Educational Equity in Wales

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ABSTRACT

About one-fifth of the population of contemporary Wales live permanently in official poverty and another one-third live close to the poverty line. At least one-third of our children live in child poverty. Low levels of educational achievement are a characteristic feature of adults and children living in poverty in Wales. This in turn is closely linked to their chances of obtaining regular, high-quality employment that will provide them, their families and their communities with an opportunity to escape poverty. It is clear, therefore, that the biggest weakness of the current education system in Wales is the underachievement of those experiencing poverty. The greatest challenge is to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged learners. This article argues that if this is to be achieved, it will not be through the school improvement-led approach that has dominated education policy in Wales in recent times. A new policy paradigm is required which places far more emphasis on the importance of family and community engagement, as well as ensuring that schools work most effectively for those who need their support the most.

Keywords: poverty, equity, family, community, education

Introduction

'Schooling in truly disadvantaged communities offer[s] a sobering antidote to a heady political rhetoric arguing that all schools can be improved. Our evidence suggests a need to temper this enthusiasm with a realistic appraisal

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of the extraordinary problems confronted by some schools' (Bryk et al., 2010: 210).

Addressing the impact of poverty on educational achievement has become an increasingly strong focus of education policy in Wales since devolution. It is now one of the national priorities for education of the Welsh Government, and shortly after becoming Minister of Education and Skills in the summer of 2013, Huw Lewis announced that it would be his major priority. This article:

- considers the extent and nature of poverty in contemporary Wales and the impact that living in poverty has on the educational achievement of our children, and thereby upon Wales as a nation.
- offers a critical analysis of current education policy in this area and suggests that a new paradigm needs to be developed if Wales is to create a truly equitable education system over the period that lies ahead.

Poverty and educational achievement in Wales

As a nation Wales has always known and suffered from the effects of social and economic poverty. It was endemic in pre-industrial society and, despite the relative prosperity brought by the industrialisation of large parts of Wales from the mid eighteenth century, it remained a pestilence triggered variously by economic slumps, insecure employment conditions and the other vagaries of working-class existence in the period before the coming of the welfare state in the twentieth century (Williams, 1983).

Whilst the worst vestiges of poverty and its effects were removed by the edifices created by the Liberal government before the First World War and the reforming Labour government after 1945, economic hardship among the people and communities of rural, industrial and urban Wales far from disappeared. The long contraction of Wales's industrial base, which grew apace in the 1960s, afflicted the coalmining, metalworking and other extractive and related industries, with often devastating effects upon the communities that were so dependent upon them. The after-effects of the 1984 miners' strike, and the wider dismantling of the economic infrastructure of the valley communities and towns of south Wales and parts of north-east Wales, created economic deserts and social malaise where once there had been socio-economic vibrancy (Johnes, 2009).

Whilst the Wales inherited by devolved government after 1999 was in the process of adapting to its new post-industrial existence, it was hardly

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buoyant. Recent studies have pointed to the south Wales valleys communities, for example, as being the slowest to recover from the decline of their basic industries of any of the historic industrial communities of the UK that had been ravaged by the economic policies of the 1980s and 1990s (Fothergill, 2008; Egan, 2011). Although for a period after devolution the combined effect of a strong UK economy and the support offered by the Welsh Government to business development saw unemployment, worklessness and child poverty falling in Wales, the coming of the economic recession from 2008 ended the growth trajectory (Adamson, 2008).

Today Wales remains a nation deeply affected by poverty. In approximate terms, about one-fifth of our people live in deep poverty from which they do not find it possible to escape. They are often workless and many are in receipt of some form of state benefit. This classical 'out-of-work' poverty is not, however, the characteristic feature of poverty in contemporary Wales. The majority of people in poverty today are in some form of work, be it full time, part-time or 'zero-hours' employment, but in all cases not leading to enough income being received to keep those in employment and their families above the poverty line (Welsh Government, 2013a, 2014c; New Policy Institute, 2013)

In addition to the one-fifth in almost permanent poverty, the UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission believe that over a four- or five-year period up to another one-third of the population move in and out of poverty. For these reasons, the complex nature of modern-day poverty in Wales and its insidious impacts, including restricted and reducing social mobility, are as dire as they have been in over a century (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014).

