

Editorial: The Future for School Leadership in Wales

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Introduction and background

The educational journey undertaken in Wales since the devolution in 1999 of nearly all powers over education to the National Assembly for Wales has been both an exciting and challenging one. In the decade preceding this, education policy in England and Wales had increasingly been influenced by debates about school standards first sparked off by James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of October 1976 and the not unrelated development of the first national curriculum for state schools in England and Wales introduced in 1988 (Jones, 2016; Jones and Roderick, 2003).

During the initial years of the National Assembly for Wales and its Assembly/Welsh Government these preoccupations continued to be in play. Whilst discrete and innovative approaches were taken to the development of the curriculum in Wales and major differences were enacted in relation to its assessment, increasingly it was school standards which dominated the debate about education (Egan and James, 2001, 2002, 2003). There was now an expectation that high educational standards should be achieved for all pupils – regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds – and that schools should be made more accountable for the outcomes they achieved (Egan and Marshall, 2007).

Within this policy discourse, the role of educational leadership was relatively muted. The two key strategic documents published by the Assembly/Welsh Government in 2001 and 2006 referred only to the provision of the formal leadership programmes for aspiring/serving headteachers (the

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National Professional Qualification for Headship, the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers and the Professional Headship Induction Programme) all of which were England and Wales programmes which preceded devolution (Welsh Assembly Government, 2001 and 2006). Although some access to the National College for School Leadership set up by the Westminster administration in 2000 was facilitated, despite the advocacy of the headteacher associations for a 'Wales version' of this to be established, this possibility was eschewed.

Increasingly, however, evidence emanating from educational research and from the school inspection system (see the contribution from Estyn below) highlighted the importance of school leadership as a determinant of effective schools. The publication of two seminal international studies by McKinsey and Company in 2007 and 2010 brought this field of educational research into greater prominence (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010). They suggested that what was apparent from studying successful education systems around the world which were achieving both excellent and highly equitable outcomes for young people was first and foremost the importance of high-quality classroom teaching. Second only in importance to this was the quality of school leadership within these education systems, with one of the key attributes of successful leaders being the focus they placed on developing outstanding professional learning and teaching within their organisations.

This authoritative body of knowledge was to have a strong influence in Wales upon the development of what was intended to be a major education reform movement under the ambit of the School Effectiveness Framework published in 2008, within which leadership was viewed as one of the key elements (Egan et al., 2007; Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). The publication in 2009, however, of disappointing results for Wales in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), following on from those in 2006, led to a significant change in direction in Welsh Government policy set out in a twenty-point ministerial action plan which appeared in 2011 (Bradshaw et al., 2007 and 2010; Andrews, 2011).

What followed in Wales and has continued up until recent times has been a period of increasing school accountability and growing challenge to school leaders. The global nature of this policy direction, heavily influenced by PISA, has been described by the Finnish academic, Pasi Sahlberg, as representing a 'Global Education Reform Movement' or 'the GERM' (Sahlberg, 2011). The way in which this infected many education systems including Wales has been characterised by one writer as constituting 'an

era of standards-based agendas, enhanced centralised accountability systems where improved student learning, narrowly defined, becomes the mantra for school leaders, who themselves are subject to enhanced accountabilities' (Cranston, 2013: 131).

More recently, however, there has been a significant change in direction by the Welsh Government encompassing the development of a new school curriculum, reforms to teacher education and to professional learning. These developments have included much greater involvement of schools and school leaders alongside the Regional Education Consortia and the Welsh Government in a process of policy 'co-construction'. More recently they have led to a consultation and ongoing review of existing accountability measures. The education reform movement and its ambitions have been set out in *Education in Wales: Our National Mission*, an action plan published in 2017 (Welsh Government, 2017). It identifies the four enabling objectives of the reform movement as:

- developing a high-quality education profession
- inspirational leaders working collaboratively to raise standards
- strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and well-being
- robust assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements supporting a self-improving system.

