in such a short time period was not necessarily in itself a totally useful way to proceed, given the overwhelming evidence that successful change needs careful embedding, if it is to become 'institutionalised' and if it is to affect learner outcomes comprehensively (Elmore, 2007). Additionally, it has only been just over four years since the announcement of Leighton Andrews's raft of policy changes, and only a couple of years for the policies to show any chance of obtaining a 'lateral ripple' through into teacher behaviours in classrooms and consequent results of pupils, as they reach schools and the educational system.

There are – indeed – hints of improvement in certain areas. Attendance rates appear to have improved, and interestingly of course improvement in attendance in schools in disadvantaged communities is often the forerunner of improvement in academic results (see reviews in Chapman et al., 2012). There are hints that on public examinations, GCSE and A-level achievement Wales may be improving slightly faster than the whole of the United Kingdom, but the promise of the improved Summer 2014 examination grades do not appear to have been fully realised in the 2015 figures. Nevertheless, the 'gap' between Wales and England in the percentage of 15/16-year-olds achieving the Level Two threshold does appear to be diminishing slightly. The annual reports of the Chief Inspector for Education and Skills in Wales also show a slight improvement in standards, although it is often described as 'slow' or 'gradual'.

From troubled and troubling to transformational, 2015?

Given that 'slow improvement' may be the most valid description of where Wales has reached in terms of the overall quality of its educational system, it may be that that this will not be enough to enable it to systemically advance much in the performance of the PISA results of December 2016, generated as they are by tests sat by pupils in the autumn of 2015. If one studies the pace of global educational reform, its content and its pervasiveness in recent accounts (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010; Chapman et al., 2015), it may well be that Wales is not yet quite evidencing the achievements educationally of other competitor societies. The next section of this article looks at possible ways in which our Welsh change attempts can be made even more effective and, indeed, more 'transformational', presenting them in detailed format as a series of recommendations for consideration within and without Welsh Government in particular, and Welsh educational circles in general.

We need to focus more on the supply side than the demand side as a lever of change

Demand-side reform has been the emphasis most favoured internationally for the last fifteen years, by using the 'contingencies' around the educational system of consumers and their choices to maximise 'leverage' on educational 'suppliers' to improve. In Wales this has been reflected in the generation of quality rankings on individual schools – such as their 'band'

allocation – to inform parental choice of school and to ensure parents are provided with the knowledge to be 'active citizens', in improving the quality of the schools their children attend.

However, it may be that the operation of 'demand side' pressure is likely to be less powerful in Wales than elsewhere. Historically, the salience of 'community' in Welsh civil society has meant that parents often seem to have chosen their local community school, whatever its quality, in preference to conducting educational shopping trips outside their 'community' schools, even though the latter may be more effective. Additionally, there are considerable areas of Wales where there is only one realistic choice of school for parents, especially in the case of secondary school choice, because our sparse rural population means that travel times to and from school would be too great for children to attend other than their 'local' school. As an example, the secondary school in Llanfyllin is the only realistic choice for the parents of Llanfyllin – the journey to the nearest alternative school to the north, to Bala, is over the Berwyn mountains, which are frequently impassable in poor weather, and the journey to the nearest alternative school to the south, to Welshpool, is a round trip of forty miles per day.

If 'demand side' levers will not operate with the strength in Wales that might be expected from their use in other societies, focusing on the 'supply side' part of the equation for school improvement may be more important to us. However, the 'supply side' enhancement has received much less attention in the 2011 policies than the 'demand side' levers – the Masters in Educational Practice (MEP) is a 'supply side' attempt at professional development for newly appointed teachers, and of course the 'New Deal' for the education workforce, involving the use of electronic passports to chart development and codification of the raft of state, private sector and higher education offerings of professional development, is a useful development on the 'supply side'. However, it is interesting that the 'New Deal' has been announced in detail in 2015 at the end of the announcement of the large number of policy areas originally focused upon by Leighton Andrews in his 2011 speech, after considerable attention has been given to introducing the 'demand side' reforms.

We need to focus on within-school variation as a lever of change

Much school improvement of the last twenty years has been concerned with trying to transmit and transfer knowledge and approaches from

schools that are 'effective' to those that are less so (see the review of Hopkins et al., 2014). There is of course much to commend this approach – schools are core organisational units, they are the units for performance assessment and they are discrete entities which can be constructed as 'givers' or 'recipients' of knowledge. This approach in Wales is represented in the interesting and innovative School Challenge Cymru approach.