Another aspect of this complexity is the demography of poverty. Whilst 'traditional' out-of-work poverty is dominant in the former industrial valleys and parts of our cities, in-work poverty can be found across Wales – as much in rural or semi-urban areas as in more densely populated communities. There is also now a greater recognition that whilst the basic definition of poverty remains an income, and therefore employment, derived condition, other forms of poverty – of experience, of quality of life and of enjoying full citizenship – are also restrictive and debilitating aspects of the lived experience of many of the people of Wales (New Policy Institute, 2013; Dorling, 2014; Macinnes et al., 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

These complexities and changing indices also have to shape our understanding of child poverty. About a third of our children in Wales live in official child poverty. This figure is derived from the eligibility of their

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families for free school meals. Given the changing nature of poverty, this is far from a perfect indicator of the background of our young people in schools, but it is the best we have.

What we can be more definite about is the levels of achievement of children eligible for free school meals (eFSM). The most recent available figures present the following headline indicators (Welsh Government, 2015a):

- by the age of 7 nearly 89% of children from more privileged backgrounds achieve 'expected levels' in reading, writing, number and other aspects of their curriculum, but by comparison only 72% of children from the poorest backgrounds achieve these outcomes;
- at the age of 11, whilst nearly 90% of non eFSM children reach expected levels, only 72% of eFSM children do so;
- by the age of 14 the respective figures are 86% and 62%; and
- when young people take their GCSEs, whilst 62% of those from more affluent backgrounds get at least five passes that include English and Mathematics, only 28% of those who live in poverty achieve this benchmark.

Thus by the age of 7, just over a quarter of children from our most disadvantaged homes and communities are *not* achieving outcomes that suggest they are capable of realising their potential. By what might be the end of their educational journey at the age of 16, this has risen alarmingly to three-quarters of young people from low-income families and communities *not* achieving results that will provide them with a good chance of ultimately achieving an apprenticeship, a place in higher education or some form of well-paid and secure employment.

Put starkly, the education system has not provided these young people with the wherewithal to become economically and socially mobile and to move themselves, their future families and their communities out of poverty. The extent of unfulfilled potential and the dark consequences of their continuing inurement in poverty is nothing less than a human and societal tragedy. In the words of the UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, they have been 'failed by the system' (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014: 187).

There is of course much greater complexity to the ecology of low achievement associated with poverty than is allowed for in these headline figures. This includes the very welcome trends whereby for all age groups

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achievement of both eFSM and non- eFSM children is improving and for most age groups the gap between the relative achievement of eFSM and non-eFSM children is actually reducing. This has to be tempered, however, by the fact that it is not reducing at the age when GCSEs are taken and when success at this level is so strongly associated with future employment and education prospects. At the current rate of progress it will be another sixty-plus years before all of our eFSM students achieve their full potential at the age of 15 (Welsh Government, 2014a, 2015a; National Foundation for Educational Research, 2014).

There are also important variations within this overall picture. Girls generally do better than boys in our educational system, but this should not mask the low achievement of many eFSM girls. Some ethnic minority groups do far better than others and, given the remarkable extent to which this appears to have been a factor in the recent success of London schools, Wales needs to know far more than it currently does about the achievement of ethnic minority groups within its education system (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2014; Welsh Government, 2015a).

Another area where we lack sufficient evidence is whether particular types of schools have an effect, and in particular whether Welsh-medium schools do less well or better with their disadvantaged pupils than English-medium counterparts; the indicators that we do have suggest that generally they do less well (Welsh Government, 2011; Welsh Government, 2015b).

More broadly, we do have the evidence that points to significant school effects, with data showing that schools with similar socio-economic status populations can be up to 55 percentage points apart in the achievement by their students of five higher-grade GCSE passes including English and Mathematics (Welsh Government, 2014a).

The national ratings of schools introduced by the Welsh Government since 2011 have shown that schools with relatively high levels of eFSM can be placed in the highest category of performance and that schools with relatively low levels of eFSM feature in the lowest category (Welsh Government, 2011; Welsh Government, 2015b). Estyn evidence also often points to similar variations (Estyn, 2012). The reasons for this are considered below, as is the extent to which these 'against the odds' schools provide a formula for success that can be 'virally' spread across the whole education system.

