Developments in inclusive education and additional learning needs in Wales

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ABSTRACT

In relation to inclusive education and additional learning needs, developments in Wales reflect global trends elsewhere. Whilst there has been a longstanding commitment to inclusive education in schools, progress towards this has been slow, accompanied by growth in special education and persistence of belief in segregated practices as in the best interests of some learners. This article explores developments in the area of inclusive education and additional learning needs in Wales over the last two decades. First, we consider the policy context, specifically the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales and its alignment with the new system for learners with additional learning needs. Following this, we focus on practice and the response to educational reform by schools and local authorities. We conclude that systems for inclusion and learning support currently being developed in Wales have the potential for enhancing well-being and achievement for a wider group of learners if certain conditions are in place.

Keywords: inclusion, additional learning needs, curriculum reform

Introduction

There has been widespread commitment globally to the agenda of inclusive education, seen as a way of ensuring good educational outcomes for all

learners, especially those who are most disadvantaged (Slee, 2018). This commitment, however, has been hampered by a persistent lack of clarity about what inclusive education means, both as a concept and in practice (Hernández-Saca et al., 2023). Inclusion has been defined as the education of learners from marginal groups within their local schools, but this association with placement has raised issues about the participation of learners in academic and social life and their sense of belonging (Ainscow, 2020). Inclusive education often means an emphasis on the development of schools and teachers, with a focus on values that support and shape certain kinds of practices (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020). Inclusion is a movement away from the idea of a 'norm' towards a wider consideration of the diversity of learners and ways of responding effectively to everyone in a school setting (Florian and Graham, 2014). Inclusive practice has been described as an inquiry stance that allows teachers to problem-solve around issues of teaching and learning, and to question basic assumptions that underpin practice (Ainscow and Sandhill, 2010). Collaboration and constructive dialogue between professionals, learners and families is seen as an important part of a 'reculturing process' (Woodcock and Hardy, 2017) that transforms whole schools as interactive and dynamic systems.

Despite the development of this understanding, it is apparent that progress towards inclusive education has been slow around the world (OECD, 2020a). Explanations for this are varied and wide-ranging. Policy contexts have been found to promulgate inconsistent messages about enabling environments alongside deficit views of the learner (Lehane, 2017). The discourse of inclusion has been appropriated by educational movements that seek to segregate learners (Slee, 2019), and it is notable that the agenda of inclusion has been accompanied by exclusionary practices and the growth of special education (Rix, 2015). It is apparent too that there has been inadequate focus on practice, for example, on the role of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for inclusive education (Nilholm, 2021). Research also suggests that local contexts often intersect with the rhetoric of inclusion to enact policy in ways that undermine inclusive principles (Artiles and Kozleski, 2016).

To a great extent, developments in Wales reflect this global picture of inclusive education. *The learning country*, which set the policy agenda for Welsh education in the first decade of this century, made a commitment to the development of inclusion in schools, though conceptualised this as concerned with learners with special educational needs (SEN) and disability, but also as the raising of standards for a wider group of

learners (National Assembly for Wales, 2001, pp. 18/62). Twenty years on, developing inclusive schools remains an aspiration in policy documents (Welsh Government, 2020a). Alongside a commitment to inclusive schools, Wales has seen a growth in its special education sector, with numbers of pupils in special schools increasing year-on-year for the past 10 years (Welsh Government, 2023a), and 529 local authority designated 'special classes' are currently operating in mainstream schools (Welsh Government, 2024). Research suggests that 'soft' exclusions within mainstream schools is an expanding though hidden area of practice in Wales (Power and Taylor, 2020). In terms of inconsistency of messaging about inclusive education – enabling learning environments for all learners versus a focus on deficits in some learners – Welsh education policy is illustrative here too (Knight and Crick, 2022). There also appears to be a policy-practice gap with schools developing their own practices in consideration of local as opposed to national alignment (Estyn, 2023).

Yet it is apparent that widespread educational reform, which is currently taking place in Wales, particularly the introduction of the new curriculum, holds promise for inclusive education. In its emphasis on high-quality teaching, teacher development and collaborative practices, developments in Wales appear to promote an approach to education that could be described as naturally inclusive (Welsh Government, 2020b). The aim of this article is to explore these developments with reference first to the policy context and the introduction of a new curriculum but also new system of additional learning needs (ALN), and secondly, to practice and the response to reform by schools. Finally, we consider some potential problems in the education system for inclusive education in Wales and outline some possible future directions.

