

# *Professional learning in education: policy and practice in Wales since devolution*

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## ABSTRACT

In the 25 years since devolution in Wales, professional learning has changed significantly. This article considers the development of Welsh Government initiatives over the last two decades and explores where they might be placed on a continuum between transmissive and transformative approaches. The article also explores recent developments of professional learning through the lens of political, professional and pragmatic conceptions of the domain. Although there is limited empirical research on these initiatives, there is some evidence of shifts in policy and practice in Wales aimed at streamlining and improving the quality assurance of professional learning for practitioners. The Welsh Government's definition of professional learning is evolving, and a positive landscape formed of professionally led and transformative professional learning may be emerging. However, the article argues that professional learning has some way to go before it is fully integrated into the learning culture of schools in Wales.

**Keywords:** professional learning, policy change, wales, devolution, educational leadership, professional enquiry

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## *Introduction*

The professional learning architecture of any education system is likely to be complex and nuanced, even in a national education context as small as

<https://doi.org/10.16922/wje.26.2.4>

that of Wales. The 25 years since devolution have afforded the Welsh system the opportunity to devise and develop professional learning systems, cultures and processes which have the potential to be distinct, powerful and engaging. The purpose of this article is to make sense of this complexity by providing an overview of some of the key themes and developments that have emerged in the last two decades. It is clear that the professional learning picture is even more complex if initial teacher education (ITE) is also taken into account, as there have also been significant and extensive reforms in this area over the same period (Furlong, 2015). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the professional learning of existing practitioners. Within the confines of this article, we hope to offer not just a description of the many developments but rather a way of understanding, in our view, some of the more significant ones, through the lens of the *political*, *professional* and *pragmatic* conception of professional learning (Jones, 2011) and considering where policies and practice of professional learning in Wales may lie along a continuum between *transmissive* and *transformative* approaches (Kennedy and Stevenson, 2023).

We define professional learning broadly to include professional development, a term that encompasses the training that teachers undertake to demonstrate their engagement with activities related to their role (Jones, 2016). However, before we attempt any overview, it is worth briefly acknowledging the range and number of professional learning developments that have occurred. Since 1999, there have been a considerable number of policy interventions in the professional learning landscape in Wales at national level. They fall into two broad categories. The first category focuses on more general reforms within the Welsh education system which have significant professional learning implications. Examples of these are ALN reform in 2021 and the Curriculum for Wales in 2022. In both these examples, a wide-ranging system reform has set out new professional learning expectations for those working in the sector. Alongside these, there is a second category focusing on direct interventions upon content, mode of delivery, and/or philosophy of professional learning in the same time period. Examples include, the New Deal (Lewis, 2015), the National Approach to Professional Learning (NAPL) (Welsh Government, 2018a), two new national MA Education qualifications over the time period and numerous iterations of accredited programmes focused on school leadership (such as the NPQH in 2017 and 2024). Perhaps the more general point to note at

this stage is that professional learning policy in Wales has been constantly on the move, whether through interventions that directly seek to restructure the mode of delivery or philosophical approach to professional learning, or interventions that are focused on a different element of the educational superstructure, but which have significant implications for professional learning. After a quarter of a century, it is necessary to consider how best to make sense of these rapid developments. A number of commentaries have already been conducted (Jones, 2011; Egan and Grigg, 2016; Roy et al., 2021), and we draw upon the insights generated by these studies and focus on developments that have happened subsequently. However, there is more limited research data on the impact of such policies or on the changes themselves.

One of the current authors, in a retrospective analysis of professional learning since devolution, proposed a further categorisation of professional learning according to its perceived function: *political*, *professional* or *pragmatic* (Jones, 2011). These distinctions are arguably as pertinent today as they were at the midpoint of the devolution journey, and so we will use them in the analysis that follows. The specific functional emphasis of each of these will be quickly recapped here. The *political* emphasis focuses on using professional learning to achieve specifically identified whole-system reforms or instituting national, standardised professional learning structures. It sees professional learning as, ‘imposed or directed externally rather than emerging from the teaching profession itself’ (Jones, 2011, p. 761). This contrasts clearly with the *professional* focus which emphasises the function of professional learning to generate deeper, more effective levels of practice in ways determined internally by the profession itself. This emphasis is characterised by the belief that teachers are ‘lifelong learners, form critical friendships, network, evaluate and continually seek ways of improving practice’ (Jones, 2011, p. 761). Broadly speaking, the political focus directs professional learning according to the perceived needs of the system as determined by the Welsh Government, whereas the professional focus is less prescriptive and allows practitioners, both individually and collectively, to determine the direction, form and content of professional learning. In effect, the former prioritises system wide direction and consistency, while the latter aims to enhance the agency of professionals and practitioners. In reality, it is more a question of emphasis and tone of discourse. Arguably, the tone of policy has been professionally aligned since the publication of the National Mission in 2017 which emphasised