So, like poverty itself, the evidence on educational achievement of our most disadvantaged pupils suggests that our understanding should be complex, nuanced and subtle rather than oversimplified. Much greater certainty

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can be pointed to, however, on the impact that not having good educational qualifications can have for the future life prospects of individuals, including their chances of being in and staying out of poverty.

There is a strong and growing relationship between the levels of a person's qualifications and their chances of obtaining secure employment. As the UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has argued, being in employment may not be a guarantee of living outside of poverty, but it does provide the best possible chance of achieving this. There is also a strong relationship between levels of qualifications and levels of remuneration resulting in individuals having a better chance of not experiencing in-work poverty resulting from low wages (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

There are also strong correlations between levels of education and health. The pioneering Welsh medical practitioner Julian Tudor Hart has pointed, for example, to the need to create what he calls 'intelligent communities', where education influences people to keep themselves fit and healthy as well as having sufficient earnings to enjoy good food (Hart, 2010). The 'protective' factors which education provides in avoiding the likelihood of drug use, being involved in crime and other behaviours that will impact deleteriously on an individual's quality of life are also well established (Hammond and Feinstein, 2006).

In summary, it can be argued that, as Wales's history and contemporary experience clearly indicate, the best chance that individuals and communities have of avoiding poverty is good quality and reasonably well-paid employment, and the best chance of securing this is to maximise a person's educational achievement.

This is far from the situation that exists currently in Wales. There are many strengths to our education system and much good practice on which we can build future achievement, but it is deeply inequitable. Where a child is from and the family s/he is born into, as well as the school they will attend, are powerful – far too powerful – determinants of their chances of fulfilling their potential and securing what the American philosopher Michael Sandel calls the 'tickets to the good life' (Sandel, 2012).

This article now turns to consider what Wales through its education system is doing as a nation to address this situation, what success these approaches appear to be having and, in particular, what more we may need to do to achieve transformational success.

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Achieving equitable education systems: shifting paradigms

The Finnish academic and policy expert Pasi Sahlberg is wont to muse on the reasons why Finland suddenly found that its education system was highly ranked internationally and admired all over the world (Sahlberg, 2011). He suggests that when they overcame the shock of coming so high in the OECD PISA rankings, academics and policymakers began to examine their system to discover what it was that might explain these unexpected outcomes. What they discovered was two things. Firstly, a high-performing school system where children, regardless of background, achieved their potential supported by teachers who had been recruited through competitive entry routes, were educated to Master's degree level and who used robust pedagogy, based on research-informed evidence. These were similar causative factors that Michael Barber and colleagues at McKinsey and Co. were identifying in other high-achieving (based on the metric of the OECD PISA tests) education systems elsewhere in the world (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010).

The Finns, however, identified another critical factor which they believed to be at least as powerful as, if not more powerful than, school improvement and system effectiveness, and it is that education was highly valued by Finnish families, the community and society. Sahlberg illustrates this through the reading habits of the Finnish population. There are about 5 million Finns. Currently about 75 million books each year are loaned from the Finnish Public Library system. Adult Finns read a great deal, and their children replicate this and the assumptions and habits that underpin this phenomenon.

Caution is of course required here. As Ed Miliband, former Leader of the Labour Party, has quipped: 'if you want to see the American Dream … go to Finland'. Finland is a highly equitable society with a highly equitable education system, and the relationship between these two features is almost certainly symbiotic (Ripley, 2013).

More generally, however, it can be suggested that whilst a healthy scepticism should be applied to the reliability of the PISA tests as a robust indicator of comparative educational performance between the participating countries, they certainly suggest that the most successful education systems in the world are also the most equitable. When researchers and others looked closely at the common characteristics of these successful and egalitarian systems, they discovered that what might be called the 'family

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and community' factors which were apparent in Finland are as influential as, if not more so than, internal drivers within the education system, such as leadership, the quality of teaching and overall school effectiveness (Field et al., 2007; OECD, 2011 and 2012; Ripley, 2013).

These findings also correlate with the evidence that is emerging from school reform programmes, such as those undertaken in Chicago and in London. The body of research that has been produced on school reform in Chicago has identified that some schools located in communities where there is deep and enduring poverty achieve much higher levels of success than schools in similar areas elsewhere in the city, and that the reason for this is the much more pronounced family and community engagement of the former, compared with the latter (Bryk et al., 2010).