However, this approach may be less useful in Wales than elsewhere. Wales shows less variation in the 'raw' results of its secondary schools, for example, than our English neighbour – we have no '100%' schools with all students gaining five or more GCSEs including Mathematics and English, by comparison with several score of such schools in England. Wales also has no very poorly performing schools with below 10% of students achieving this Level Two benchmark – England has some. It is likely that the greater range of socio-economic conditions in England is the explanation for this, given the presence of an 'upper' socio-economic stratum of larger numbers than in Wales, and given the presence of 'low' socio-economic areas of an 'underclass' variety that are relatively unknown in Wales.

Given this relative lack of Welsh range, it may therefore be that the option of using range to promote school improvement may be less than useful to us. Where Wales does have considerable variation is 'within' schools. In the PISA studies of 2010, Wales was one of the highest scoring societies for within-school variation (WSV), and whilst this student variation in achievement may reflect variation in students' home backgrounds and the presence in Wales of our comprehensive schools that have all students within them (because of the absence of a strong private sector and of different school types, such as academies), it is possible that this student within-school variation also reflects on the variation in the quality of the experiences offered to Welsh students within their schools. The historic lack of attention within Wales to the issue of 'middle management' training, the lack of any Welsh equivalent of the National College for School Leadership that resourced English head teachers with the knowledge and practices to generate coherent across-school management structures across subject areas, and the relative lack of effectiveness of Welsh secondary education in general, may have meant that Welsh secondary schools have 'disaggregated' into varied subject units more than have those of other societies.

Interestingly, Wales was the site of the innovative High Reliability Schools project in Neath Port Talbot Local Authority, which developed

mechanisms and strategies for schools to become skilled at 'benchmarking' against their own good practice in their exemplary departments (Stringfield, Reynolds and Schaffer, 2008). This work was carried on within England in the pioneering 'WSV' project of the 2002/7 New Labour government, and indeed a whole suite of materials and approaches were developed that were a 'toolkit' that could be used to make all schools' best practice their standard practice (see Reynolds, 2007 for an overview). The commitment to learning from any within-school variation was one of the characteristics of the School Effectiveness Framework of 2008, but has been strangely neglected in Wales, although pioneering work is now taking place in the ERW consortium schools of south/west Wales.

It is easy to see why a 'WSV' approach may not be immediately appealing. Benchmarking within schools is technically complex and psychologically difficult, given that it involves learning from teachers/practitioners in the same school. Techniques of learning may be particularly complex if they are concerned with pedagogy, rather than with the organisational/structural matters that are often the focus of school-to-school improvement. With school-to-school change, the use of groups of teachers from one subject department within a school, say, involves much smaller numbers, leaving teachers exposed personally in ways that would not occur in large-group learning. One can only say that given the educational state of Wales currently, the degree of risk that may be indicated through using a within-school focus may be worth considering.

We need to build on Welsh difference

The last decade has seen the development of a distinct ideology, and set of value positions, that underpin the nature of our educational system. Crucially, this has involved the rejection of the differentiated models of schools that have flourished in other societies, like the academies in England, and the charter schools in the United States. This magnification of school 'types' is clearly to magnify the power of the 'demand' lever, since parental choice is maximised in its power if there are multiple schools and multiple types of schools to choose from.

Wales, by contrast, has taken the decision to stick with one school type, the 'all in' comprehensive schools, and their primary equivalents, believing that this inclusive approach is likely to further the social and academic outcomes that Welsh society is deemed to need. Correspondingly, Wales has argued for a close relationship between its schools and its communities,

more practicable here than in any society like England, where the students from one area may go to the multiplicity of schools and/or types of schools that is consequent on the creation of differentiated school provision.

Unfortunately, it is hard to see how the benefits of close school/community links (consequent upon a community relating to only one school) have been built upon. This is to go beyond evidence, but it seems unlikely that the powerful lever of a close 'mesh' between parents and their local schools has been pulled particularly frequently in Wales. Indeed, recognition of the 'beyond school' does not seem to have been prevalent in Wales over time. Wales needs to think closely about the interaction between its schools and its communities, for the following reasons:

- as educational effectiveness research has further explored what effective schools do, their 'levers' have increasingly been seen as beyond school ones (Chapman et al., 2015);
- many schools in other parts of the UK are grasping at the extra school influences since they have 'maxed out' on the conventional kinds of within-school interventions; and
- many of the case studies of successful school improvement and school change and indeed many of the core models of change employed by the 'marques' of academy schools such as Ark or Harris in England give a central position to schools relating 'outside' or 'beyond' school.