An important aspect of these reforms has been the commitment to establish a *National Academy for Educational Leadership* (NAEL) in Wales. Stakeholders from across the Welsh education system, drawn together in a shadow board, have led the development of the NAEL which was launched in May 2018.

Special number of the journal

This special number of the *Wales Journal of Education* is being published to mark the launch of the NAEL in May 2018. The intention is to celebrate this event as a major milestone in the history of education in Wales and to provide the incoming board, chief executive and associates of the academy with a corpus of educational research and other evidence which we hope can inform their important work. We acknowledge the support we have received from the Welsh Government and the shadow board of the NAEL

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in making this edition of the journal possible. In an innovative way for this and other academic journals we have been able to bring together academic evidence from the international and Welsh-based research communities and practice-based contributions from headteachers and the school inspectorate.

The support of the Welsh Government and the shadow board of the NAEL has enabled us to commission three international contributions from leading academics. The first of these is provided by Brian Caldwell, one of the most eminent researchers on educational leadership. He draws upon two large international studies to argue that education systems which wish to create structural autonomy for their schools, as Wales is ambitious to do in creating a self-improving system, need, as a pre-requisite, to develop their leaders so that they can exercise professional autonomy.

Campbell and Osmond Johnston draw on evidence from another high performing education system, Canada, to argue that this professional autonomy should be focused upon leading excellent learning and teaching with school leaders developing a common vision for their staff whereby they – teachers and leaders – all engage in a variety of professional learning opportunities.

Our final international contribution comes from Toby Greany, who provides a major review of the experience of setting up leadership colleges/institutes in other countries, particularly England, Singapore and Scotland. He describes and analyses the challenges that were faced by these institutions between becoming effectively ‘arms of government’ as opposed to the ‘authentic’ voices of the teaching profession, or some balanced amalgam of these two competing influences. In these examples, the institutions in England and Scotland have ultimately become incorporated into the machinery of government, whereas the National Institute of Education in Singapore is closely aligned to a university-based model of teacher education.

Contributions from Wales are made by educational researchers, Estyn and headteachers. Estyn, drawing upon evidence on their inspection of school leadership in Wales over the last twenty-five years, note that their focus has changed over that period from one that looked narrowly into school management issues to one that recognises the central importance of leadership to school improvement.

The transcript of the seminar held on school leadership in Wales today reveals, however, that headteachers continue to see both practical management skills and context-specific leadership attributes as both being

essential to successful leadership practice. The headteachers were positive about the increased opportunities that exist to participate in collaborative work with other schools and to engage with educational research. Those headteachers who lead curriculum reform ‘pioneer schools’ welcomed the time and space that has been released for them to engage in innovative thinking about curriculum development and pedagogy. What is also strikingly clear from their testimony, however, is their belief that excessive, multiple and sometimes punitive accountability within the current education system has inhibited opportunities to be innovative and has had a negative effect on recruitment to headship.

The CYDAG article outlines a brief history of the association which was set up to support Welsh-medium schools in 1963, initially to collaborate on the production of Welsh-medium teaching materials for secondary schools. Since that beginning CYDAG has become an association that offers leadership to the whole of the Welsh-medium sector as a forum for discussion and collaboration and a facilitator of school improvement. CYDAG has also held regular meetings with ministers, civil servants, HMI and representatives from other education bodies to inform and influence the development of policies and practices that affect the sector. The article goes on to explain the current set of challenges that face the sector at a time of change.

The first of our contributions from academic researchers in Wales echoes these concerns. Davies et al. draw upon their qualitative research undertaken in a sample of schools in areas of Wales where recently it has been particularly challenging to recruit successfully to headships. Their evidence suggests that school leaders do not feel well supported and are not provided with sufficient professional development opportunities.

As is noted in the Estyn evidence and is also reflected in the new Welsh Government *Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership* (Welsh Government, 2017) leadership is now seen as being an important element of teacher development throughout their careers. This is also featured in the contribution from Hannah Burch, which draws upon the experience of the first cohorts of Teach First participants in Wales. Simultaneously with their initial teacher education experience they have participated in a leadership development programme where, through professional support networks, they are assisted in forming shared values focused on tackling educational inequity.

