Editorial – Devolving Responsibility: Mandate, Delivery and a System Under Strain

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This issue of *the Wales Journal of Education* is published in November 2026, roughly six months into the term of the first Plaid Cymru-led Welsh Government, with Rhun ap Iorwerth as First Minister, Anna Brychan holding the combined Cabinet brief for Education and the Welsh Language, and Cefin Campbell as Deputy Minister for Skills and Tertiary Education – a ministerial arrangement that itself signals how tightly this Government intends to bind schools, further and higher education, and language policy together into a single, more joined-up education and skills system. It also follows a UK-wide constitutional moment that was still unfolding as this editorial was written in July 2026: Sir Keir Starmer's resignation and Andy Burnham's emergence as his successor as Prime Minister placed the shape of devolution, not merely its exercise, back on the political agenda across all four nations. The First Minister's insistence on 'a fairer settlement on funding and powers', met at the time with a still-undefined Westminster offer to extend devolution 'deeper down' toward cities and regions (ITV News Wales, 2026), confirmed that questions of where power sits, and who is accountable for what, had become newly and genuinely contested. Readers encountering this issue in November will already know more than we did in July about how that settlement took shape; what was true even in the summer, however, was that the terms of the debate had materially shifted.

Devolution is not only a story about Cardiff Bay and Westminster. Education was one of the founding areas of devolved competence when the National Assembly for

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Wales was established by the Government of Wales Act 1998, giving Wales authority over schools, colleges and universities from the outset and setting the pattern for everything that has followed (Moon and Evans, 2017; Knight et al., 2025). It should also be seen as an organising principle of the Curriculum for Wales itself. As the Welsh Government's own design guidance puts it, the Framework gives every school in Wales 'the opportunity to design their own curriculum within a national approach' (Welsh Government, 2020), offering schools and practitioners the autonomy and agency to choose the specific experiences, knowledge and skills that will best support their own learners, within nationally defined expectations (Welsh Government, 2022). This is devolution in miniature: responsibility for curriculum design transferred from the centre to the school, on the premise that those closest to learners are best placed to serve them. This issue's six papers, taken together, trace what happens as responsibility moves through this devolved system – from government to school, from partnership to practitioner – when the conditions to exercise it well do not always travel with it (Davies and Beauchamp, 2024).

The wider policy context gives this question real weight. Higher education institutions have continued to operate under sustained deficit pressure through this period, even as sector-wide restructuring shows tentative signs of stabilising by 2027/28. The new Government's first hundred days included a £5,000 increase to the initial teacher education (ITE) priority-subject incentive, taking it to £20,000; a concrete, early act of workforce stewardship, but one that sits against the more sobering finding, reported in this issue, that ITE partnership leadership across Wales remains under significant strain (Estyn, 2026). Welsh Government also used its first months to reaffirm a manifesto commitment on the Welsh language, building toward a target, first set out under the previous administration, of half of Wales's children beginning their journey in Welsh-medium education by 2050. A new Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Plan, trailed for publication this autumn, sets out a 0–16 architecture of national indicators. Curriculum for Wales implementation, meanwhile, continues to reveal the gap between principled design and enacted practice that recent WJE editorials have repeatedly identified (Crick, Beauchamp and Thomas, 2024; Crick, Beauchamp and Thomas, 2026).

Smith and Hewitt open the issue with Changemakers, reporting on a co-designed, multilingual interactive resource built with young Welsh citizens aged 16–24 to strengthen political and citizenship education. Drawing on

mixed-methods research into young people's understanding of UK political institutions, the study finds significant gaps in knowledge: most strikingly around devolved governance and who actually holds responsibility for the issues that matter to young people's lives. Rather than treating this as a deficit to be corrected through instruction, the authors position young people as co-designers and as political actors already engaged in 'everyday politics' (Harris et al., 2010), reframing citizenship education as relational, digitally mediated and grounded in lived experience rather than confined to a discrete curriculum subject. The resulting website integrates social media-style engagement with multilingual accessibility, reflecting participants' own preferences for how political information should reach them. The paper's central contribution is methodological as much as substantive: it demonstrates how youth-centred co-design can produce resources that resonate rather than lecture. Its findings carry particular weight given the confusion the authors identify about where power actually sits within the UK's devolved settlement: precisely the kind of institutional literacy the events of this year made newly urgent, as constitutional debate about the shape and location of power across the UK intensified.