Developments in the policy context

Alongside changes to teacher education, qualifications and standards, educational reforms in Wales include the development of a new curriculum and changes to the statutory SEN/ALN system. These developments aim to promote high standards and aspirations for all learners by addressing inequities in education, removing barriers to participation and supporting all learners, especially those who are disadvantaged (Welsh Government, 2020a). The newly introduced

Curriculum for Wales is considered the 'cornerstone' of educational reform (OECD, 2020b) and is seen in some measure as a response to successive disappointing Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (Ware, 2019). The new curriculum aims to broaden learning, support schools to be more flexible in their approaches, and provide education leaders and practitioners with greater agency to innovate and be creative in what they teach and how they respond to learners (Welsh Government, 2019, pp. 3).

The reform to the statutory system of ALN, which is also taking place, has been anticipated for many years (Ware, 2014). Numerous reviews, evaluations and consultations into the effectiveness of the SEN system have taken place throughout successive Welsh Assemblies, with inquiries frequently identifying an unsatisfactory system (Dauncey, 2016). Recommendations for changes to the system were identified as early as 2002 and continued well into the subsequent decade. Persistent weaknesses of the SEN system related to stigmatising terminology underpinned by the medical model of disability, challenges with the continuity of provision for those not of school–age, and a complex, costly and bureaucratic assessment process which often led to delayed support (Welsh Government, 2014). Variation was also frequently acknowledged between local authorities regarding the level of provision offered to learners and how they interpreted the SEN Code of Practice. Other important failings related to parent distrust throughout the system (Welsh Government, 2014; Welsh Government, 2018a). Interestingly, the surfeit of challenges noted were not unique to Wales; similar difficulties were also persistently identified in the English SEN system (DfE, 2011; Lamb, 2009) and have also led to reform.

The Welsh Government has introduced legislation for reform of the ALN system under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (2018), along with support for its implementation in the form of the ALN Code for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) and ALN transformation programme (Welsh Government, 2018b). Currently, schools in Wales are working between the existing SEN system (phased in from September 2021) and the new ALN system and the transition is due to be completed in 2025 (Welsh Government, 2023b). The new system seeks to preserve the strengths of the old SEN system whilst addressing problematic features, with the broad goal of providing an inclusive system in which all children and young people can reach their full potential (Welsh Government 2018b). Key features include the

creation of a single framework supporting children and young people from 0–25 years, implementation of an integrated, collaborative process of assessment, planning and monitoring to aid timely and effective support, and greater transparency for information, advice, and appeals (Welsh Government, 2014). Other significant features include the legal adoption of the term 'ALN' and the protection of provision through statutory individual developments plans (IDPs). To aid these changes the ALN Code was developed to set out mandatory requirements and guidance for settings, agencies and professionals supporting learners with ALN. This includes the additional learning needs coordinator (ALNCO) and other key roles to aid multiagency working (Welsh Government 2021).

In considering these two reform programmes, there appears to be a degree of alignment, but a number of tensions are apparent. Curriculum for Wales notably focuses on flexible, high-quality teaching and the development of teachers, alongside increased emphasis on learner voice and participation, and improved community practices (Welsh Government, 2020b). Progression is seen to depend on the actual progress of individual learners rather than according to pre-ordained stages of development. The curriculum is seen by school leaders as offering greater potential for flexibility, therefore, and for embedding inclusivity in classrooms, alongside individual supports (Welsh Government, 2023b). Greater responsibility for all learners is more clearly that of ordinary classroom practitioners under new arrangements (Welsh Government, 2021). ALN reform references these progressive elements within its documentation, drawing on the same language of equity, inclusion and children's rights. Closer inspection of policy documents relating to ALN and curricular reform, however, suggests that the two systems are not that aligned, with minimal reference made to inclusion and ALN in curriculum documentation and a continued focus on individual learner deficits in the system for ALN (Knight and Crick, 2022). Indeed, the 'parallel' implementation will be important to evaluate in greater detail moving forward (Welsh Government, 2023b). It has been recognised that for real change, there is a need for greater collective agency for inclusion throughout all parts of the education system. This needs more integration of reform programmes and a movement away from a belief in hierarchies of learners within schools where groups of learners are defined by perceived learning capacity (Conn and Davis, 2024).

