

Editorial – Educational Change in Wales: Curriculum, Capacity and the Next Senedd Cymru

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As this issue of the *Wales Journal of Education* is published in May 2026, a new Senedd Cymru begins its parliamentary term, with major educational reforms still in active implementation. The phased implementation of the Curriculum for Wales continues across all year groups. The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system is embedding new statutory duties. The Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 introduces new statutory requirements relating to Welsh-medium and bilingual provision, including minimum expectations for Welsh language education across the system. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging across all educational settings and contexts. Higher education institutions face sustained financial constraint. The new parliamentary term therefore begins while substantial elements of educational reform remain in progress, within a context of fiscal and workforce constraint. Across these developments, this issue foregrounds a central question: how can the education system sustain coherence, equity and professional purpose amid ongoing change? That question is ultimately one of capacity.

Over the past decade, Wales has articulated ambitious reforms as part of its ‘national mission’ in curriculum design, Welsh-medium and bilingual provision, digital competence, ALN provision and post-16 transformation (Welsh Government, 2023; Welsh Government, 2025). Yet ambition alone is insufficient. Reform endures only where professional capacity, including teacher expertise and leadership; institutional capacity, including governance, infrastructure and policy coherence; and fiscal capacity, including sustainable funding across schools and

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universities, are aligned. This reflects wider scholarship on system-level reform and implementation (Fullan and Quinn, 2016). As the next Senedd Cymru begins its term, translating aspiration into sustained practice becomes an immediate and practical concern (Davies and Beauchamp, 2024).

Recent WJE editorials have sought to help define and frame key debates rather than merely describe them (Beauchamp et al., 2021), from envisioning a post-COVID 'new normal' (Thomas et al., 2023), to addressing political change and reform (Crick et al., 2024), and to fostering innovation in research and practice (Beauchamp et al., 2025; Thomas et al., 2025). This issue continues that trajectory. It brings together scholarship spanning early years language development, generative AI policy, home-school partnership, curriculum enactment and moral education in higher education. Collectively, these contributions illustrate that reform is not simply a matter of policy architecture. It is realised through professional judgement, relational trust and sustained system capacity.

Jones, Tiesteel and Storey open the issue with a systematic review of Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) for children aged five to eight in the post-pandemic period. International prevalence rates of Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) remain broadly consistent, yet the review identifies a notable absence of targeted intervention studies following COVID-19 disruption. It also highlights strong associations between SLCN and socio-emotional wellbeing, reinforcing evidence that early language development underpins both attainment and longer-term life chances. In Wales, where SLC difficulties constitute the largest category of ALN (Knight et al., 2024), these findings carry weight; the authors underscore the need for bilingual, standardised assessment approaches and integrated wellbeing-focused interventions. Early language support is not peripheral to reform. It is foundational to educational equity and to the aspirations of the Curriculum for Wales (Conn et al., 2024).

Next, Atherton, Karlinger and Castle examine generative AI in Welsh education. Drawing on survey data and framed through the Technology Acceptance Model and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, the study identifies a widening gap between adoption and readiness. While experimentation is increasing, policy frameworks, professional development and technical infrastructure remain uneven. Three patterns of implementation, described as restrictive, ad hoc and emerging structured approaches, illustrate divergent learner experiences. Concerns about assessment integrity, resource inequality and the implications for learners with

ALN are particularly salient. Consistent with broader research on digital transformation, the paper demonstrates that effective AI integration depends on sustained professional learning and coherent governance (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Within the new parliamentary term, embedding equity and ethical considerations for continued AI adoption and diffusion, particularly in the context of agentic AI (Hughes et al., 2025), from the outset will be essential.

The third paper from Davies, Waters-Davies and Underwood revisits the pandemic from a relational perspective, examining home–school partnerships during COVID-19 disruption. Rather than focusing solely on learning loss, the authors analyse how parental engagement and professional boundaries were reshaped. Although socio-economic and digital inequalities constrained participation, new forms of collaboration and mutual understanding emerged. Longstanding evidence links parental engagement to learner outcomes, and these findings retain continuing relevance. The Curriculum for Wales situates learners within families and communities; meaningful partnership is therefore integral to reform (Goodall, 2022). The paper invites reflection on how the relational gains of this period might be embedded more systematically in the future.

Gatley and Oostendorp-Godfrey examine the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales through a distinctively philosophical lens. Drawing on interviews with secondary teachers, they argue that a purpose-driven curriculum foregrounds educational values and requires practitioners to navigate complex trade-offs between competing commitments. Participants expressed strong support for the curriculum’s four purposes (Welsh Government, 2022), yet differed in the values they prioritised and identified tensions between those purposes and external pressures, including qualifications, accountability regimes and community expectations. The challenge, the authors suggest, is not simply one of guidance or workload, but of deliberative capacity. Teachers are being asked to interpret and enact a values-led framework without always having the conceptual tools or structured spaces to engage in sustained ethical discussion. In response, the paper proposes philosophical resources, including educational goods frameworks, normative case studies and philosophy-for-teachers approaches, as potential supports for maintaining the curriculum’s purpose-led integrity. Curriculum change, in this account, is normative and cultural as well as structural.

Finally, Allen-Walker and Williams extend the discussion into higher education, examining how staff construct professional identities through moral education

within community-facing degree programmes. Drawing on Schön's (1983) metaphor of the 'swampy lowlands' of practice, the authors explore how practitioners move beyond formal professional codes to negotiate ethical ambiguity in context. Their analysis highlights the importance of dialogic, reflective spaces in enabling staff and students to navigate the moral complexity inherent in professional life. In doing so, the paper broadens the discussion of curriculum purpose and values into the terrain of professional identity formation.

Across these five contributions, a coherent picture emerges. Educational change is shaped by persistent inequities across linguistic, digital and socio-economic domains. It depends on professional expertise and sustained learning. It requires governance coherence in periods of technological and systemic transition. Above all, it is relational; enacted through trust, partnership and deliberation. The challenge is not simply to initiate reform but to sustain it.

The Senedd elections of 7 May 2026 have determined the composition of the next Senedd Cymru and established the institutional context for educational policy in the coming parliamentary term. The formation of a new Welsh Government and the appointment of ministers, advisers, and scrutiny committee chairs will frame decisions about curriculum timelines, ALN resourcing, digital strategy and sustainable higher education funding. The next Senedd Cymru inherits a system still consolidating major reforms: a Curriculum for Wales embedding across phases, an ALN framework maturing in practice, continued expansion of Welsh-medium and bilingual provision aimed at developing confident and willing bilingual speakers, accelerating AI adoption and integration alongside emerging forms of AI reluctance and resistance, and universities operating under challenging fiscal conditions. The central question is how coherence and equity can be maintained as these reforms mature.

For researchers, practitioners and policymakers alike, responsibility now lies in ensuring that evidence and professional insight inform deliberation in this parliamentary cycle. As earlier WJE editorials have argued (Crick et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2025), reform requires balancing innovation with stability and aspiration with institutional realism. This issue contributes to that deliberation: from early language development to AI governance, from curriculum enactment to moral professionalism, the work gathered here does not prescribe policy. It offers evidence-informed analysis intended to support careful judgement in the next Senedd Cymru and beyond.

The challenge for this new parliamentary term may best be understood as one of stewardship: sustaining curriculum coherence, strengthening professional and institutional capacity, and advancing educational equity within the distinctive context of Welsh devolution. The contributions in this issue are offered in that spirit, as resources for critical reflection and informed deliberation.

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