In London, the Challenge programme has been associated with remarkable levels of success, with eFSM children achieving approximately twice the percentage of higher-grade GCSE passes, including English and Mathematics, of children from similar backgrounds in Wales. An improvement in the achievement of children from ethnic minority backgrounds has been identified as a significant contributor to this overall performance (Burgess, 2014).

It has also been suggested that part of what has changed in London is the mobilisation of families and communities – particularly older and newer ethnic minority communities – to the cause of education and to improving the life-chances of their children (Burgess, 2014; Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta, 2014). Michael Barber and colleagues have noted that this family engagement factor is also a strong influence across the Asian Pacific Rim countries that are currently building such successful education systems as part of their route out of poverty (Barber, Donnelly and Risvi, 2012).

It appears that the learning to be gained from these UK and international experiences is that whilst it is important to use the knowledge that exists about how schools can improve and education systems can become more effective, this alone will not be sufficient to achieve the equitable education system we are now resolved on creating in Wales.

Perhaps Basil Bernstein was right, therefore, when he suggested that 'education could not change society' and that it would be necessary for the nature of class relationships in capitalist societies to change before equity could be achieved in education or in any other part of civil society (Bernstein, 1970). What the field of school effectiveness research can be seen to have established is that Bernstein's view was perhaps too pessimistic and overly simplistic. There is palpably a school effect, but can it be scaled

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up to an extent that it alone can achieve equitable education outcomes (Chapman et al., 2012)?

If this is to be done by a form of attrition, gradually moving what is occurring on the margins to something that virally infects the whole system, then it might be reasonable to ask why by now this has not happened in Wales. Some of the early school improvement research studies were undertaken in the late 1970s and early 1980s in seriously disadvantaged parts of Wales. Why have their outcomes not been scaled up to improve overall performance in the system, including greater equity? One of the most cited school improvement studies is that of the High Reliability Schools Programme in the Neath Port Talbot area, undertaken in the 1990s. Why has it not crossed the rivers Nedd or Ogwr to other parts of the region and nation? Even more to the point, why has it not transferred its success from the secondary to the much lower-performing primary sector in the area (Egan, 2012b)?

By contrast, the successful education systems in the UK and elsewhere in the world have not worked on the margins but have achieved system-wide reform through mobilising whole communities and even societies to focus upon the importance of education and the critical role it has in removing people and communities from poverty. They use all the knowledge that is available, including the outcomes of school improvement and effectiveness research and practice, to bring about transformative and sustainable change (Caldwell and Harris, 2008; Parsons, 2012; Ainscow et al., 2012 and 2015). This cannot be about policy borrowing – Wales cannot and surely would not want to recreate the South Korean system where, for example, children spend far longer hours in school, followed by many being coached and drilled in the evening – but it should be about learning from the success of others about what it takes in total to create the step change that is required (Ripley, 2013).

If this could be the way ahead for Wales in creating an equitable education system, where are we now? In essence, we appear to be locked into a classical school improvement paradigm that moves between shifting combinations of challenge and support for the education system. During the first period of devolution, up to 2007, when Jane Davidson undertook her long tenure as Education Minister in the Welsh Government, it can be argued that the emphasis was on support for teachers and schools (National Assembly for Wales, 2001; Welsh Assembly Government, 2006).It became apparent by 2006, however, that this alone was not leading to improvements in educational achievement in general and particularly for the most

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disadvantaged children. A series of policy developments resulted from this growing awareness, culminating in the development of the School Effectiveness Framework by 2008, which represented a balanced approach between support and challenge for schools, including a new emphasis on the importance of family and community influences (Welsh Government, 2008).

Following the PISA results of 2009 and the unfavourable assessment they appeared to offer of the health of our education system, compared with other UK and international countries, the dominant paradigm under a new and zealous Education Minister, Leighton Andrews, became that of challenge to the system and the ratcheting up of various forms of accountability (Egan, 2012b; Andrews, 2014). The School Effectiveness Framework was in effect abandoned, and with it a judicious use of support and challenge for schools and an emphasis on the family and community influences on educational achievement.