Developments in practice in schools and local authorities

Following introduction of the programme for educational reform, Wales has seen a reduction in the overall number of pupils identified as having ALN or SEN, although as noted by Estyn (2023), there has been an increase in the number of pupils with a statutory plan, either through an IDP or a statement of SEN over the same period. As of January 2023, 63,089 pupils were identified with ALN or SEN in maintained schools (13.4% of all pupils) in comparison to 74,661 (15.8%) in February 2022 and 92,688 (19.5%) pupils in April 2021 prior to implementation of ALN reforms (Welsh Government, 2023b). A reduction in the proportion of pupils receiving specialist provision was anticipated, but what was less expected was the emergence of inconsistencies in practice in schools and local authorities. In a recent thematic review of the implementation of ALN reform, Estyn (2023) reports that whilst many schools indicated a generally secure understanding of the definition of ALN, some local authorities and schools were unclear of the legal definitions and what this meant in practice. Local authorities and schools described using their own definitions and were waiting for further clarification following tribunal outcomes. Some schools and local authorities expressed dissatisfaction that the ALN Code does not provide clear enough practical guidance on how to apply the definitions and, as a result, relied upon local guidance rather than the Code.

Such findings help explain what Estyn (2023) suggest as evidence of schools developing their own terminology to categorise the support and provision offered in practice. Whilst previous SEN categories of 'School Action', 'School Action Plus' and 'Statement' are being removed, schools indicate using terminology such as 'universal', 'universal plus', 'targeted', 'specialist' and, 'specialist including multi-agency support', a potential rebadging of previous ways of working (Estyn, 2023). Estyn further report a lack of a common understanding as to what these terms constitute, what provision is offered within these categories and a lack of clarity about whether provision constitutes additional learning provision.

Although the number of learners identified as ALN has decreased, research into the role of the ALNCo indicates they have oversight over a much wider range of learners than those on the ALN register or under investigation for this. ALNCos describe having oversight of all learners within their setting and getting to know anyone who might require extra

support, regardless of whether they met the ALN criteria (Conn et al., in press). Taken together with the development of alternative categories of support as described above, this suggests a lack of clarity in relation to reforms, or possibly confusion around the operation of dual SEN and ALN systems whilst the transformation programme comes into effect, or again, an on-going resistance to change in practice. Indeed, there is some evidence of early lack of support for reform of the ALN system by professionals and parents. A consultation entitled 'Statements or something better?' (Welsh Government, 2008) found that, although there was overwhelming belief that the SEN system was not working effectively, there remained a consensus that the system already offered most of what was desirable in a statutory framework. A further consultation on the 2014 White Paper legislative proposals for ALN also found a level of disagreement amongst stakeholders. Of the five of questions about the proposed changes set out in the consultation, for example, more respondents disagreed with the statements than agreed in all cases (Dauncey, 2016).

What is of significance are tensions between perpetuation of a separate system of support in schools and the aims of the new Curriculum for Wales. This places emphasis upon 'raising the aspirations for all learners' and guidance has been developed to 'support schools to design inclusive school curricula' (Welsh Government, 2020b). However, a study by Knight et al. (2022) suggests that, whilst teachers subscribed to the ideal of inclusion, they also expressed limits for learners with ALN in mainstream classes relating to behavioural issues, training and preparedness, and physical and financial constraints. Inclusion requires the operation of an 'ethic of everybody' (Hart, 2012) and a widening of what is available within ordinary classrooms. Knight et al. (2022) found a level of implicit 'othering' of learners with ALN by teachers, some viewing these learners as not naturally belonging within mainstream education. This reinforces the marginalisation of learners, despite the promotion of inclusion within curriculum, through a persistent belief in segregated practices as being in the best interests of some learners.