'co-construction' of new developments (Welsh Government, 2017). Those with the executive responsibility for the overall development and performance of an education system, in this case the Welsh Government, are able to *politically* engineer the conditions within which *professionally*-focused and designed professional learning might flourish.

There is, of course, a third category that undoubtedly emerges; the *pragmatic alternative* (Jones, 2011). If the political emphasis draws its power from an externally derived vision of professional learning need and the professional emphasis draws its power from internally derived priorities and goals, the pragmatic emphasis enacts professional learning that responds to more contingent, ad-hoc, short-term, locally-derived aims and restrictions. The pragmatic emphasis is more likely to be determined by the constraints of budget, staffing and opportunity, for example, than by broader, longer-term visions of professional learning effectiveness (Jones, 2011). The danger for any educational system is that the pragmatic influence upon professional learning becomes the dominant mode with negative consequences for equity and coherence for schools and professionals.

Before we move on to consider some of the more recent professional learning developments in the light of these distinctions, it is also worth considering an additional way of viewing professional learning. Kennedy and Stevenson (2023) distinguish between professional learning approaches which aim to *transform* and professional learning provision which aims to *transmit*. The first is potentially messy, disruptive, provisional and open-ended but arguably more powerful in identifying future trends. The latter is aimed at fostering conformity and compliance in terms of practice and is arguably, although easier to operationalise, less likely to develop the passion, commitment and professional drive needed for long-term educational professional growth (Boylan et al., 2023). Pressures for harder-edged political intervention emerge regularly following, for example, Wales' less than flattering performance in PISA (Dauncey, 2023). The importance of taking a transformative approach was highlighted by the need to address pupil and teacher learning at the onset of the Pandemic when schools were closed. Both approaches have significant implications for professional learning policy and practice.

At this point it must be noted that many of the developments that we will go on to discuss have fundamentally emerged from the political domain, but this is not the only way of viewing them. We acknowledge the complexities of policy and practice. However, an examination of these in greater depth is beyond the scope of this article. The purpose of

this article is to explore a selection of developments in turn (from the last ten years) and to consider, irrespective of their initial point of emergence, where we feel they sit in terms of their ability to attain a *professional* focus, their likelihood of being dominated by a *pragmatic* agenda, and even their ability to offer professional learning that is potentially *transformative*. Where does the system sit after 25 years of devolution?

### *The offer of the New Deal*

In 2015, the then Minister for Education and Skills Huw Lewis announced his New Deal for education professionals in Wales (Lewis, 2015). This appeared to be something of a reset in comparison to the more overtly political interventions formulated by his predecessor Leighton Andrews, which themselves followed on the heels of the poor PISA results of 2009 (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Jones and Evans, 2024). The New Deal, as the name suggests, signalled a compact with the profession and unsurprisingly the promise of a greater role for the profession in determining professional learning needs and priorities at more individualised levels. The initial announcement offered education professionals in Wales ‘a structured entitlement to access world class professional learning opportunities to develop their practice’ (Lewis, 2015). The language itself clearly identified the role for professionals in determining their professional learning needs and priorities, highlighting that practitioners would ‘establish career long development pathways [...] to take greater ownership and responsibility for their professional learning’ (Lewis, 2015). In effect, this amounted to a political intervention, at the highest level, to professional learning provision that would be orientated around the internally identified needs of the profession, something of a bridge between the *political* and the *professional*. The New Deal envisaged two key delivery conduits for these aspirations. One was, at the time, the recently formed school improvement consortia, and the other was the provision of a standard universal repository for individual professional learning progress, namely the Professional Learning Passport (PLP). The former would be tasked with providing the majority of high-quality professional learning opportunities whilst the latter had the role of providing a platform upon which ‘practitioners [would] be able to record their professional learning in a single place, and [would] enable them to develop a detailed, online

