

Editorial
The State of the Nation: Education
in a Devolved Wales

PROFESSOR DAVID EGAN and DR RUSSELL GRIGG
Wales Centre for Equity in Education

We are delighted to be writing this editorial to the first volume of *The Wales Journal of Education*¹ at a time when education in Wales is very much in the public eye, in the lead-up to the Assembly Elections. In 2015 the Education Minister, Huw Lewis, called for a great debate in education, following the publication of Graham Donaldson's report *Successful Futures* on the curriculum and assessment arrangements (Donaldson, 2015). The contributors to this special edition, including Professor Donaldson, were invited to reflect on the current state of education in Wales and its future prospects. We hope that readers find their contributions stimulating and constructive in the debate over how we can achieve a high-performing education system in Wales, both in terms of quality and equity.

The *Journal* is the only academic peer-reviewed Journal that focuses on education in Wales and matters that relate to it. Founded in 1989, the *Journal* was representative of the former federal University of Wales and the development (pre and post-devolution) of education studies and research in Wales and on Wales. The de-federalisation of the University of Wales and the disastrous decline of educational research in the universities of Wales highlighted by one of the contributors to this volume, John Furlong, led to a steep decline in the fortunes of the *Journal*. This was, perversely, at a time when it could be argued that the devolved education system in Wales more than ever deserved the evidence-based and independent voice it offered. It was kept alive during these difficult times by the stoical efforts of, amongst others, Professor Ken Reid, Dr Howard Tanner and Professor John Parkinson. All interested in the study of education in Wales should be

1 David Egan and Russell Grigg

in their debt. Now, as we approach the fifth elections to the National Assembly for Wales and with the real prospect that its term of office might see the first Welsh Parliament since the time of Owain Glyndŵr, the *Journal* is re-launched (supported by the University of Wales and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David).

The *Journal* aims to publish contributions about both education in Wales and that which is of relevance to it. It will appear twice a year, with one volume being a generic number and the other focusing on a special area of interest. At least one of the articles in each volume will be published in the Welsh language, with an English-language abstract. The Editorial Board for the new *Journal* comprises representatives from nearly all of Wales's universities alongside leading scholars from outside of Wales who have strong Welsh connections. It also includes representation from one of Wales's leading head-teacher associations, from its Further Education representative body and, in a personal role, from the education research team in the Welsh Government.

In this first volume, most of the articles discuss issues relating to the school system in Wales, which has occupied centre stage in recent education debate. Donaldson explains the rationale for his landmark report on the school curriculum and outlines its key features, before considering the challenges in successful implementation. Despite previous well-intentioned revisions to make the curriculum fit for the twenty-first century (Welsh Government, 2008), Donaldson's recommendations for a systematic and inclusive approach to radical change have been well received. One of the points he makes is the need for 'an agile change strategy' at a measured pace.

In his article, Grigg summarises findings from a small-scale survey of what teachers think about recent Welsh government education initiatives. While they generally welcome policies that have had a strong element of social justice, like the Pupil Deprivation Grant, they are more divided over 'accountability' measures, such as the tests associated with the Literacy and Numeracy Framework. They recognise the importance of reflective practice, clear leadership and professional development as key to improving provision in Wales.

Furlong picks up similar themes in his piece on initial teacher education. He warns that university departments and faculties of education now need to find a distinctive voice at a time when schools are increasingly capable of offering their own training of teachers. Their essential contribution, he adds, should be to support teachers in their critical reflection and research skills.

Notwithstanding the important developments taking place in early years education, Egan argues in his contribution that national policy has been too narrowly focused upon the rhetoric of school improvement. He calls for a more holistic approach that includes a greater focus on family and community engagement. Contributions on further education and adult/community learning were sought for this number of the journal, but, unfortunately, were not forthcoming. However, we intend to address this in future issues, given the critical importance of these areas, to both education studies and the future of the education system in Wales.

Historically speaking, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the notion of a Welsh educational system (distinct from England) is a relatively new one. The late Professor Gareth Elwyn Jones, doyen of Welsh educational historians and a former editor of this *Journal*, pointed out that Welsh education policy prior to devolution in 1997 amounted to ‘the art of the possible’ (Jones and Roderick, 2003, p.209). What this meant in practical terms was that whilst the general direction of education policy determined by whatever government was in power in Westminster would hold sway in Wales, the detail of some policies, particularly those relating to the curriculum, could be finessed. To this extent the discrete version of the National Curriculum which developed in Wales after 1988 makes it possible, Jones and Roderick argue, to speak for the first time of a ‘Welsh education system’ (ibid., p.211).

The growth of the civil service in Wales, as a result of devolution and the drawing into government of the former quangos ACCAC (the Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales) and ELWA (Education and Learning Wales), created significant policy capacity at the centre. This led to an expanded centralised role over the curriculum and other areas of post-devolution policy, including increased national testing and stronger accountability. In the recent years of austerity the staffing of the civil service has, of course, been significantly reduced. Nevertheless, there remains a feeling that it is too powerful, controlling, and lacks the intellectual capital required for more effective policy development and implementation.

Since 2007 national testing and accountability have largely driven the school system. This has marginalised professional autonomy and encouraged instrumentalism and ‘teaching to the test’; it has also marginalised evidence-based teacher enquiry and reflection and, in general, failed to create the framework for professional learning and development that is at the core of the most successful education systems around the world and which other professions in Wales benefit from.