Currently a synthesis appears to be emerging, influenced in part by the realisation that, when teachers and schools are challenged to within an inch of their professional and corporate lives, as Richard Elmore has wisely suggested, performance management systems that do not provide professionals with support, as well as challenge, are doomed to fail (Elmore, 2007; OECD, 2014).

A strong constituent part of this new synthesis is increased emphasis on the importance of equity. Both support (through the Pupil Deprivation Grant) and challenge (through school categorisation and the work of Estyn) are being used to take forward this policy direction. There is also an increased focus on the importance of family and community engagement (Welsh Government, 2013a, 2014a, 2014b).

At the core of this new approach to policy, however, remains a traditional school improvement paradigm. Its key features are the National Model for Regional Working, the Schools Challenge Cymru programme and the school categorisation system – all dressed up in the notion developed by David Hargreaves of a 'self-improving system' (Welsh Government, 2014b, 2014d, 2015b; Hargreaves, 2010). The way in which many of the most successful education systems in the world have moved away from this traditional model – with its limited track record of success, particularly in achieving equitable outcomes – to a more holistic and sophisticated approach which combines family and community approaches with school improvement to create a new and successful paradigm for change, is seemingly currently eschewed in Wales.

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The justification for this is presumably that, as both eFSM and non eFSM children are improving their achievement, 'more of the same' will ultimately create the excellence and the equity that is being sought: 'a rising tide raising all ships' is the phrase that is often used. There is a danger here that, rather like the generals of the First World War, the belief is that one more push will achieve the breakthrough that will secure ultimate victory. This is not sustainable and it is certainly not very smart. If it were going to work, surely it would have done so by now?

The best international and UK evidence suggests that what Wales needs if it is to create both a high-achieving and highly equitable education system in future is a new approach based upon a new paradigm for educational change. What this would require is considered below.

An equitable education system for Wales

What are likely to be the key components of such a new paradigm? It can be suggested that there will be three key components. Firstly, educational leadership imbued with a sense of moral purpose, which refuses to accept that being born into a disadvantaged family and community should inevitably lead to poor educational outcomes and a continuing pattern of exclusion and poverty. Secondly, emphasis on the quality of teaching experienced by our most disadvantaged young people as the most important within-school factor, and a commitment, therefore, to ensuring that our most disadvantaged and needy children are taught by our most outstanding practitioners. Thirdly, and most importantly of all, that family and community engagement becomes a key concern of all schools and that in our most disadvantaged communities, where this is most needed and is hardest to achieve, community-based educational partnerships are created as the key change mechanisms (Egan, 2010, 2012a, 2013; Egan, Saunders and Swaffield, 2014; Grigg et al., 2014).

These Education Community Partnerships should bring together schools, families, community-based programmes, a range of agencies, the voluntary and charity sectors and the business community to create a single dynamic for educational change and improvement in the community as well as in the education system (Estyn, 2011; Egan, 2012; Adamson and Lang, 2014; Cummings et al., 2011; Kerr et al., 2014).

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Leadership

It has often been observed that one of the key explanatory factors as to why some schools succeed more than others in overcoming the impact of poverty on children's learning is the influence of leadership, particularly that of the head teacher (Caldwell and Harris, 2008; Hopkins, 2007; Egan, 2012; Estyn, 2012, 2013). A failure to accept that disadvantage should necessarily lead to low performance – what one successful head called the 'poor dab syndrome' – creates a sense of moral purpose in a school that can be infectious. To have meaning, however, such laudable aspirations need to be turned into practical outcomes that involve a form of 'policy bending' within the activities of the school. The financial and intellectual resources of the schools need to be deployed where they can have the greatest effect, which is often likely to be on improving the engagement and achievement of those most in need (Ainscow and West, 2006; Ainscow et al., 2012; OECD, 2011 and 2012).

Successful leadership in the most challenging circumstances requires distributed leadership that ensures that all leadership groups in the school are involved. This should encompass those in the senior leadership team, in middle leadership roles and in primary schools, classroom teachers working in leadership roles with teaching assistants. These leaders should focus on improving the outcomes of those who need their attention the most and on working together to share the knowledge they develop. In the case of primary schools, for example, it should include developing the competence of teaching assistants through their professional learning, so that experienced and effective teachers can be released to focus upon the most disadvantaged and low-achieving (Welsh Government, 2015c).