portfolio capturing all of their professional learning’ (Lewis, 2015). The aspiration to meet the challenges ahead through professional learning that would be designed and implemented ‘by practitioners for practitioners’ (Lewis, 2015) was clearly established. However, the extent to which the New Deal has genuinely delivered professionally focused professional learning, or even transformative professional learning, is debatable perhaps not least because of its capacity to attract resourcing and focus as other interventions have subsequently occurred at national level. Nevertheless, this aspiration to institute from the top a professional learning settlement which would become authentically professional in execution has remained (Miles, 2023). It was referenced clearly within the first enabling objective of ‘developing a high-quality education profession’ within the publication of ‘Our National Mission’ (Welsh Government, 2017, p. 25). This aspirational commitment continued into the National Approach to Professional Learning (NAPL) (Welsh Government, 2018a) and its successor the National Professional Learning Entitlement (NPLE) (Welsh Government, 2022). The NAPL included a significant focus on the ‘Individual Professional Learning Journey’ and the NPLE, through its foregrounded use of *entitlement*, has explicitly attempted to reinforce the agency, in terms of professional learning, of the individual practitioner.

### *The challenge of a new curriculum*

The Donaldson report (2015) paved the way for curriculum renewal in Wales and the professional learning requirements for this reform were anticipated through the formation of Pioneer Schools. Just as any professional learning offer to educators may be attempting a balance between a *political* emphasis and a *professional* emphasis, the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) has attempted to balance a nationally coherent curriculum offer with the desire that the details of this offer should be planned, designed and executed at a local level. This latter principle of subsidiarity, emphasised in the initial report (Donaldson, 2015) is in many ways analogous to the professional learning emphasis that focuses on the *professional*, as discussed above. There are inevitably tensions and complexities in trying to achieve this balance whether in the domain of curriculum reform or, as we are discussing in this paper, the domain of professional learning. In this particular instance, since the

implementation of CfW implies significant professional learning across the system, the tensions coalesce.

Some have argued that in terms of CfW, although the broad spirit of subsidiary has been welcomed by the profession, lack of clarity on the detail and limits of this subsidiarity principle have threatened to hamper progress (Newton, 2020). It is possibly this uncertainty that has left an element of the profession feeling relatively unprepared in terms of their own professional learning to implement the CfW (Duggan et al., 2022; Evans, 2023). To rectify this, some have called for a renewed ‘coherent, well-coordinated and sustained professional learning programme’ (Evans, 2023, p. 10), presumably, a programme which would blend the *political* and *professional* and avoid professional learning for the implementation of CfW defaulting to the *pragmatic*. Balancing these two elements is a significant challenge for any system, particularly since the CfW is no longer being prepared but is now very much being delivered.

### *Developing learning organisations*

There has been yet another significant influence on professional learning in Wales in the last 10 years. The Schools as Learning Organisations (SLO) (Kools and Stoll, 2016) model has been repeatedly emphasised at various levels by the Welsh Government since 2017 through its extensive links with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), links which have had significant effects in a variety of domains within the sector. The concept of SLO has had political weight attached to it, denoting this time not professional learning focused on a particular topic or area but rather the ways in which powerful learning can be supported by schools and school leaders. It emphasises a model of organisational development that potentially could and should be led by the professional and contextual interests of those working within any given institution. Therefore, although the SLO model is *politically* endorsed, the dimensions on which it is structured are free to be shaped by and defined at a local level, by *professionals* for *professionals*.

As there has been an emphasis on the Welsh iteration of SLO, there is now a growing body of literature focused on SLO in Wales which is useful in this context. Some have concluded that the Welsh SLO model has the potential to be *transformative* and that the assumptions behind its dimensions are supported by broader empirical evidence (Harris et al., 2022).

