

Book Reviews

Testing Times. Success, Failure and Fiasco in Education Policy in Wales Since Devolution

Philip Dixon, 2016

Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press

+180 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-1860571244

This is a timely commentary on the educational system in Wales, which has certainly experienced testing times over recent years. The author is well placed to comment on the Welsh educational landscape given his former role as director of ATL Cymru and dealings with education ministers and civil servants.

The book opens with a brief historical review of education in Wales but the focus is very much on post-devolution developments and the contribution (or otherwise) of education ministers. Dixon offers an insightful and generally balanced critique of the Welsh Assembly Government's vision set out in 2001 in *The Learning Country*. He describes how it was warmly received by academics and the profession in general, but acknowledges also that the unions were too quick to praise the direction of travel. In fairness, as Dixon concedes, the wealth of comparative international data that so shapes modern-day education discourse was not widely used in the early 2000s. As a result, he maintains, the Welsh educational system was described in overly optimistic terms. It was far short of the 'world-leading' rhetoric of Jane Davidson's tenure as education minister. As Leighton Andrews, one of her successors, put it, this was a fair system aspiring to be good, not a good one aiming to be excellent.

Dixon's main criticism of the education system in Wales is aimed towards the civil service who had done little to change the culture and delivery of policy, a central theme in the book. He cites several prominent examples, including the Foundation Phase and, more recently, the Donaldson Review's recommendations on curriculum and assessment. He also, with

<https://doi.org/10.16922/wje.19.2.10>

the exception of Leighton Andrews, blames government ministers for too readily accepting the advice of their officials. The teaching profession largely escapes criticism and, instead, Dixon argues that teachers received little meaningful professional development while England has embarked on a major process of upskilling teachers. Dixon maintains that despite references to 'Supporting Practitioners', *Learning Country 2* (2006) did little to address this in concrete terms. He is scathing of the bureaucratic changes which resulted, for example, in the creation of the new Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills and dismisses much of the change as cosmetic, little more than the shuffling of chairs (p. 34).

One thing Dixon does particularly well to help the reader appreciate the impact of the high level political manoeuvrings is to follow the school journey of a fictional child, Megan, through the life of *The Learning Country*. He suggests that she would benefit from Flying Start, the Foundation Phase and free breakfasts. Her primary school days would include a rich curriculum and teacher-led assessments. At fourteen Megan could choose her own learning pathway, either through the traditional GCSEs and A levels or the new vocational route. All of this learning would take place in refurbished or even replaced buildings. Of course, what the likes of Megan actually experienced is far more contentious. Dixon uses the Welsh Government's own education targets and outcomes as a measure of its success and concludes that even when these were revised downwards, it fell significantly short of the mark.

Dixon reveals that when he met Andrews and was asked his opinion on the Educational Department, he told the minister that it was 'dysfunctional' (p. 38). Andrews went a stage further and described the whole education system as such. There is no doubt that the new minister's no-nonsense style set him apart from his predecessors. In terms of substance, Dixon maintains that Andrews offered 'concrete proposals and demands', epitomised in his famous twenty-point plan, and signalled a move away from 'glossy brochures with cuddly pictures of the minister talking to children' (p. 39). National literacy and numeracy strategies and tests were ushered in as part of a focus on improving standards in these core areas. Andrews's career as education minister came to an abrupt end in 2013 and was followed by a rather damning report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2014 which was critical of the lack of vision. Having dismissed *The Learning Country* as being 'woefully inadequate' in lacking a standards agenda, Dixon is not slow in criticising the underwhelming vision set out in

Qualified for Life, which effectively set targets that corresponded to 'aiming for (the OECD) average' (p. 48).

