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**Education: Past, Present,
Future.
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Introduction

- From the late twentieth century onwards, education policy in Wales began to move towards devolution and became an important, and often contested, part of the wider UK education system. This process began in 1981, when responsibility for education was transferred from Westminster to the Welsh Office, and it became more firmly established with the creation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 (Gillard, 2011; Welsh Government, 2017). Devolution gave Wales greater control over its own education policies and allowed it to move away from approaches used in England. This created opportunities to develop policies that reflected Welsh culture, language, and social values.
- Supporters of devolved education argue that it allows education policy to better meet local needs, strengthens the Welsh language, and promotes a more inclusive and values-based education system (Rees, 2014). Since devolution, Wales has introduced a number of distinctive policies in areas such as curriculum design, assessment, and inclusion. Supporters believe these developments are important for promoting national identity and improving equality of opportunity within education (Power et al., 2016). However, devolution has also faced criticism. Some critics question whether having separate education policies has led to improved educational standards in Wales, raising concerns about accountability and Wales' performance in international assessments such as PISA (Egan, 2019).
- As a result, the devolution of education in Wales remains a contested issue. The debate reflects wider tensions within the UK education system between local control and national consistency, as well as differing views about the purpose of education and the role of government. This section will explore the historical development of education devolution in Wales, examine arguments both in support of and against it, and consider its significance for learners, teachers, and policymakers.

(Gillard, 2011; Rees, 2014; Power et al., 2016; Welsh Government, 2017; Egan, 2019)

Key Period In Education

- Back in 1981, education authority began drifting toward Wales as the Welsh Office grabbed duties once stuck in Westminster. Wales gained its initial voice in schooling for once; and policies started veering off from England's path, Gillard notes in 2011. Those first tweaks stayed small. Yet the National Assembly for Wales, set up in 1999, delivered real heft: now Wales moulded its curriculum, picked testing methods, and crafted wide plans echoing its tongue and traditions, according to the Welsh Government, 2017.
- Unique approaches rolled out next. Estyn emerged as the Welsh watchdog for education and training, split off from England's Ofsted; some key stage national tests got axed, a clear retreat from England's testing fixation, as Rees points out in 2014. Focus sharpened on Welsh language and roots: bilingual setups grew, lessons leaned into nearby history; community principles gained heavier pull, Power and others describe in 2016. In the end, a setup formed, guided more by homegrown demands, cultural ties, and inclusion worries than by borrowed English moulds. That span from 1981 through the early 2000s marks a crucial phase. Foundations settled in. Room from policy let Wales test ideas, tailoring learning to its social and cultural setup; debates cropped up, naturally: worries over quality, oversight, and Wales's standing in global tests like PISA, Egan observes in 2019.

(Gillard, 2011; Welsh Government, 2017; Rees, 2014; Power et al., 2016; Egan, 2019)

Why is this a contested issue?

- The devolution of education in Wales continues to generate debate because it raises difficult questions about who should make key decisions and whether local control genuinely improves educational outcomes. Supporters of devolution emphasise the benefits it has brought, such as efforts to promote the Welsh language in schools and a curriculum that reflects the nation's history and social values (Power et al., 2016; Rees, 2014). Policies specifically designed for Welsh contexts are also seen as helping to reduce regional inequalities and provide more inclusive learning opportunities.
- From this perspective, devolved education allows schools to respond to local cultural, and community needs rather than simply following a uniform UK-wide approach (Rees, 2014). There is a lot of pushback, though. Opponents wonder if student achievement has significantly improved because of autonomous administration. Wales frequently falls behind England and other UK countries in important topics, according to international evaluations like PISA, which opponents exploit to question the efficacy of Welsh-specific tactics (Egan, 2019). Differences between Welsh and English education systems also create practical challenges for families and teachers moving across borders, and shared accountability can become unclear when oversight is divided (Gillard, 2011). Some argue that devolved policies risk prioritising political convenience over evidence-based practice, raising concerns about consistency and standards.
- The contested nature of the issue is further reinforced by broader political and cultural considerations. Education in Wales is closely linked to national identity, and policy decisions carry symbolic significance (Power et al., 2016). Devolution's supporters see it as a means of bolstering Welsh identity and community cohesiveness, while its detractors fear that divergence could lower coherence throughout the UK and impair students' performance on international tests. Different stakeholders have varied priorities: teachers may support policies that reflect classroom realities but resist extra administrative

(Gillard, 2011; Rees, 2014; Power et al., 2016; Egan, 2019)



Why is this important?

