Editorial – Political Change, A Renewed Focus on Reform and Delivering on Wales' Education Priorities

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This issue of the *Wales Journal of Education* once again comes out during a period of significant scrutiny and attention on education in Wales. Indeed, as of March 2024 – and the original submission of this editorial – Wales not only had a new First Minister (Vaughan Gething MS), but a new Cabinet Secretary for Education: Lynne Neagle MS, replacing Jeremy Miles MS, who after nearly three years as Minister for Education and Welsh Language has been moved to the economy and energy portfolio (whilst retaining Welsh language policy). However, from submission to publication, we have since seen the resignation of Vaughan Gething MS, and the appointment of Eluned Morgan MS as the new First Minister for Wales in August. What this means for cabinet portfolios – and the continued implementation of the Curriculum for Wales – remains to be seen.

Nevertheless, after fielding questions from pupils in a visit to a primary school in Cardiff early in her tenure, the new Cabinet Secretary, who is one of only four politicians remaining in the Senedd from the very first election 25 years ago, acknowledged a number of challenges facing education in Wales, including tackling absenteeism and bad behaviour in Welsh schools (BBC Wales, 2024). Setting out her vision for education in Wales in the Senedd – still within the wider framing of "education as a national mission" (Welsh Government, 2023b) – the Cabinet Secretary reiterated the importance of an education system that is explicitly

child- and learner-centred, focused on helping learners and staff to overcome the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Education Wales, 2024). She further outlined the value of a whole-school approach to mental health; emphasised collaboration, challenge and partnership working; the priority of recruiting, retaining and developing a dedicated and talented school workforce; a priority on post-16 education, acknowledging the pressures currently facing Welsh further education and higher education institutions; a renewed focus on additional learning needs (ALN) reform; and being completely committed to the progress of Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2024).

However, this vision will be evaluated through the critical lens of raising standards, more so after Wales recorded its worst scores in the most recent round of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests (Welsh Government, 2023a; Senedd Research, 2023) – even taking into consideration preliminary concerns with Welsh/English language effects (Jerrim, 2023), and known issues with mode effects (Harrison et al., 2023). While the 2022 PISA scores were a final snapshot before the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales from September 2022 onwards, a recent report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies reiterate the major challenges for education in Wales. It proposed that low educational outcomes are not likely to be a reflection of higher poverty in Wales, a different ethnic mix of pupils, statistical biases or differences in resources; they are more likely to reflect differences in policy and approach (Sibieta, 2024).

As highlighted in our previous two issues (Thomas et al., 2023; Crick et al., 2023), and in the context of exploring the early implementation of Curriculum for Wales and education system-level reform in Wales (Evans, 2023), the five articles in this current issue address various aspects of these wider challenges, taking into account a broader post–pandemic view on learners, leaders and the system at large (Knight et al., 2023b; Marchant et al., 2024; Hamilton et al., 2023). Furthermore, there is a significant focus on wider educational provision, the emergence of the new ALN system in Wales, and critical reflections on inclusive education more broadly (Knight et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2023a).

We begin with an article by Underwood et al., which articulates the potential synergy between the multi–disciplinary field of childhood and youth studies (CYS) and the ongoing education system-level reforms in Wales. The paper posits that the academic principles underlying CYS, encompassing insights from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and

history, are instrumental in contextualising and enhancing educational practices under the emerging Curriculum for Wales. The wider reforms in Wales emphasise a child-centric approach that dovetails with the CYS perspective of recognising children and young people as active social participants with distinct rights and agencies.

One of the critical contributions of this paper is its emphasis on the necessity for teachers and educational leaders to integrate CYS concepts into their teaching practices. By bridging the gap between theoretical research in CYS and practical teaching methodologies, educators can foster a more inclusive and effective educational environment. The paper highlights that this integration not only enriches the learning experiences of students by making them more relevant and engaging, but also aligns with the four purposes of Curriculum for Wales, which aim to develop learners into ambitious, creative, ethical, and healthy individuals.

The paper also discusses the importance of initial teacher education (ITE) in fostering a deeper understanding of CYS. It argues for an approach that prepares future educators not just in pedagogical skills but also equips them with a comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural contexts affecting children's lives. This is seen as essential for educators to meaningfully grasp the complexities of modern childhood and effectively apply their teaching strategies to support the holistic development of their students. The discussion extends to the practical applications of CYS in addressing contemporary issues that affect children and youth, such as mental health, gender identity, and social inclusion. The paper calls for educational policies and practices that are informed by up-to-date research in these areas, suggesting that well-rounded education reform should consider the broad socio-cultural factors impacting young people's lives today.

In essence, the paper advocates for a more collaborative approach between the fields of CYS and educational policy and practice, suggesting that such a partnership could lead to educational reforms that are inclusive and impactful. It underscores the potential of CYS to act as a foundational framework through which the new Curriculum for Wales can be implemented and developed, ensuring that education in Wales remains responsive to the needs and rights of children and young people, fostering a deeper understanding and more effective engagement with the complex realities of children's lives in Wales.