Dixon maintains that his focus is on policies and not personalities, although he argues that as policies are not created in a vacuum it is necessary to point out the weaknesses as well as the strengths of those who shaped these policies. Some readers might share Dixon's view that politicians are 'fair game'. Jane Davidson is presented in a particularly poor light, described as 'overly dramatic' – apparently a 'Lady Jane' figure (according to her cabinet colleagues), driven around in her ministerial limousine on her school visits. Others have argued that Davidson, a former teacher, proved to be a popular minister. Moreover, I'm not sure her legacy was entirely 'toxic' as Dixon claims. She removed National Curriculum testing, introduced the Foundation Phase and the Welsh Baccalaureate, and subscribed Wales to PISA in 2006 which, at the very least, has sharpened debate on the comparative performance of education in Wales. More fundamentally, I am not the only reviewer left uncomfortable over the degree of personalisation in Dixon's book (McAllister, 2017).

Having spent much of his time criticising the implementation of policies, Dixon's final chapter offers a way forward. He suggests the setting up of a Recovery Board, appointing by the National Assembly rather than the Welsh Government, and comprising members with a proven track record of delivery. He wants to move away from 'another gathering of the great and the good, Ministerial cronies or "friends of friends" that can all too often bedevil the life of a small country' (p. 161). Such a board would focus on implementation, which Dixon sees as the root cause of so many ills in Welsh education. Dixon puts forward seven key questions which need answering if Welsh education is to move forward. These mostly cover familiar ground, for example in terms of learning from other countries with the caveat that Wales should be weary of 'policy tourism'. But Dixon refreshingly suggests that we should encourage more education 'heretics' who question the established orthodoxies and here, surely, is a role for universities.

The book should appeal to a wide readership – students, teachers, school leaders and policy-makers interested in why the system has underperformed. And it is certainly a book that would stimulate seminar discussions. It is engaging, provocative and, sadly, concerning for those reflecting on the progress of post-devolution education policy in Wales.

References

McAllister, L. (2017). “‘Painful reading’ for all who care about children’s education’. *Western Mail*, 9 February 2017.

Dr Russell Grigg

Education in Britain: 1944 to the Present

Ken Jones, 2016

Cambridge: Polity Press

2nd edition

252 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-6321-0

This is a timely second edition of a well-regarded history of education in modern Britain. This edition considers a longer span of time and for the first time includes coverage of further and higher education as well as schools. It provides a thorough, well-organised and lucid historical narrative and analysis based on extensive coverage of secondary sources. It is also genuinely an account of education developments in the four nations of the UK education system and charts both the historic and contemporaneous divergence of these systems in relation to their infrastructure and discrete education philosophies.

In relation to Wales its analytical framework is based on the author’s overarching interpretation that our education policy has been ‘bound up with a set of arguments with its English counterpart, which is part model to be imitated and part example to be avoided’ (p. 3). On this basis, he depicts the history of education in Wales since devolution as being characterised by increasing ‘avoidance’ of ‘New Labour’ approaches in the period up to 2010 and of some ‘imitation’ of the dominant influences of globalisation and marketisation since then.

What the author is not able to draw upon for the period since devolution is historical scholarship of the quality that Gareth Elwyn Jones’s work provides for earlier periods. We will have to wait for such scholarship, therefore, before the author’s analysis of education in Wales since devolution can be robustly assessed. In the meantime, however, might it be that the distinctiveness of post-devolution developments in Wales is overstated? Could it also be that the similarities between the accountability and performance-driven philosophy that increasingly underpins education

policy in Wales has seen the persistence of an England *and* Wales education system to a far greater degree than the author suggests?

Given the socio-economic challenges that the National Assembly of Wales faced on its formation resulting from the hollowing-out of the Welsh economy and many of Wales's communities in the 1980s and 1990s, it could be argued that devolved education policy in Wales required imagination more than it did 'avoidance' or 'imitation'. For a period after the publication of *The Learning Country* in 2001 that seemed possible but by the end of the decade it had become a chimera. The *Education Reform Programme* being fashioned by the current Welsh Government offers the hope that a distinctive education philosophy to meet the needs of the Welsh people might again emerge. Jones is almost certainly right to argue that 'education in Britain has become, more than ever, plural' (p. 211), but this begs the question as to whether plurality has achieved the socially progressive and inclusive education system that many of us believed devolution could bring.

Professor David Egan
Cardiff Metropolitan University