

Editorial:
*Education Research in a Self-improving
Education System*

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This edition of the journal goes to press in early 2018 shortly after the Welsh Government has published its plan of action for the school system in Wales up to 2021 (Welsh Government, 2017). The plan, like all such documents on education published by government since devolution, espouses a commitment to ‘evidence-driven’ policy. Given that, as pointed out in previous editorials in this journal, we have witnessed during this period an ongoing decline in educational research capacity in Wales from what was already a weak base (Furlong and White, 2001) it is particularly encouraging, therefore, that this aspiration is accompanied by a resolve to strengthen educational research.

The ‘self-improving school system’ that the Welsh Government is committed to developing with Regional Education Consortia and schools will share ‘research evidence across the system’ ensuring that teachers will have ‘a deep understanding of pedagogy’ and through a reformed initial teacher education and professional learning system be ‘research-engaged’, teaching a new curriculum based upon ‘reputable pedagogic research’. Universities will be asked to ‘support a research-engaged profession’ through greater collaboration between themselves and with the Regional Education Consortia. It is also encouraging that the importance of educational research is also to be strongly represented in the proposed functions of the new National Academy for Educational Leadership (Welsh Government, 2016).

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This is all very encouraging and builds upon the evidence base emerging from the workings of the self-improving school system in England where the importance of school/higher education partnership in developing professional learning has been highlighted in a recent research study completed for the Department of Education (Maxwell et al., 2015) and from international research on successful education systems. The major study undertaken by Linda Darling-Hammond and colleagues (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) on teacher quality in the high-performing systems that they researched in Singapore, Finland, Australia, Canada and China points to the importance of research engagement by teachers developed during their professional learning.

In these nations, the strength of the education research community and the quality of country-specific educational research is much greater than that to be found currently in Wales. If we are, therefore, to meet these laudable aspirations to strengthen educational research in Wales within higher education and via its new partnerships with the Regional Education Consortia and schools, a veritable transformation will need to take place in developing research capacity in Wales over the next four years.

Ideally this should result from the 'co-construction' by all interested parties in Wales of a strategy and action plan supported by significant new financial resources. As reported in volume 19.2 of this journal, the Editorial Board has taken a lead in bringing together the wide range of organisations in Wales that have an interest in educational research and the British Educational Research Association to seek a collaborative way forward. BERA has recently met with the Welsh Government and it is hoped that the momentum established will lead to such a jointly owned strategy and plan soon being put in place.

The contents of this edition of the journal provide, we believe, further encouragement for those of us who believe that through individual, institutional and organisational efforts we can indeed raise the quality and status of educational research in Wales. At the micro level where initial teacher education institutions have been challenged to make teacher education more research based (Furlong, 2015), Lewis et al. demonstrate that small-scale collaborative work represents a viable way forward. At a more macro level, the 'research note' from Tyler reports on highly promising work involving Bangor University, the Regional Education Consortia in north Wales and other partners to raise research capacity and activity in the region at school, local authority and higher education level.

In relation to fields of research enquiry, the ongoing importance of the transition that young people make from primary to secondary school is highlighted in two contributions from researchers at Cardiff Metropolitan University. Hodgkin uses a range of evidence including pupil voice to indicate how challenging this process remains for some pupils and Davies et al. point to the difficulties faced by a group of pupils – those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are able and talented – who have been relatively neglected both in research and practice.

Different methodological approaches to educational research are demonstrated in the contributions from Beverley et al. and Ward. The former draws upon randomised control trial evidence to highlight the efficacy of low-cost interventions aimed at developing numeracy skills in primary schools. Ward uses largely qualitative evidence research to explore the problematic trajectories that boys face in improving their learning and place within society in post-industrial communities in Wales.

Keane's contribution on Owen M. Edwards, perhaps the most influential educational figure in the revival of national consciousness and pride in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Wales (Jones and Roderick, 2003), reminds us of the eternal verity that education and educational scholarship can have in shaping the future fortunes of the Welsh people.

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