Our second article by Pegram et al. delves into the complex decision-making processes of school leaders in Wales as they select and implement

educational programmes. This research, conducted through interviews with school leaders from a variety of schools, seeks to understand the various influences that guide these decisions, particularly in the context of adopting research- and evidence-informed teaching methods. One of the study's primary findings is that while there is a significant push from current educational policies and initiatives in Wales – and indeed, across the UK – for evidence-based approaches to teaching, the actual decision-making by school leaders often relies more on personal and collegial experiences rather than on empirical research. This highlights a gap between the intention of policies and the realities of educational practice. The study explores this disparity by examining how leaders in educational settings make choices about which teaching programmes to implement, emphasising the multi-faceted nature of these decisions, which include considerations of practicality, familiarity, and peer influence.

The study indicates that decisions are seldom made based solely on the availability and accessibility of rigorous and robust research evidence. Instead, school leaders commonly draw on their own experiences, the experiences of their colleagues, and the broader institutional and environmental culture. This potential over-reliance on experiential and contextual knowledge over empirical data suggests a need for a more integrated approach in the promotion of evidence-informed practices within schools. It also points to the importance of inter-personal and inter-school communication, where the experiences of others within similar educational settings play a crucial role in shaping leaders' decisions. Additionally, the study finds that non-research-based professional development plays a significant role in influencing educational practices, further complicating the drive towards evidence-based approaches. This indicates a strong cultural component in educational decision-making processes, where the diffusion of innovations is mediated by social and professional networks rather than driven primarily by research and evidence.

The findings also suggest that the practical realities of implementing new teaching methods, such as the resources required and the compatibility of new approach with existing practices, are crucial factors in decision-making. This practicality often outweighs the theoretical or evidenced advantages of new educational approaches, pointing to the need for evidence-informed practices to be not only theoretically sound but also practically viable. The study therefore calls for a more nuanced

approach to promoting evidence-informed teaching practices; it suggests that while research and evidence is critical, understanding the social, cultural, and practical contexts within which school leaders operate is equally important. The study advocates for policies and practices that respect these contexts and work collaboratively with educators to integrate research into practice effectively. This involves providing school leaders with evidence that is not only rigorous and robust, but also accessible, applicable and responsive to their specific educational contexts and environments.

The third paper in this issue by Bridgeman offers a detailed exploration into the functioning and challenges of alternative provision (AP) outside mainstream education. This work is part of a larger ESRC-funded project investigating the political economies of school exclusions in the UK, focusing specifically on the delivery and effectiveness of AP in Wales. The research identifies AP as a crucial educational route for young people unable to engage with mainstream education due to various reasons such as exclusion, illness, behavioural issues, or additional learning needs (ALN). The study is structured around examining the purposes, outcomes, and operational challenges of AP through interviews with ten alternative providers across two Welsh local authorities.

A key contribution of this paper lies in its delineation of the different focuses among AP providers: educational and vocational providers concentrate on qualifications and transitions into further education or employment, whereas therapeutic, sports, and arts-based providers emphasise building trust, relationships, and life skills. This highlights the diverse strategies employed to re-engage young people with education, tailored to their specific needs and circumstances. The research thus underscores a critical issue within AP: the difficulty of measuring the success and long-term outcomes of programmes and interventions. Many providers, especially those integrated within schools, lack access to sufficient data to track students' progress after the completion of a programmes. This challenge is compounded by a fragmented AP landscape with a lack of standardised frameworks for evaluation, making it hard to ascertain the effectiveness and justify longer-term funding of these programmes. The study illustrates how providers, especially in the third sector, struggle to secure adequate funding to cover essential programme costs. This funding shortfall often leads to reliance on temporary or uncertain financial streams, which can affect the sustainability and quality of the provisions offered.

This study's findings are valuable for policymakers and educational leaders as they provide insights into the operational realities of AP. It highlights the necessity for a coherent policy framework that supports standardised evaluation practices and robust funding mechanisms to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of AP. These insights provide timely insight for identifying and refining educational strategies to better support vulnerable youth populations and improve their educational outcomes. This paper thus contributes to the understanding of alternative educational provisions, highlighting the complexities of delivering tailored educational experiences outside of mainstream settings. It calls for a more integrated approach to support and fund these crucial services, ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to succeed in their educational journeys, regardless of their personal circumstances.

The next paper by Marsh and Jeans provides a comprehensive analysis of the new statutory framework established to support individuals aged 0–25 in Wales with additional learning needs (ALN). The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET) introduced a transformative approach to special education in Wales, shifting from statements of special educational needs (SEN) to more holistic Individual Development Plans (IDPs). This major policy change is intended to offer more tailored and inclusive educational support across a broader demographic. The paper focuses on establishing a quantitative baseline for future evaluations of this new system, utilising Welsh Government statistics from 2010 to 2023.