So great is the variance in outcomes explained by outside-school factors that even a modest 'synergy' between school and home could be considerable in Wales in its effects upon our school outcomes.

We need to concentrate attention upon teachers and teaching

The centrality of teachers and teaching in the determination of educational outcomes is a notable finding of EEIR in recent years (Muijs and Reynolds, 2011; Muijs et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2014). Early research in EEIR focused upon the effects of schools, and neglected the study of the classroom level. Recently, however, classroom processes have become more central in research and have begun to feature more strongly in the 'instructionally based' models of leadership available and have begun to be the focus of direct improvement attempts themselves.

The consequent building of teacher 'capacity' to teach and to professionally improve is something that has emerged as central to the efforts of educational improvement in many countries around the world,

from Australian states to Canadian provinces, and to whole countries, such as New Zealand. Additionally, the content and focus of the English 'National Strategies' of Literacy and Numeracy that were the focus of New Labour in the mid 2000s was upon the classroom. Indeed, the English focus upon 'teaching' as the alterable variable that needed to be changed and potentiated in its impact was precisely the factor that generated worldwide interest, although not from Wales, interestingly, where the focus was less on this so-called 'prescriptive' approach and more on the importance of teachers themselves generating best practice that fitted with and suited them in their immediate contexts. Possibly, also, Wales has been 'blind-sided' by the PISA studies that have played such a large part in determining the content of our educational discourse since 2010 – PISA collects data at country system and school levels, but collects nothing about what the processes in the classrooms are.

Interestingly, the recent OECD (2014) report shows clearly what Wales needs to do in order to raise standards: improve teaching and the building of teacher capacity as fundamental to improving school outcomes. It notes the heterogeneity of school population in Wales now, given the scale of migration from other European societies into west and north-east Wales, for example. It notes how 'all in' comprehensive schools have heterogeneous school populations, given that all children from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds attend our 'common' schools, with no segregation into 'private' or into 'new marque' state schools, like academies in England. It notes the very high population of the education workforce that is made up of classroom/teaching assistants in Wales, a complicating consequence particularly of the pattern of working necessitated by the Foundation Phase.

Welsh government accepted the report and its recommendations in 2014, very quickly after its publication. With the exception of the provision of in-service training materials for all educational professionals, currently in development in the University of Wales Trinity St David, and the future provision of Welsh Government 'masterclass' material that enables teachers to focus upon improvement of their pedagogy in association with other practitioners, it is difficult to see any systematic attempt to focus upon 'teaching' in Wales, although the reform of initial teacher education will give a lever to improve teaching standards for those entering the profession. Across the world, Wales remains unusual in that its teachers have not, so far, had programmatic, systematic and structured interventions to help them maximise their 'capacity' and therefore the achievement of their students.

We need to give further attention to skilling the 'meso' level

Within educational effectiveness and improvement research, recent years have seen growing interest in the characteristics of effective 'meso' or middle-level organisations, like in the United States School Districts and in the United Kingdom Local Authorities (see the Introduction in Chapman et al., 2015). These characteristics seem to be concerned with the attention that they give to ensuring that schools mirror reliably the overall 'mission' of their particular geographic area, that there are shared consistent expectations about the goals of the system, that there is high-quality decision-making based upon high quality information (data systems), and that there is high-quality professional development.

Within Wales, too, 'meso' level organisations have been the focus of much policy attention from Welsh Government. The twenty-two local authority improvement services have been organised into four consortia, with the local authorities only now responsible for a residuum of services, like non-attending students or students with additional learning needs. In most accounts so far, there is modest progress in the organisation and functioning of the consortia, although their ability to challenge their schools may have outrun their ability to offer improvement assistance.