Another key feature of effective leadership in challenging circumstances is ensuring that all staff within the school, not just teachers, receive ongoing professional learning opportunities that enable them to develop the best and most up-to-date pedagogical knowledge on how to intervene effectively with disadvantaged learners. Successful leaders know that within the school environment it is outstanding teacher pedagogy that can make the biggest difference for low-achieving children (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed et al., 2010; Egan et al., 2014; Grigg et al., 2014). The Welsh Government's *New Deal for the Education Workforce* (Welsh Government, 2014e) should provide the opportunity for an increasing focus to be placed on providing opportunities for school staff to develop their professional learning, in order to achieve more equitable outcomes.

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Leadership in schools in disadvantaged communities should not solely be focused within the school. It also should also look outwards to build family and community engagement. Head teachers and /or members of their senior leadership teams need to be as much community as school leaders if they are to maximise the impact they wish to have on the young people they educate. There is also a role here for governing bodies, given that they are likely to have considerable contacts within the community the school serves. Together, the leadership groups within the school can take an 'asset-based' approach to identifying individuals, organisations and agencies within the community who they should form links with (Harris and Chapman, 2002; Egan, 2012; Estyn, 2011; Kerr et al., 2014).

It is very easy for schools facing the most challenging circumstances to adopt a 'deficit model', seeing the community and its families as being hostile forces which are not supportive of the school and in effect are 'part of the problem' they face. Such attitudes are inevitably self-defeating and can be self-fulfilling (Wood and Warin, 2014). Developing positive attitudes to the families and communities the school serves and the social capital that can be derived from these sources should therefore be a key aspect of school leadership for equity (Lupton and Thrupp, 2013).

The facets of leadership set out above should be reflected in a single school strategic plan that is agreed by the governing body and shared with key partners. It could be used as a basis for staff development and in a user-friendly format be made available to young people in the school and their families.

At system level much more emphasis could be placed on developing leadership specifically for schools serving disadvantaged learners and communities. This has been a strand in leadership development supported by the National College for School Leadership in England and its successor organisation within the Department of Education. It has led to support for programmes such as Future Leaders (The Future Leaders Trust, 2015) and Teaching Leaders (Teaching Leaders, 2015), which specifically develop leaders for the most disadvantaged schools. Similar programmes have not been adopted in Wales and our most disadvantaged schools often struggle to appoint outstanding leaders at middle and senior leadership level. Consideration should also be given to providing greater financial incentives for emerging and aspiring leaders to teach in our most challenging situations. The *New Deal for the Education Workforce* should consider how these deficits could be addressed.

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Teacher pedagogy

Whilst the research literature on school improvement makes clear that leadership is important in raising student achievement, it is even stronger in its affirmation of the importance of teaching as the single biggest success factor (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed et al., 2010). This is particularly the case for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, who need the attention of outstanding teachers if they are to maximise their learning potential in schools. Through the work of John Hattie (Hattie, 2012), the Sutton Trust, the Education Endowment Foundation (Higgins et al., 2014) and others we now have a much better understanding of the most effective learning and teaching approaches that can be used with more unengaged students.

We also know that recruiting the best qualified and most suitable entrants into teaching and exposing them, through initial teacher education and lifelong professional learning, to the bodies of knowledge we now have, can bring about transformative and sustainable change in student outcomes (Connelly et al., 2014).

The Furlong Report on initial teacher education in Wales raises serious questions about the extent to which this is currently taking place in Wales (Furlong, 2015). It acknowledges that Teach First (Wigdortz, 2012), which began working in Wales in 2013 and which focuses on providing promising young teachers for the most disadvantaged schools, is likely to improve the quality of entrants. Given, however, that it is currently a relatively small programme confined to a limited number of secondary subject areas, this impact at present is likely to be minimal.

In relation to the ongoing professional learning of teachers, although the approaches identified by the Sutton Trust and the Education Endowment Foundation have been promoted by the Welsh Government through, for example, the Guidance on the use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant and the Masters in Educational Practice, the extent to which these pedagogies are known widely by teachers and embedded in their practice is difficult to ascertain (National Assembly for Wales, 2015).