Huskinson, Evans-Jones, Andrews and Healand-Sloane examine a structural paradox at the heart of the Curriculum for Wales: Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) is a mandatory element of the curriculum for all learners aged 3–16, yet neither the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 nor its accompanying guidance specifies any minimum time allocation or delivery model. The result, the authors argue, is that a single legal duty produces radically different entitlements depending on which school a learner attends, from weekly specialist teaching to occasional collapsed-timetable days. This ambiguity is intensified at Years 10–11 by the removal of the short-course GCSE Religious Studies, which previously anchored curriculum time for many learners and now leaves a structural gap with no replacement mechanism. Their proposed reform package, comprising a national minimum time entitlement, strengthened Estyn inspection benchmarks, transition guidance for Years 10–11 and sustained investment in professional learning and subject networks, is explicitly framed as compatible with, not opposed to, schools' curriculum-design autonomy. The paper offers an instructive case study in how the same devolved design freedom that lets schools build curricula suited to their own learners can, without national guardrails, produce inequity that undermines the Curriculum for Wales's own civic purposes.

Waters-Davies and Livingston report on Phase 2 of a longitudinal study into a mandated university–school partnership model for ITE in Wales, examining how 'joint ownership' and 'joint responsibility' are experienced by teacher educators roughly eighteen months into implementation. Building on their earlier finding that university-based staff experienced greater emotional demand and diminished agency than school-based colleagues during the partnership's formation (Livingston and Waters-Davies, 2024), this paper finds that while 'bridging activities' have planted early seeds of relational agency (Edwards, 2005), entrenched institutional habits and power relations largely persist beneath visible markers of change. The partnership, the authors conclude, has not yet reached a genuine cultural tipping point: policy-mandated structural devolution of responsibility has not, on its own, produced the relational agency that Zeichner (2024) argues genuine partnership requires. The paper argues that sustainable partnership demands sustained opportunity for 'micro-negotiations' between individuals, not simply new organisational structures, and that the emotional dimensions of institutional change need explicit recognition and support. This is a candid, evidence-grounded account of how far implementation still has to travel from devolved mandate to lived, agentic practice.

Grigg extends this account across a much longer timeframe, applying a 'usable past' framework to mentoring in Welsh ITE, from the 1944 McNair Report through successive partnership and accreditation reforms to the present day. Drawing on documentary analysis of inspection reports and policy documents, the paper finds a striking historical consistency: mentoring has been repeatedly identified as central to teacher preparation, yet the conditions needed to secure its quality, equity and professional status have never been durably established. All seven ITE partnerships inspected by Estyn between 2021 and 2025 received recommendations to improve mentoring consistency, and ITE leadership itself is described by Estyn (2026) as 'fragile and precarious'. Grigg identifies converging pressures at individual, partnership and system level – from 'judgementoring', which constrains reflective dialogue (cf. Grigg et al., 2024), to financially unsustainable partnership models, to short ministerial tenures that disrupt policy continuity – captured in a memorable image of a tandem bicycle where one partner pedals harder while the other coasts. The paper's recommendations offer a historically grounded rejoinder to the sense, evident elsewhere in this issue, that devolving responsibility without sustained investment reliably reproduces the problems it sets out to solve. They include

raising mentoring's professional status through accreditation and career pathways, strengthening mentor selection and training, and developing regional professional learning hubs.

If Grigg's recommendations centre on sustained investment in professional learning infrastructure, Thomas, Caulfield, Roberts and Hughes examine what that investment can look like in practice, evaluating *Ein Llais Ni* (ELIN), a design-based collaborative professional learning (CPL) programme that was delivered across ninety-five Welsh-medium schools in its initial year of implementation. The programme is rooted in a design-based implementation research model, allowing for a more systemic approach focused around developing capacity for sustained change on a broader organisational level. In that way, ELIN lends itself well to models of CPL that generate improvements in educational practice, in this case, focusing on one key national priority, namely the development of pupils' oracy skills in Welsh. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers across seven schools during the programme's first implementation year, the study finds that teachers valued the interventionist, collaborative and responsive elements of cross-school learning that were built around a shared goal, and the availability of diverse professional resources and events, even amid initial uncertainty about roles and expectations. Teachers reported improvements in both pupils' oracy and their own practice, though self-evaluation remained an area needing clearer guidance. Situating this within the wider context of Welsh-medium education, the authors argue that modelling good practice and co-constructing strategies across individual, school and cross-sector levels, developed within a design-based framework, is essential not only for oracy development but for the wider revitalisation of the Welsh language. Where devolved responsibility for professional learning is matched with genuinely sustained collaboration and resourcing, this paper suggests teachers do build the confidence and shared practice that policy intends, a hopeful counterpoint to the partnership and mentoring papers elsewhere in this issue, and directly relevant to a policy landscape increasingly oriented around national indicators for foundational literacy, oracy and bilingual attainment.