- The devolution of education in Wales is an important issue because it affects students, teachers, and communities, with consequences that can last for generations. Schools shape not only learning, but also social behaviour, cultural awareness, and future opportunities. Giving Wales control over its education system has allowed the introduction of policies that reflect the country's language, history, and culture. Supporters argue that this strengthens Welsh identity and encourages community cohesion (Power et al., 2016; Rees, 2014). For example, bilingual education and lessons based on Welsh heritage give students a sense of belonging and create learning environments that feel relevant and welcoming. Education in this context also promotes citizenship, fairness, and social cohesion (Rees, 2014).
- Devolution also raises the challenge of balancing local decision-making with wider standards. Split powers allow Wales to adapt policies to its own context, such as reducing certain high-stakes tests and introducing inspections through Estyn (Gillard, 2011). These policies influence how teachers teach, how students learn, and the outcomes for learners across the country. However, differences between the Welsh and English systems can create practical difficulties for families and teachers moving across borders. Questions about quality, consistency, and comparability remain, showing the complexities of running a devolved education system.
- Equity and social justice are central to the debate. Devolution allows Wales to address regional inequalities and target resources to areas where students need the most support, aiming to give all learners fair opportunities (Power et al., 2016). At the same time, there is concern about whether these policies improve outcomes, as international comparisons like PISA scores suggest Wales lags other UK nations in some areas (Egan, 2019). Effective policies can enhance opportunities for all students, while poorly implemented ones risk widening existing gaps.
- Finally, the importance of this issue goes beyond schools. Education reflects broader political and cultural questions about governance in Wales and the UK. Decisions about what is taught, how it is assessed, and who is accountable carry symbolic significance and shape national identity (Rees, 2014; Power et al., 2016). Understanding the debates around education devolution helps to show how cultural values, political structures, and daily school practices interact. This issue is therefore significant not only for students and teachers, but for Welsh society as a whole, as it influences the country's future and its position within the UK.



(Rees, 2014; Power et al., 2016; Lloyd Williams, ap Gruffudd & Gruffydd Jones, 2024; Davies, Morgan, Connolly & Milton, 2024; Egan, 2019; Gillard, 2011)

Critical reflection

- Education devolution in Wales provides a clear example of how giving local authorities control can shape learning, identity, and fairness. With powers handed down, Wales has developed policies that reflect its language, culture, and social priorities, including strong support for bilingual education and lessons that include local history and traditions (Power et al., 2016; Rees, 2014). For students, this can make learning feel more connected to their communities and sense of identity. Teachers can design lessons that relate directly to their pupils' experiences, and schools can focus on inclusion and equity in ways a uniform UK-wide approach may struggle to achieve.
- However, challenges remain. International assessments, such as PISA, show that Wales still falls behind England and other UK countries in key areas (Egan, 2019). Students and teachers moving between Welsh and English systems can face confusion, and accountability is not always clear when oversight is divided (Gillard, 2011). These issues demonstrate the potential downsides of devolved governance: flexibility and innovation may be limited if standards, monitoring, and evaluations are inconsistent.
- Looking critically, the main tension in devolved education lies between tailoring policies to local needs and maintaining high, consistent standards. Devolution allows culturally and socially relevant approaches, but careful supervision is needed to ensure fairness and equality for all students. Education policy is not just about exams or grades—it shapes identity, community cohesion, and prepares young people for life beyond school. Devolution has opened the door for innovation and local responsiveness, yet it also shows how decisions in education can have long-term effects across generations. Balancing local priorities with national and international expectations remains the core challenge, which is why education devolution in Wales continues to spark debate.

