

Developing Educational Research in Wales

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In the first edition of the relaunched *Wales Journal of Education*, we pointed to the current parlous state of educational research in Wales and expressed the hope that the journal would be able to contribute to an urgently needed renaissance in Welsh education studies. We return to and expand upon these themes in the editorial to this volume.

It is encouraging that we can report upon a number of positive developments. The relaunch of the journal was undertaken successfully and we sense strong support and optimism for its future. This has been evidenced by the flow of submissions we have received for this volume, such that, due to constraints of space, we have had to hold over the publication of some of these to a future number.

For the first time in this edition we are including a Research News section. The information contained therein suggests that despite the many challenges faced by the educational research community in Wales, there is both vitality to the work that is being undertaken and a commitment to developing future activity. It is our intention to make this a regular feature of the journal and we look forward to receiving updates from those who have submitted entries to this edition and to new contributors.

We are particularly interested in action or practitioner research contributions from those in the field. Understandably, for many teachers research may not seem a priority and there are those who argue that research is best left to academics, while teachers focus on becoming evaluators of what they do (see Stewart, 2015). Much depends on what counts as 'research'. Lawrence Stenhouse, one of the most distinguished educationalists of his generation, succinctly defined research as 'systematic enquiry made public' (Stenhouse, 1981: 104). On this basis what matters most is carefully planned research that is shared, critiqued and challenging.

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The nature of research, however, can vary from individual teachers focusing on one aspect of practice to the large-scale enquiries involving many schools.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA: 2014) acknowledges the pressures teachers work under and that research should not become an additional burden with which they are expected to handle. We would endorse its pragmatic view that research should be viewed along a continuum and that over time, school leaders should seek to cultivate a culture in which systematic use is made of evidence from multiple sources and where research becomes an everyday part of a teacher's professional identity and practice.

Certainly in England, support for grass-roots research has picked up in recent times through organisations such as researchED and the UK government's funding of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has led the way in developing the notion of 'research engaged' schools, first mooted by Handscomb and MacBeath (2003) and has produced a range of useful materials on its website to support practitioners and school leaders. Jonathan Breckon (2016), on behalf of Nesta and the Alliance for Useful Evidence, has written a highly readable guide for practitioners on how to use research evidence. He takes the reader through questions such as 'When can evidence help you?', 'What evidence should you choose?' and 'Where should you look for evidence?'

As Thurston points out in the Research News section, the Welsh government is clearly taking the issue of educational research seriously. Huw Lewis, former education minister, has signalled that 'the need to develop research literate professionals' (Evans, 2016) will only become more important in future years. As part of its Professional Learning Model for practitioners, the Welsh Government has published materials to support reflective practice, collaboration and the use of data and other research evidence (e.g. Welsh Government, 2015). The Learning Wales website includes online modules covering 'Teachers as Researchers' and 'Research Informed Practice'. Perhaps the most important message is for professionals to become equipped with the skills so that they ask the right kinds of questions, separate myths from realities and ultimately identify which approaches are most likely to succeed in their contexts (BERA, 2014; Cordingley and Groll, 2014).

The editorial board of the journal, as part of its commitment to participating in the future development of educational research in Wales,

has entered into discussions with BERA on how we can work together to this common end. This met with a very positive response from BERA officers and executive, leading to an agreement to the holding of a session at the BERA Annual Conference at Leeds University in September 2016 to explore further how we might work together to develop the future fortunes of educational research in Wales. We have also begun informal discussions with colleagues in the Scottish Education Research Association (SERA) and intend to explore further their *modus operandi*. Again, our discussions with SERA have met with interest and support. In taking this lead on how the journal might play a wider role in the future of educational research in Wales, we will also hold discussions with the Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD) and the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers in Wales (UCET Cymru).

We consider the aforementioned as being important and encouraging developments, but of course there is a mountain to climb if we are to create the healthy and robust research community in Wales in which the journal can thrive.

Turning to the eclectic mix of articles published in this edition of the journal, given what has been said above, it is interesting to reflect on what they reveal about the nature of educational research currently being undertaken in and on Wales, the findings and issues they highlight and what, in total, they may suggest about future developments.

A range of research methodologies are represented here including a questionnaire-led survey of student views on the *Cwricwlwm Cymreig* (Davies and Hughes); a number of reviews of largely secondary evidence on subjects as diverse as the *Schools Challenge Cymru* programme (Ainscow), further education governance (Graystone) and science education (Davies); small-scale case-studies using mixed research methods on the introduction of a phonics reading programme (Watkins et al.) and the take-up of the further mathematics qualification in 16–19 education (Tanner et al.); and finally a report on ethnography as an educational research method (Hodgkin et al.).

Newer social science approaches such as theory-based research, cohort and longitudinal studies, quasi-experimental designs (including randomised control trials) and systematic reviews and meta-analyses are not, therefore, represented here. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that these often require a level of funding that, outside WISERD, has not been available to the research community in Wales. The range of articles here suggest that despite the restrictions and challenges faced by the wider research

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community, a healthy variety of worthy research activity is taking place in Wales.

What does the work represented here have to say about current education policy and practice in Wales? Two themes seem to stand out. First, the extent to which a robust body of educational research exists that enables Wales to successfully adapt (to policy 'learn' rather than 'borrow') approaches that have been developed in England, such as those reported by Ainscow and Watkins et al. The latter suggest on the basis of one small-scale study that there is good potential for this to happen. Ainscow points to similar policy-transfer potential and claims some early gains. It could be argued, however, that far more extensive research will be required to produce robust outcomes before a scaling-up of these types of interventions was undertaken. The second main theme that emerges is the gap between the 'rhetoric' of educational policy in Wales since devolution and its implementation. The extent to which innovative and worthy policies have led to improved standards and outcomes is suggested by the contributions made by Davies, Davies and Hughes, and Tanner et al.

In relation to both themes, the possibilities offered by educational research may be seen. Developing policy and practice on the basis of existing evidence and ensuring that major policy initiatives include the opportunity for rigorous research to be undertaken on their implementation have not always been a strength of educational developments in Wales since the devolution of power.

If the current ambitious reform programme of the Welsh Government, encapsulated in the curriculum developments that are proceeding following the Donaldson Review and the changes mooted for initial teacher education and professional learning, are to be successful, high-quality educational research that builds upon what is presented in this volume of the *Wales Journal of Education* will be essential.

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