The developments flowing from Graham Donaldson's review of the curriculum in Wales (Donaldson, 2015), the Furlong Reports and the *New Deal for the Education Workforce* should, therefore, provide considerable opportunity to strengthen teacher pedagogy in general in Wales, and particularly in relation to achieving more equitable outcomes.

A reformed initial teacher education, for example, should look to recruit the very best people into the system and to providing them with a

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curriculum that enables them to become familiar with research-based pedagogy, including the knowledge we have on maximising student potential and achievement. In their school placements – based on the 'clinical practice model' set out in the Furlong Report – they could spend part of their time in schools that have a record of high levels of achievement with the most disadvantaged students and work with outstanding practitioners.

The New Deal development should contain a discrete professional learning strand related to overcoming disadvantage, enabling teachers and other professionals to be able to follow a professional learning pathway in this area, leading to accreditation at Master's level. Given that schools in our most disadvantaged areas find it difficult to recruit teachers, including high-quality teachers, the Welsh Government and local authorities should consider offering incentives for outstanding teachers and leaders to work in schools where they can have the greatest impact. The Teach First programme represents a start in this direction, but there is much more that can be done.

Currently, we generally allow head teachers to place our best teachers with the highest achievers in primary and secondary schools. The evidence is that the obverse should be happening if we are to improve overall student and school achievement and begin to break the stranglehold which poverty has on educational achievement and on social and economic progress (OECD, 2011, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011; Barber et al., 2012).

This is part of the wider misunderstandings that hold back our education system: the belief that, to address perceived low educational standards, setting and banding are appropriate strategies, when the evidence is that the most successful education systems in the world forego these approaches; the belief that class size is important when in fact it is teacher quality which is far more influential (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed et al., 2010; Siraj and Mayo, 2014; Ainscow et al., 2012).

Family and community engagement

What has been argued above is that we should use and adapt from the old school improvement paradigm the useful knowledge it has created, particularly in relation to the importance of leadership and teaching, to serve the cause of equity in education. The new and more powerful knowledge that we have on the importance of family and community engagement in

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the process of educating all of our children and supporting schools in their work (Egan, 2012; Egan et al., 2014; Grigg et al., 2014; Kerr et al., 2014; Kintrea et al., 2011; Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Cuthbert and Hatch, 2009) must be synthesised with these older traditions to create the new paradigm for educational equity.

In our most affluent areas in Wales the involvement of families and communities in supporting the education and resilience of their children is already naturally in place and contributes significantly to the success achieved by many schools in these areas (Caldwell and Harris, 2008). In our many challenging socio-economic communities in Wales – rural, valleys and urban – too often, however, these positive forces are not present and it should now be an imperative that Wales makes up for these deficiencies if we are to improve educational equity.

The influence of parents and families upon children, their socialisation and education is well known. It is particularly well established within early years education, including those working in pre-school situations and nursery/reception classes (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Siraj and Mayo, 2014; Chicken et al., 2015; Statham et al., 2010). It is at the heart of the work undertaken by the Welsh Government's Flying Start programme (National Assembly for Wales, 2014) in the childcare system and within the Foundation Phase curriculum for 3- to 7-year-olds. The international evidence for this being perhaps the most important time of all to tackle disadvantage and attempt remedial work is well established. The critical importance of involving the hardest-to-reach families in this process is also well known (Siraj and Mayo, 2014; Allen, 2011).

Currently there is a great deal of focus and interest in Wales on the importance of parental and family engagement. Programmes and interventions, including FAST (Families and Schools Together), introduced by Save the Children and based on the work of Professor Lyn McDonald of Middlesex University (McDonald et al., 2010), the structured parental conversations promoted by the Achievement for All programme (Blandford and Knowles, 2013), the restorative justice approach promoted by Family Learning Signature (Business Lab, 2012) and the Family Values programme (NSM, 2015) are all currently operating in Wales.

Many schools have become involved in these programmes or have developed their own approaches, often funded by the Pupil Deprivation Grant. Some primary schools work with Flying Start to build upon the parenting approaches that have been developed in their clusters with some of the most disadvantaged families. There are also links between schools

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and the Families First programme (Welsh Government, 2014f), which adopts a multi-agency approach to supporting the most vulnerable children and families.