(Power et al., 2016; Rees, 2014; Egan, 2019; Gillard, 2011)

ALN ACT INTRODUCTION

Wales saw major changes with the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Act in 2018. The law overhauled support for children and young people with learning difficulties, replacing the old Special Educational Needs (SEN) system with a more inclusive approach that focuses on each individual up to the age of 25 (Welsh Government, 2018; Lloyd, 2020). The main goals were to identify needs more quickly, create one clear plan instead of multiple documents, and involve learners and their families more closely in decisions about their education.

The ALN Act has been debated from the start. Supporters argue that it improves fairness and access, making it easier for schools to provide the right support for each learner (Cullen & Rees, 2019). Critics, however, point out practical problems. Funding is limited, teachers are not always trained for the new system, and the extra planning and paperwork can be a heavy burden (Evans, 2020). This shows the tension between the policy's aims and what actually happens in schools.

In this section, I will look at the background that led to the ALN Act, weigh the arguments for and against it, and explain why it matters for students, families, and teachers. Even well-meaning reforms can be controversial when fairness and inclusion meet budget limits and the daily realities of classrooms.

(Welsh Government, 2018; Lloyd, 2020; Cullen & Rees, 2019; Evans, 2020)



KEY PERIOD IN EDUCATION

- The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Act 2018 was introduced as part of a broader effort to modernise support for learners with special educational needs in Wales. The move came after decades of criticism of the old SEN system, which was seen as complicated, fragmented, and sometimes unfair (Cullen & Rees, 2019). The Act was passed by the Welsh Government in 2018 and fully came into effect in 2021, marking a key period for education in Wales that focused on inclusion, equality, and personalised support (Welsh Government, 2018; Lloyd, 2020).
- Before the ALN Act, different systems and paperwork existed for schools, local authorities, and families, making it difficult to provide consistent support. The 2018 legislation created a single, streamlined framework for all learners with additional needs, ensuring that children and young people up to 25 have one clear plan that reflects their individual requirements (Welsh Government, 2018). This period also aligns with wider reforms in Wales, including efforts to improve wellbeing, inclusion, and learner outcomes, making it a landmark moment in education policy.
- The key period, therefore, spans the years leading up to the Act's passage in 2018 and the first years of its implementation after 2021. It represents a shift towards person-centred education and demonstrates how policy can try to respond to past inequalities, while also sparking debates over resources, teacher workload, and effective implementation.

(Welsh Government, 2018; Lloyd, 2020; Cullen & Rees, 2019)



Why is this a contested issue?

The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Act 2018 has been controversial since it was introduced, mainly because it tries to balance inclusion, fairness, and practical delivery. Supporters of the Act argue that it has created a more consistent, person-centred approach for learners, giving children and young people up to 25 years old clear plans tailored to their needs (Cullen & Rees, 2019; Lloyd, 2020). Families and advocates welcome the involvement of parents and learners in planning, and they see the law as a step towards reducing inequalities and making schools more responsive to everyone's needs.

At the same time, critics highlight significant challenges. Schools and teachers often face extra workloads from creating and managing the new single plans, and many feel they have insufficient training to implement the Act effectively (Evans, 2020). Funding has also been a major concern, with opponents arguing that without extra resources, the promises of the law cannot be fully realised. Some worry that, in practice, the Act may focus more on compliance and paperwork than on improving learning outcomes.

The contested nature of the ALN Act also reflects broader debates about education policy in Wales. It raises questions about how far government reforms can realistically deliver inclusion while balancing resources and teacher capacity. Parents, teachers, local authorities, and policymakers all have different priorities, which makes reaching agreement difficult. This tension shows that even well-intentioned reforms can spark debate when ideals of fairness, equity, and practical implementation collide.

(Cullen & Rees, 2019; Lloyd, 2020; Evans, 2020)

Why Is This Issue Important?