Chapman, Beauchamp and Griffiths close the issue by examining secondary Expressive Arts teachers' perceptions of effective technology use during a period of compounding disruption: curriculum reform and pandemic restrictions occurring simultaneously. Using inductive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, the authors develop the 'Purpose to Outcomes' (PtO) process, a model capturing how

teachers' technology decisions were shaped by purposeful alignment with subject-specific creative processes, by the particular affordances and barriers technology presented within each Expressive Arts discipline, and by a shared learning ecology spanning the Area of Learning and Experience as a whole. The pandemic, the authors find, reignited longstanding concerns about unequal access even as it accelerated technology adoption. While not generalisable beyond this cross-section of practice, the PtO process makes a distinctive contribution to a thin research base on technology in arts education, echoing earlier work on purposeful pedagogical orchestration of technology (Beauchamp and Kennewell, 2013), and offers an instructive historical marker: a snapshot of how practitioners exercised professional judgement under devolved discretion several years before generative AI reframed the same questions of purpose, access and pedagogy across the wider system.

Beyond the paper's own scope, but very much in the same territory, this same distinction between devolved pedagogical judgement and reserved regulatory power was thrown into sharp relief this year by the UK Government's under-16 social media ban, announced in June 2026 under powers provided by the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, with the first regulations potentially taking effect from spring 2027. Online safety regulation is reserved to Westminster, but its consequences land squarely on devolved territory; tellingly, the Welsh Government responded to the parallel question of mobile phones in schools not with a Wales-wide ban but by leaving the decision to individual schools, the First Minister explicitly ruling out a national mandate, the same devolved design logic running through the Curriculum for Wales itself. The Children's Commissioner for Wales has gone further still, publicly opposing a blanket ban as the wrong instrument entirely, arguing it targets children's access rather than the underlying safety of platform design, and calling instead for statutory safety-by-design duties on technology companies (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2026). With the internet now central to the lives of virtually all children and young people – 99 per cent of 8–17-year-olds now go online (Ofcom, 2026) – the equity and access questions Chapman et al. raise are only sharpening further as Wales navigates a complex policy landscape where regulation and pedagogy pull from different levels of the same devolved system.

Across all six contributions, a single pattern recurs. Wales has built an education system substantially organised around the principle of subsidiarity – decisions made as close as possible to the learner – from the Curriculum for Wales's school-level

design freedom, to ITE's mandated partnership model, to citizenship education's turn toward co-produced, learner-led resources, to schools' own discretion over phones and devices. Waters-Davies and Livingston, and Grigg, both examine ITE partnership and mentoring, one through close longitudinal fieldwork and the other through historical analysis, and arrive at a shared, sobering conclusion: devolving joint responsibility is no guarantee of joint agency. Huskinson et al. identify the same structural pattern in curriculum entitlement, where the Curriculum for Wales's foundational commitment to school-level design autonomy, absent national guardrails, has produced exactly the kind of postcode inconsistency the reforms were meant to eliminate. Thomas et al. offer the more optimistic counterpoint: where devolved responsibility for professional learning is carefully resourced and sustained, as in *Ein Llais Ni*, teachers do build the confidence and shared practice that policy intends. Chapman et al. remind us that these questions of purpose, access and professional judgement under devolved discretion are longstanding ones, now resurfacing with sharper urgency as generative AI and now UK-wide online safety regulation reach into the same terrain from a different, reserved, direction.

It is Smith and Hewitt's Changemakers, though, that speaks most directly to this issue's wider political backdrop. Their central finding should give pause to anyone assuming that devolution's institutional architecture is well understood by the citizens it is meant to serve: young people in Wales frequently cannot identify who actually holds responsibility for the issues affecting their lives, at a moment when that architecture was itself under renewed negotiation between Cardiff Bay and a new UK Government. This was the same principle of subsidiarity the new UK Government claimed to want to extend across England's regions and nations; this issue's evidence suggests that devolving responsibility is consistently the easier half of the task. Matching it with time, trust, funding and sustained professional development – devolving capacity as well as accountability, at every level from Westminster to the individual classroom – is what determines whether mandate becomes delivery, or merely strain.

As this issue reaches readers in November 2026, roughly six months into this Welsh parliamentary term and against a still-settling picture of where power sits across the UK, that is the test this Government, and this system, now faces. The contributions gathered here do not resolve that test, but they offer evidence-informed grounds for judging how it is being met – from the Senedd chamber to the school gate.

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