The problem here is that marginalisation of learners with ALN has the potential for negative impact on the attainment of this group. As previously noted, the overall number of pupils identified as having ALN or SEN in Wales has reduced, but a study by Knight et al. (forthcoming) suggests that identification has been far more pervasive within the Welsh education system over the last two decades. This study found that, of

children born in 2002/3, 47.9 per cent – almost half of all learners – were identified with SEN/ALN at some point between Reception to year 11, challenging the notion that SEN/ALN is an issue affecting a minority. Whilst these findings underscore the interplay of a range of factors influencing the identification and impact of SEN/ALN, they highlight that identification of SEN was the most influential predictor of learner attainment with an increased proportion of time spent diagnosed with SEN having a corresponding decrease in the likelihood of achieving nationally expected educational outcomes, for example, a learner identified with SEN during their KS2 education having a 97 per cent reduction in the likelihood of meeting national expectations.

There are indications of encouraging developments however. From research to date, a key theme emerging is the development of cluster working across regions. Estyn (2023) report many schools have developed positive collaborative approaches with local authorities and further highlight the importance of cluster working for ALNCos. This has supported schools in implementing ALN reforms through the sharing of practice and specialist resources, though Estyn notes that the sustainability of a co-ordinated approach to cluster working at this time is unclear. Cluster working between schools appears to have supported collaboration around implementing ALN reforms (Welsh Government, 2023b), whilst evidence suggests that ALNCos regularly seek advice from their network groups to ensure practice in their settings is regionally aligned (Conn et al., in press).

Schools and local authorities are united in their enthusiasm for person-centred planning (PCP) as an initiative that pre-dates but runs alongside reform of the ALN system and introduction of the Curriculum for Wales. Relationships between schools and parents have been described as strengthened as a result of the use of a range of PCP practices and there is evidence of PCP as an approach aligning home and school in relation to priorities for a learner (Conn et al., in press; Estyn, 2023). Estyn (2023) cautions, however, that inconsistencies in practice remain including identifying effective approaches to learning support and challenges related to increased workload in particular for ALNCos in organising and administering PCP meetings.

Finally, there is a suggestion that schools feel confident in their practice relating to ALN (Estyn, 2023). It is possible that professional development opportunities as part of the ALN transformation programme had impact in upskilling practitioners along with initiatives, such as the

national MA Education (Wales), offering opportunities for teachers to develop knowledge and practice. However, an explanation may lie in the fact that school practice has changed very little for learners with SEN/ALN despite reforms. Conn and Hutt (2020) found strong belief amongst school practitioners that arrangements for ALN learners would continue largely in their previous form following reform, and that this was underpinned by the language of ability and associated practices. The current situation as surmised by Conn and Davis (2024) is one where despite apparently real change being enacted at policy level, less change may have taken place in practice.

Conclusions and future directions

The question we would like to raise is whether the systems for inclusion and learning support currently being developed in Wales are likely to result in enhanced well-being and achievement for a wider group of learners. It is not clear that the progressive aims of the reform programme will be realised given that, as Estyn (2023) notes, there is a lack of joined up thinking at policy and practice levels to integrate Curriculum for Wales and the new ALN system. The historical developments that we have outlined above, in relation to the over–identification of SEN in Wales and the negative impact of this on attainment, suggests not. It is clear from research that there is a problem with categorising learners in terms of inflexible groupings and the development of negative learner identities (Francis et al. 2017), something that has also been found within the Welsh context (Conn et al. 2024).

However, developments in Wales are strongly influenced by developments in education systems around the world, most notably perhaps, the non–prescriptive, teacher–developed curricula of Scotland, New Zealand and the Netherlands (Sinnema et al., 2020). It is possible to identify international education systems that successfully support a large number of learners by operating a low threshold for obtaining additional input. In Finland, for example, the 'everyman additional need service' provides large numbers of learners with short-term support that is viewed as preventative rather than stigmatising (Graham and Jahnukainen, 2011). Assessment within the primary phase is focused on whole school populations and important practices include co–teaching, catch–up work, the teaching of small groups and special education teachers retrained to understand how to

address additional support in the context of mainstream classrooms. If this is the system that is currently being created in Wales then the future looks promising. The prospect is one of high-quality, effective support that is often short-term and applied in ways that do not marginalise learners. If, however, the system continues to focus on hierarchies of learners and a dual system of mainstream and specialist education, then perhaps the future will reflect the past and may not be quite so promising.

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