David Egan and Russell Grigg 3

The articles by Waters and Lewis illustrate how the educational system in Wales is distinctive. Waters provides an overview of the life of the Foundation Phase for 3 to 7-year-olds in Wales, while outlining the issues and challenges facing the early years education sector. She then considers what lessons can be taken forward to sustain the Foundation Phase. Lewis traces the progress of Welsh-medium education from when the first 'dedicated' Welsh primary school opened in Aberystwyth, in 1939, to the Welsh Government's Welsh Medium Education Strategy in 2010. He reflects on the challenges in translating this into practice, including promoting the social use of Welsh outside school.

More generally, the contributors identify a range of challenges in building a first-rate education system in Wales. Many revolve around leadership issues, such as policy focus and implementation, building capacity and improving the quality of teaching. In the example of pupil behaviour and attendance, Reid points out that, while there have been improvements in these areas, with overall attendance rates rising, the absence of a national strategy on behaviour and attendance illustrates shortcomings in leadership. In their articles, Reynolds and Hopkins address system-wide issues. Hopkins provides a summary of international evidence for system-level reform. He then offers a critique of recent developments in Wales and sets out a strategy for sustained progress in student achievement. These concerns are reflected in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's report on the Welsh education system (OECD, 2014). Reynolds discusses the direction of education policy in Wales and suggests that a greater focus should be on the 'meso', or middle, level of education, including training for Challenge Advisers and teacher professional development.

Central government, local authorities and schools all have a role to play in addressing shortcomings in policy implementation. As our contributors point out, the common denominator in this respect appears to be deficiencies in leadership capacity within the Welsh education system. If it is accepted that nation and system building are inextricably linked with building leadership capacity, then at school, local authority and central government level, the first period of devolution has seen far too little concentration on developing a leadership cadre in Welsh education. Outstanding leaders at school level know that what ultimately will make the biggest difference is the quality of teaching that young people receive. Many contributors to this volume identify the development of professional learning and autonomy as being one of the strongest deficiencies of the current education system in Wales.

The 'state of the nation' contributions in this volume offer Wales a mixed bill of health, pointing to strengths but also to critical areas that need to be addressed if strong future growth is to take place.

The first of these is workforce development and in particular the need to strengthen teacher professionalism and enquiry-based professional learning. Recent developments associated with the Welsh Government's New Deal for the Education Workforce are encouraging in this respect, but it can be argued that if they are to avoid the mixed fortunes of earlier initiatives, such as the Pedagogy Strategy, the General Teaching Council for Wales' Professional Bursary programme, the Chartered Teacher Programme, Professional Learning Communities and the Masters in Educational Practice, they need to be more soundly established, better funded and led by the teaching profession itself.

The second is the need to move away from the currently dominant school improvement paradigm to one that includes the role of schools, their communities and other parts of the education system in a holistic approach. This should more effectively address the inequities in educational achievement that are perhaps the greatest weakness of the education system in Wales. Again, there are encouraging policy developments taking place currently in this respect, but these need to receive a far greater proportion of available funding if they are to have the profile that is required.

Thirdly, it should not be surprising that we argue that much greater emphasis needs to be given to the role that the higher education sector can play in the future development of the Welsh education system. Through improvements in initial teacher education, an enhanced role in the quality assurance and accreditation of professional learning and a strengthening of educational research, we believe that higher education can significantly assist in overcoming current deficiencies in capacity and leadership.

Higher education cannot and should not do that alone. There is a clear need to develop additional capacity within the Welsh education system that is independent of Welsh Government. Drawing upon the expertise that Graham Donaldson points to in Estyn, and that also exists within other parts of the system, there may be a case to be made for establishing a Welsh equivalent of *Education Scotland*, or a National Council or Institute for Education, or an enhanced Education Workforce Development Council. This would allow the Welsh Government to concentrate on policy development and to commission expert capacity to lead on implementation.

A critical reading of the contributions to this volume, therefore, would suggest that in essence there are two major issues here which face the

David Egan and Russell Grigg 5

education system in Wales. The first is developing intellectual capital within the system based upon high-quality teacher professionalism, the intermediate level expertise that could be provided by a new specialist national organisation and less control by central government. The second is the need to develop a highly inclusive education system, from early years through to family and community learning, that is particularly focused on the need of the most disadvantaged in our society.

These, of course, represent major challenges to an education system faced by austerity, but if education is to play its critically important role in developing a just and prosperous society in Wales in the future, they will need to be overcome. This *Journal* intends to contribute to, interpret and, when necessary, critique the journey that would be needed to rise to this challenge.

David Egan
Russell Grigg

References

- Donaldson, G. (2015). *Successful Futures*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.
- Jones, G. E. and Roderick, G. W. (2003). *A History of Education in Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- OECD (2014). *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective*. Paris: OECD.
- Welsh Government (2008). *Making the Most of Learning: Implementing the Revised Curriculum*. Cardiff: DCELLS.

We would like to acknowledge the support of Catherine Jenkins, Sarah Lewis and Natalie MacDonald in the editorial process.

Note

- ¹ Formerly the Journal was called *Cylchgrawn Addysg Cymru* / The Welsh Journal of Education and more recently the *Cylchgrawn Addysg Prifysgol Cymru* / University of Wales Journal of Education.