In general, however, we are a long way away from the universal and sustained adoption of family and parental education programmes in the way that has been called for by the UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). Although the Welsh Government is currently producing what promises to be most useful guidance on family and parental approaches, we are also far from having an evidence-informed knowledge base on successful interventions that draws, for example from the work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in this area (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Kintrea et al., 2011; Egan, 2013).

If parents are the greatest influence on children, not far behind comes the impact of where they grow up and live, including the influences of peer groups. There continues to be a debate in the research and policy community about the influence of place and the extent to which we should have place-based policies, rather than those that target particular groups of people, such as those experiencing poverty, wherever they are to be found (Lupton, 2010; Kerr et al., 2014; Egan, 2011). Given what we know about the increasingly complex demography of poverty in Wales, it would seem sensible that a hybrid that brings both approaches together is the best way forward.

Currently poverty-/place-based interventions in Wales are focused on the Communities First programme (Welsh Government, 2013b) which is funded to operate in Wales's most disadvantaged communities, as identified through the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (Welsh Government, 2014c). This provides funding for the community partnerships within these areas to target initiatives focused on improving employment, health and education.

Within these communities and elsewhere in Wales there are attempts being made to bring together all agencies, including schools, in order to align their strategies, practice and sometimes funding in a common effort to tackle poverty and its consequences, including those which affect education. Examples of such work includes exciting initiatives in the Glyncoch area of Pontypridd, in Ely and Caerau in Cardiff, in parts of Newport, the Rhondda Fach and in the Maes-y-Morfa area of Llanelli (Egan, Swaffield and Saunders, 2014; Grigg et al., 2014; Chicken et al., 2015). These are often 'bottom-up' partnerships and are probably the better for being that,

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but their sustainability is frequently fragile and not well enough aligned to funded Welsh Government programmes, including those supported by the European Social Fund.

The potential for such community-based partnerships has been explored in the highly innovative deep-place study undertaken by the Centre for Regeneration Excellence in Wales. Much interest has been taken in its proposals for how the town of Tredegar might escape the deep post-industrial poverty it is currently immured in, through a series of interrelated interventions, including the development of a Community Education Partnership (Adamson and Lang, 2014). An established international example of such an approach is the Harlem Children's Zone in New York (Whitehurst and Croft, 2010).

So what currently exists in Wales is a growing amount of often unrelated and uncoordinated activity in the field of parental and community engagement in education, some developed by programmes attempting to establish themselves in Wales, some from Welsh government-funded programmes and some from community-generated activity. They are all worthy, but are they effective and sustainable? The answer will almost certainly be No, unless they become more closely aligned to the school improvement tradition set out above. If this can be achieved, the step-change required to bring about a transformational movement for educational equity could be possible.

A number of actions suggest themselves. Firstly, the Welsh Government needs to commission – but not mandate – the development of a new paradigm for achieving educational equity. A sensible approach might be to ask the UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission to assist it in this task and to require the Welsh Government to work closely with the policy, research and practitioner communities in Wales in undertaking its work. Secondly, we need more research and evaluation studies on the family and community engagement that is already taking place in our most disadvantaged communities. Thirdly, and flowing from the first two actions, we need a flexible model that would enable Community Education Partnerships to be established in our most disadvantaged communities that bring together all key players – schools, other educational organisations, families, agencies, programmes and partnerships – in common cause.

There is an essential perversity at the heart of the Welsh education system. As the OECD has noted, we have a highly equitable system at the point of entry, with a miniscule private schools sector and no grammar or free schools or academies. Children generally attend their local school or,

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if they choose a Welsh-medium or faith education, they sometimes travel a little further. Paradoxically, however, they will enter an education system that has a very poor track record in achieving equitable outcomes.

It is time to end that perversity and to challenge that paradox. Wales will not become the excellent education system it aspires to be unless that is achieved, and its civil and political society will continue to be weakened by the failure to do so. The argument put forward here is that if we are to rise to that challenge we have to put aside what is a tired and largely unsuccessful school improvement paradigm, take from it many useful attributes that can be salvaged and, by uniting it with the approaches to greater family and community engagement that have been so pivotal to the success of the world's most equitable education systems, create an education system and a Wales that its citizens can be truly proud of.

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