What is remarkable about these 'meso' level policies so far is the absence of training for all the Challenge Advisers to ensure that they are 'skilled up' and can therefore skill up their schools. One national event was held, involving a limited survey of educational effectiveness research by an outside Wales speaker of repute, but the only other national programme has been a contribution from the Welsh Inspectorate Estyn, to ensure that consortium personnel know the details and requirements of the Inspection regime. Given the centrality of 'professional development' in the emerging formulations of what makes an 'effective' middle tier, the policy of relying on individual consortia to – inevitably variably – skill up their personnel may well need further thought.

We need to give attention to Initial Teacher Training (ITT)

The biggest 'bangs' for policy 'bucks' undoubtedly lie in the area of continuing professional development for our existing educational personnel. But important increments in teacher quality can also be attained from an attention to initial teacher training, too (Furlong, 2015).

Wales has managed to exist with a duality of approaches/philosophies of teacher education. On the one hand there has been an emphasis on a

reflective practice model of practice, whereby individuals reflect on their practice either on their own or with others collaboratively. On the other hand, two of the most recent policy documents from Welsh Government have espoused the salience of the 'rational empirical' or 'enquiry related' model of education, namely the National Model for Regional Working, designed for the consortia to follow, and the 'cycle', designed for those studying for the Masters in Educational Practice. Both formulations are similar – take an issue/problem, 'scope' it in the literature, gather empirical data about its characteristics, attempt an intervention/change based upon the 'scoping' and gather data about the success/failure of the actions taken, and subsequently re-jig and begin the cycle again (Welsh Government, 2014).

Deciding which approach is our preferred one – and if we are following an evidence trail about what would give us the best positive effects on children – it is the 'enquiry' model we would choose, and this needs to influence the practice of ITT. But there are other issues, too – the quality of ITT is only 'adequate' (Tabberer, 2013) at best, with particular shortcomings in leadership and standards of those entering the profession. University education departments in Wales perform relatively poorly by comparison with other subject areas in the evaluations of research quality in the RAE and REF, and there is little sign of positive change in the reach of higher education, with impressionistic evidence existing of atrophy in the wider 'outreach' professional development and community education programmes undertaken. Action concerning ITT seems urgently necessary.

We need to research/evaluate our differences

Historically, we have not necessarily evaluated through research much of our distinctive education provision in Wales, perhaps because of the anxiety that such recently designed and implemented differences in the Welsh strategies, by comparison with those of other UK nations, risk negative evaluations. More recently, though, most of the major programmes of educational reform and change have, impressively, had an evaluation component to them – the Foundation Phase, the Schools Challenge Cymru improvement programme, the Welsh Baccalaureate and the current 'New Deal' have all had evaluation and/or research and development strands attached to them.

However, a more comprehensive suite of evaluations is necessary to ensure complete coverage and understanding of the nature of our

innovatory programmes. Specifically, as an example, both in the rural communities in south-west Wales and in north Wales, some LAs have been piloting 'all through' schools that merge primary and secondary provision within one school, to avoid the need for school closure because of non-viability of provision in the individual primary/secondary schools and to preserve schools as central to their communities without the need for excessive travel-to-school times.

There are other examples of differences in such areas as the effects of compulsory Welsh-language provision upon general language-learning and take-up, and the very positive reports of FE provision in Wales in its quality as assessed by Estyn reports. Research into the nature and effects of such differences would be very useful to improve our knowledge of the effectiveness and efficiency of Welsh provision.

Conclusions

It will be clear from our assessment of multiple issues in this article that Wales is at a crucial time in terms of its educational development, and probably also in terms of its general social and economic development, too. The positives in the educational situation are the clear evidence of high levels of awareness amongst both Welsh Government and within the educational system that things need to be done to improve matters, and that these things involve actions to improve an educational system that has not been fit for purpose. The negatives would seem to be the belief in some quarters that the present range of policies are adequate because they represent virtually the totality of what policies have been followed across the planet, in the simultaneous 'demand side/supply side' paradigm.

This article has argued for consideration of further policies that are rooted in the context, social and economic structure of Wales, in addition. Focusing on our neglected supply side, looking at variation within schools, because we have a lot of it, concerning ourselves with teaching because we have neglected it and making our school/community links more than a sound bite are all – crucially – policies that could be 'made in Wales' rather than imported from elsewhere. A blend between what other nations have found to be effective, and what may be effective approaches from our own niche, may well be a necessary and productive way forward.

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Note

[1] A term that has different meanings, originally applying to a body of soldiery and then the common folk, but by the nineteenth century it carried the idea of the Welsh as a cultured people.