The contribution from Huyton et al. reminds us that school governors also contribute to school leadership in Wales. Their research suggests that

whilst their role is an important one, that generally their potential is under-developed and not sufficiently valued. The pilot programme in one local authority area, from which they have drawn their research findings, offers ways forward for this to be addressed.

School leadership in Wales today and the NAEL

What overall then do the rich and varied contributions to this special number of our journal tell us about school leadership in Wales today and what messages might they offer for our new leadership academy?

In the first place there is clearly a paradox at play here. By common consent we now recognise the importance of school leadership in Wales more than we have ever done before. Yet, the recent direction of education policy in Wales, probably unintentionally, has created an environment where leaders feel overly held to account, under-valued and to some extent professionally inhibited. The effects on the well-being, recruitment and retention of our school leaders are undoubtedly a cause for concern.

Secondly, if we are to break out of this paradoxical situation we need to empower and to some extent re-professionalise school leaders so that they can be the evidence-informed, creative innovators and collaborators with the professional autonomy needed to lead the self-improving system we aspire to.

Thirdly, that the evidence that we can usefully draw from successful education systems around the world is that the primary concern of these leaders should be instructional leadership: ensuring that they and their staff (teachers and other professionals) are able to become outstanding professionals through lifelong professional learning that develops research-informed pedagogy. If this is to be achieved, then the siren voices of the headteachers who gave testimony at our seminar should be heard. The reality of their professional lives currently is managing the ever-growing administrative burdens that are placed upon the modern education system. In the words of Earley and Greany (2017: 224), this will require new approaches 'working in teams, sharing responsibilities and working smarter' so that they can be released from some of the responsibilities that overburden them currently, to be the leaders of learning we need them to be.

Fourthly, that leadership needs to be supported by professional development that begins early in the career and develops proportionately to meet

the needs of developing, aspiring, new and experienced leaders. It is apparent that this is already in the thinking and planning of the emergent NAEL through the endorsement process for leadership programmes that they are putting in place and the developmental activities of the recently identified ‘academy associates’.

Finally, but given the situation we face currently, of critical importance, school leaders need to be able to continue co-constructing with government at national and regional level, more appropriate and proportionate levels of internal and external accountability that will support future improvement in our reformed education system. Never has Richard Elmore’s dictum that ‘external accountability systems will be relatively powerless in the absence of changed conceptions of individual responsibility and collective expectations within schools’ seemed so apt (Elmore, 2007: 199). If the challenges suggested by Toby Greany’s article are to be overcome the NAEL will have to play a key mediating role in this area between the profession it seeks to represent and the governance of education in Wales in the form of the Welsh Government and the Regional Education Consortia.

School leadership in Wales in the future

In wishing ‘good speed’ to our new leadership academy in Wales we might be allowed to express a predictable wish from this journal which seeks to be a strong voice for the importance of educational research in Wales. The current thinking in the co-construction of the NAEL has already set fostering educational research as a priority, particularly that which is ‘close to practice’ and which develops instructional leadership and professional learning.

It would also be good if it could encourage innovative thinking of the type that Pasi Sahlberg is undertaking in Finland. His perspective is that educational leadership increasingly needs to focus on ensuring the well-being of learners and teachers (what he calls ‘regular recess and physical exercise’), giving due regard to the importance of ‘small data’ (such as learner voice and teacher action research) instead of the ‘big data’ that we are currently obsessed with, enhancing equity so as to address student disadvantage and through honest evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of the (in his case the Finnish, in ours Welsh) national education systems (Sahlberg, 2018: 22).

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There will, therefore, be many practical challenges for the NAEL to address but we hope too that it will create a space for new thinking about what we want our education system in Wales to achieve so that it can both enrich and empower our future direction as a nation.

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