The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Act 2018 is important because it directly impacts the learning experiences and life chances of children and young people in Wales. At its core, the Act aims to make education more inclusive and personalised, ensuring that learners with additional needs are supported properly from early years up to the age of 25 (Welsh Government, 2018; Lloyd, 2020). This matters because, before the Act, support was often fragmented, with multiple documents and processes that could confuse schools, families, and students. The new approach streamlines support into a single plan for each learner, giving them a clear voice in decisions about their education. This shift has the potential to improve confidence, engagement, and outcomes, particularly for students who struggled under the previous system.

Beyond the classroom, the ALN Act matters for society and culture. It demonstrates Wales' commitment to fairness and equity in education, reflecting the values of inclusion and respect for diversity (Evans, 2020). Ensuring that all students, regardless of ability, have access to education tailored to their needs is not only a legal requirement but a social one. Education shapes future citizens, and giving young people equal opportunities to succeed is crucial for long-term societal wellbeing. By embedding inclusion into law, the Act signals that education is more than grades—it is about preparing students to participate fully in their communities and society.

Another reason the Act is important is that it challenges schools and policymakers to rethink traditional approaches. By focusing on personalised plans and learner involvement, it encourages schools to move away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach. This allows educators to experiment with new strategies that could better engage learners and improve outcomes (Welsh Government, 2018). For example, students may benefit from different types of assessments, alternative teaching methods, or specific support tailored to their strengths and needs. The Act also encourages stronger partnerships between schools, families, and support services, which can make interventions more effective and timelier.

Finally, the ALN Act highlights the broader stakes of educational reform. Changes to policy do not just affect individual students; they influence teacher workload, school organisation, and the wider education system. If implemented successfully, the Act can reduce inequalities, support social mobility, and help learners reach their potential. If it fails, however, students may continue to face barriers, teachers may become frustrated, and the system may struggle to meet its goals. This balance makes the Act a significant and contested policy in Welsh education.

In conclusion, the ALN Act 2018 is important because it reshapes the way support is delivered in schools, strengthens inclusion, and gives learners a real voice in their education. Its influence goes beyond classrooms, affecting teachers, families, communities, and the values embedded in Welsh education. By putting inclusion, equity, and personalised support at the centre, the Act has the potential to create lasting positive impacts—but only if schools, policymakers, and communities work together to implement it effectively (Cullen & Rees, 2019; Evans, 2020).

(Welsh Government, 2018; Lloyd, 2020; Cullen & Rees, 2019; Evans, 2020)

Critical reflection

- The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Act 2018 sets out ambitious goals but turning them into real change is not straightforward. The law shows a strong commitment to inclusion, fairness, and personalised support. Students now have a say in their learning, and support is meant to match their individual needs rather than forcing everyone down the same path (Welsh Government, 2018; Lloyd, 2020). For learners who struggled under the old SEN system, this can boost confidence, engagement, and outcomes.
- Teachers face challenges implementing the Act. While it gives them more tools to help students, it also adds extra work. Planning, monitoring progress, and working closely with families takes time, and many teachers feel they are not fully prepared or are already overworked (Evans, 2020). The success of the Act depends on enough funding, training, and consistent implementation across schools. Without these, policy goals risk remaining ideas on paper rather than improving learning.
- The Act highlights a tension between ideals and practice. It prioritises rights, wellbeing, and inclusion, which are very important, but without practical support these aims can be hard to achieve. Education is not just about exams or checklists—it reflects values, fairness, and preparing young people for life beyond school (Cullen & Rees, 2019).
- Overall, the ALN Act 2018 is a major step for Welsh education. It changes how support is delivered, strengthens fairness, and puts inclusion at the centre. At the same time, it shows how difficult reform can be, revealing the gap between government plans and classroom realities. Continuous evaluation and adjustments are needed to make sure the Act truly benefits the students it was designed to help.

(Welsh Government, 2018; Lloyd, 2020; Evans, 2020; Cullen & Rees, 2019)

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