Key findings from the research illustrate significant variances across the 22 local authorities in Wales, particularly in budgeted expenditures for SEN/ALN provisions. These financial analyses are critical as they highlight the ongoing challenge of maintaining sustainability in funding amidst major educational reforms, as well as the significant financial pressures facing local government. The paper categorises local authorities into three clusters based on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), providing a nuanced understanding of how socio–economic factors might influence the implementation and success of ALN strategies in the near future.

The research methods involve a detailed examination of data on the prevalence of ALN, levels of funding, and appeals to the Education Tribunal for Wales. This approach not only benchmarks current conditions but also sets a precedent for ongoing scrutiny and review

necessary to ensure the fairness and consistency of the ALNET implementation over the coming years. Furthermore, the paper discusses the broader implications of these findings, particularly the need for regular updates and reviews of the legislation to adapt to emerging challenges and to ensure equitable access to resources across different regions. It stresses the importance of a systematic, evidence-based approach to policymaking in education, where data-driven decisions can help mitigate disparities and enhance the educational outcomes for those with additional learning needs.

The ongoing efforts to refine and enhance the emerging ALNET system, especially given wider financial pressures on local government, are vital for its success and sustainability. This paper thus underscores the importance of integrating robust statistical reviews in the policymaking process, and particularly for SEN/ALN, making this research a timely and valuable resource for stakeholders aiming to foster an inclusive and effective educational environment in Wales.

The final paper for this Issue by Olive et al. provides an examination of the literary texts taught in secondary schools across Wales, highlighting the lack of diversity in terms of authors' genders and ethnic backgrounds. The study is particularly timely and relevant with the rollout of Curriculum for Wales, and its focus on a more inclusive and diversified educational approach. Based on a survey of 47 teachers across Wales, this work reveals a significant under-representation of female authors and authors of colour across the taught literature, which includes Welsh, English, French, and Spanish languages. This lack of diversity is seen in the choices of texts for poetry, drama, and prose, potentially impacting on the Welsh Government's ambitions for creating an anti-racist Wales by 2030 and its goals to more meaningfully teach Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) histories and experiences.

Significantly, the study found that while female authors are slightly better represented in Welsh-language literature studies compared to English, the overall presence of authors of colour is minimal. In particular, these authors are only found among English- and French-language texts, with no representation in Welsh-language literature. This situation reflects a broader issue within the educational sector where the curriculum does not fully reflect the diverse societal and cultural makeup of Wales, thus not fulfilling its potential as a tool for social change and inclusivity.

The research also discusses the systemic issues underlying these choices, including the constraints imposed by examination boards, which tend to

pre–determine the selection of texts available for study. This has a cascading effect on the diversity of literature that teachers can present to students, often limiting them to a narrow range of authors and themes. The decision-making process about which texts to teach is influenced heavily by these external factors, in addition to teachers' personal and collective experiences and the available teaching resources. The paper thus provides several recommendations to address these issues; it calls for more robust training for teachers, better resources, and a curriculum design that actively incorporates a diverse range of literary voices. These steps are crucial for aligning the taught literature more closely with the goals of Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises creating ethical, informed citizens who can appreciate and understand diverse perspectives.

Overall, this paper highlights a critical gap in the educational literature offering in Wales and provides a foundation for future research and policymaking aimed at enriching the literary experiences of students to better reflect global and multicultural perspectives. This work urges a re-evaluation of how literature is taught, advocating for a system that not only educates but also empowers all students by reflecting their diverse backgrounds in the texts they study.

Together, these five papers provide timely and valuable insight across various sectors, stakeholders, and areas of inquiry, attesting to the wealth of research currently underway in Wales. Indeed, this is the wider aim of the journal (Beauchamp et al., 2022); we hope you enjoy the papers in the current issue. We would also like to highlight an important special issue of the journal to be published in the second half of 2024 to mark 25 years since the devolution of education policy to Wales. The focus of the special issue will be to recount, analyse and evaluate the impact of a quarter of a century of post-devolution educational policymaking and practice in a range of key areas of the education sector in Wales. As always, please contact the editors if you would like to discuss your current work, submitting to Janeway (our online submission system) in Welsh or English, or getting published in the main *Wales Journal of Education* or in our developing *Focus on Practice* area.

In closing, it is incredible reflecting on the wider – and rapidly evolving – impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on education, and especially the emergence of a diverse landscape of AI tools and technologies and their potential impact on learning, teaching and assessment (Chen et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Schiff, 2022). Indeed, this is a key focus for the Welsh Government-funded Wales Collaborative

for Learning Design project, which started during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the significant attention on generative AI and large language models such as ChatGPT (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Department for Education, 2023), we would welcome submissions that critically evaluate these developments in a Welsh or related context (Williamson et al., 2024), especially given the long-standing prominence of digital competence and computer science education (Arthur et al., 2013; Crick, 2021; Sentence et al., 2022) as part of wider reforms and policy developments.

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