Similarly, others have positively noted a correlation in Welsh schools between the presence of strong SLO features and the belief for staff that their school is ‘a good place to learn from and with colleagues’ (Kools et al., 2019, p. 432). However, even those who are broadly positive about the potential of the SLO model in Wales have queried whether the system as it currently stands has the infrastructure, expertise and capacity to fully realise its benefits, noting along the way that practical guidance for schools and school leaders in terms of developing as a learning organisation is less easy to find (Harris et al., 2022). Furthermore, others have suggested that the generalised culture of sharing of knowledge and learning in schools, fundamental to the SLO model, still has some way to go and that, too often, professional learning remains siloed within discrete processes and routines (Milton et al., 2022).

### *Promoting professional learning at Level 7*

In terms of accreditation for professional learning, much has happened since devolution. We will go on to discuss leadership qualifications below, but here we will explore the political initiatives that have produced two Master’s level national programmes in the last 15 years alone. Arguably, both programmes have reflected a desire from the Welsh Government to develop a greater proportion of Master’s qualified practitioners within the system. The Master’s in Education Practice (MEP) had, as the name suggests, a clear focus on individual teachers developing their *practice* and hence it was potentially *transformative*. Even here, it is perhaps interesting to note that the original impetus for the development of the MEP arose from an arguably more *transmissive* desire by the Welsh Government to respond to the poor PISA results of the previous decade and a perceived lapse in standards. It was there to correct something within the system. The MEP only lasted from 2013 to 2015 (with the last cohort graduating in 2018) and could be considered a first attempt by the Welsh Government to develop capacity to deliver Master’s level professional learning to the workforce at scale (Connolly et al., 2017). The MEP used delivery partnerships that went beyond the confines of Higher Education (HE). The second attempt, is the ongoing MA Education (Wales) programme, which is spread over a greater number of collaborating Higher Education Institutions (HEI) than its predecessor and thus may be seen as more ambitious structurally in terms



of professional learning delivery capacity within HEIs (although its delivery model does not extend beyond HE). Both interventions have received significant financial resourcing from the Welsh Government, demonstrating, in part at least, political will. However, at the time of writing, there is yet to be a full evaluation of the MA Education (Wales) programme in terms either of its impact and reach or its ability to provide professional learning that is owned by the *profession* and that is *transformative* rather than *transmissive*.

### *Learning for leaders*

Professional learning provision for school leaders in Wales has also undergone significant developments, in the last fifteen years. Alongside the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) which predates devolution and was introduced by the incoming Blair government in 1997, the Welsh system has developed additional leadership professional learning programmes that focus on specific stages of leadership (for example, middle level leaders or aspiring headteachers). Once again, these programmes have attempted to balance the needs of the *political* (by developing professional leadership qualities and skillsets across the system to support and drive renewal and reform) and the desire to stimulate professional learning for leaders that is driven by the perceived *professional* needs of leaders themselves. In addition, these leadership programmes have grappled with similar structural delivery and capacity issues as the level seven programmes discussed above. At times, these distinct challenges have merged into one. In addition, since its inception in 2018, the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL) (NAEL, 2018) has also had as one of its missions the development of professional learning of leaders across Wales and has had the role of endorsing existing leadership programmes, should they seek this designation. It has also, over its lifespan, developed an ever-increasing cohort of NAEL Associates, leaders who are effectively advocates for leadership learning and mentors/coaches of other leaders within the school system.

In 2012, Leighton Andrews as Minister for Education and Skills, announced that a reconfigured NPQH would rigorously assess candidates against the leadership standards and therefore, provide *political* affirmation for those who subsequently qualified (Andrews, 2012). Later, the review

of the NPQH iteration by Waters (2023) that followed, has identified the need to tilt back in favour of a more bespoke offer that will attend more directly to the different contexts in which individual leaders find themselves working, in effect a recognition that the *profession* itself should provide perspectives that need to be incorporated into any leadership programme. Doubtless this is a nuanced balancing act that will continue into the future. However, some have argued that the professional learning architecture in Wales is still overly complex and confusing (Harris et al., 2021), potentially limiting its ability to be truly *transformative*.

### *Learning through enquiry*

Teacher enquiry is increasingly being seen as a powerful mode of professional learning, one which is able to deliver impactful and genuinely *transformative* learning for practitioners in their particular *professional* context (Milton and Morgan, 2023). Enquiry here is about practitioners asking themselves critical, complex, often uncomfortable questions about their practice and working through the challenges that ensue. The Welsh Government, working with regional consortia and HEIs, has devoted time and resources into attempting to capitalise on this. Indeed, there has been much political investment in enquiry structures under the umbrella of the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE) (Welsh Government, 2021), and there is additional endorsement through the most recent iteration of Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (PSTL) (Welsh Government, 2019) where for example, there is an explicit expectation that teachers should be engaged in action research/professional enquiry. In 2018, the National Professional Enquiry Project (NPEP) (Welsh Government, 2018b), still ongoing, was launched and this has been joined more recently by the Embedding Research and Enquiry in Schools (EREiS) scheme. Within these projects, there is a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, message that professional learning is inextricably linked to the *doing* of enquiry, or at least, the demonstration of actively engaged reading about research conducted elsewhere. Effectively these activities are positioned as a gradual broadening of *professional* horizons.

There are structural issues that would need to be addressed before a discrete programme like NPEP could become a truly authentic and sustainable national forum for practitioner *professional* enquiry. It is simply

not known how much resource might be required over what kind of time span, to build long-term behaviours and cultures, and to avoid projects such as NPEP becoming stuck as things-in-themselves, reified, fighting for space, resources and attention in a crowded system.

### *Concluding thoughts*

In each of the professional learning developments that we have briefly explored in this article, there are consistent footprints of professional learning that could be both *professionally*-focused, in the sense of being formulated and co-constructed with practitioners, and *transformative*, in the sense that they could provide learning experiences which have deep impact on ideas, beliefs and practices of practitioners. At times, these exist as aspirations, for example in the NPLE. At other points they exist in structures that have the potential to deliver, such as NPEP, even if there may be some distance still to travel. It is perhaps for these reasons that there is often a mood of 'cautious optimism' within the system (Woods, 2021, p. 6).

Yet, such optimism is often tempered by the notion that there may be some distance still to travel to attain a professional learning offer which is truly professionally-focused (Egan and Grigg, 2016), or which could be supported by authentic, integrated learning cultures within schools (Milton et al., 2022), or which could achieve an effective level of consistency and coherence across Wales (Jones and Evans, 2024). There are in fact a variety of perspectives on professional learning in Wales from which one may judge that there is still plenty of work to be done. Each perspective would suggest we need, as a professional learning system, to do fewer of some things, and more of others. For practitioners, the crowded system of well-meaning players is difficult to navigate. The review of the roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales stated: school leaders said they and their staff felt overwhelmed by the current professional learning [PL] offer – 'we struggle to decipher the white noise of the PL offer'. They also said they did not have the time to access much of it and when they did it was of variable quality (Jones, 2024). The professional learning endorsement process introduced by Welsh Government in 2023 is an attempt to improve the quality of professional learning provision, and the findings of bodies such as Estyn (2022) give further guidance.

However, it is not a simple task to get everyone to agree on the specifics of what should be muted within that same system, and what

should be amplified, even if there is broad agreement about the desirability of an eventual professional learning offer that is *transformative* and *professionally*-focused, and which is less likely to be driven by purely *pragmatic* rationales for action. Agreeing to reduce distracting clutter within the system is one thing, but it is not the same as gaining agreement on exactly what is creating that clutter. To this challenge we can add the relative lack of empirical research data on various professional learning offers within the system. Sometimes this is because things are not around for long enough to be the subject of this type of research, such is the current pace of educational reform and change.

At the 25-year-point, post devolution, significant events in the professional learning landscape are afoot, both associated with a desire to de-clutter, or cut back a garden that has grown in many different directions. The Welsh Government has instituted a process for slimming down and quality assuring (Welsh Government, 2023) the extensive professional learning resources on its Hwb platform in an attempt to help practitioners in Wales, wherever they are based, identify high quality professional learning materials more easily. At the time of writing, there are also clear signs that the middle-tier of the three-part education superstructure in Wales is likely to be re-configured in an equivalent attempt to simplify and add coherence to a professional learning offer which practitioners have found to be complex and challenging to negotiate. Wales is still an education system of many moving parts and it will be fascinating to see, as we enter the next quarter of a century of the devolution journey, how the development of a system-wide professional learning landscape which is *professionally*-driven and *transformative* unfolds.

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