

ECCH7004

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Learning for life: a critical analysis of the evidence for which education in Wales prepares children and young people for a good life in a rapidly changing global context.

This assignment will critically analyse the evidence for the extent to which educational provision in Wales prepares its children and young people for a good life, in a world that is changing rapidly. It will be necessary to explore and discuss various issues and to look at current Welsh Government policy on globalisation and education.. The first section of the title is related to learning for life and part of this assignment will look at what the theory and evidence for this suggests, in the Welsh context, and whether the Welsh Government's aims and objectives are being successfully worked out and modeled in practice. The Welsh Government has proposed a new curriculum in their National Mission policy, and this is in line with Professor Donaldson's 2015 report "Successful Futures", and his recommendations. The writer will look in depth at these new proposed changes and whether they have the potential to change the tide.

In order to explore the preparatory aspect that education in Wales offers children and young people, it may be beneficial to explore what a global context is, and what this could include. In 2015, the Welsh Government produced a globalisation agenda titled 'Wales in the World'. This document set out several steps that the Welsh Government had intended to take in order to ensure that Wales had a "strong footprint in the world" (Welsh Government, 2015, p.6). The document acknowledged some of the challenges faced by the Welsh economy, and this is due in part to several industries moving abroad for cheaper labour and lower production costs, as well as an increasingly competitive global market (Welsh Government, 2015). These are issues which in turn could have an affect on not just the way that education is delivered in Wales, and its relevance to this changing, global economy, but also the curriculum. There are a number of reasons why the current education model should be questioned in light of some of the economic issues mentioned; namely that part of the role of education is to prepare children and young people with the skills needed for the world of work, and to aid children and young people to achieve better outcomes and to become contributors to the economy.

Arguably, if the curriculum itself, and also the nature and mode of the delivery of this existing curriculum has remained unchanged since the inception of the 1988 National Curriculum, then it is quite evident that it is not fit for purpose. This is due to the fact that the economy has changed, as stated above, the global market is competitive and changing, then surely education should adapt to reflect these changes. The current curriculum is at odds with real life in many aspects. For example, children and young people learn pythagoras' theorem and algebra. This is fine, if you want to be an architect. However, how does this knowledge prepare a young person for leaving school? What about “useful”, practical mathematics in the context of real life situations? It could be strongly argued that children and young people should be learning skills like how to set up a business plan, how to budget or run a successful company, how to apply for a mortgage, household budgeting, how to complete a self assessment tax return, VAT, even more practical everyday tasks such as how to write a cheque or set up direct debits.

Essentially, the main argument this paper is trying to make is that our Welsh system is currently preparing our children and young people for a non-existent economy, and potentially, jeopardise positive life outcomes. Why louder alarm bells are not ringing in Cardiff Bay is somewhat worrying, as the Welsh Government has set this agenda in the first instance and if the curriculum does not evolve to meet the rapid changes, then this is potentially setting children and young people up to fail. This need for change is also echoed in the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015), where again, the Government are cited as stating that Wales should become more globally responsible, (Welsh Government, 2015).

There seems to be a tension between the need to change trajectory in order to keep up with the global economy, and the slow moving educational ship that seems to be stuck in a rut so to speak. As recent as 2019, the Welsh Government revised their 2015 agenda with another document; the International Strategy: draft for consultation, (Welsh Government, 2019). In it they are quoted as saying: “In 2015 the Welsh Government published its international agenda: Wales in the World. Since then, the international landscape has changed dramatically creating the need for a new refocused strategy that sets out an international vision for Wales”, (Welsh Government, 2019, p.3). They clearly state their acknowledgement of the dramatically changing international context and the need to refocus. Again, the focus is how

does education prepare children and young people for this ‘dramatically’ different landscape, and the question is whether this will put them in good stead to achieve a good life.

The Welsh Government (2019) acknowledged in their international agenda that Brexit has created an uncertainty around Wales’ economic place in the world. However, it is vital to look at what the economic landscape in Wales was prior to Brexit. Ifan et al. (2019), researchers at Cardiff University, found that the dominant sector in Wales is the tertiary sector (service sector), with Wales coming in at 10th out of 12 within the UK for GDP and that the economic output for Wales is lower than any other area in the UK. The Welsh Government (2019) have chosen to focus on three Welsh industries in particular; cyber security, compound semiconductors and the creative industries (television and film). The focus on these three industries alone seems rather limiting; Wales could do more to develop their other potentially lucrative industries including agriculture and forestry, tourism and hospitality, amongst other sectors. There is the risk that by only focusing on these three aforementioned sectors, that young people who have an interest in other sectors may miss out on opportunities. Wales has the worst revenue per person of the whole United Kingdom, and the major cause of this was lower revenues collected from taxes (Ifan et al. 2019). It could be concluded from the evidence discussed that the reason for the poor revenue produced by Wales is that there are far less employment opportunities in Wales.

The Welsh Government’s international agenda as of 2019, and in light of Brexit, was threefold: to raise Wales’ international profile, to encourage inward investment, and to highlight to the world that Wales is a globally responsible nation. There are several issues with these three goals.

The first goal, to raise the profile of Wales internationally, is problematic due to its seemingly narrow focus on technology, and technologically based companies. This eliminates budding entrepreneurs and businesses from other sectors, and could actually prove detrimental.

Another issue with this goal is the fact that many grant funders, and in particular, local authority grants, are offered on the proviso that these small businesses can provide local employment, but there is an over emphasis on the Welsh language, (Carmarthenshire Council, 2019).

This insistence on the Welsh language is at odds with the globalisation agenda, especially as English is the lingua franca of the world. Secondly, many start up businesses may not be at a stage to provide employment in the early days of their business start ups, and to put such a stringent expectation on small businesses, who are essential to the economy in Wales (especially in light of the low revenue and GDP in Wales), and because of this, small businesses and entrepreneurs should be encouraged.

The second goal, to increase exports from Wales and to encourage inward investment is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the policy document does not state or explain how the Welsh Government will aim to deliver this in detail. There seems to be narrative, but no detail. For example, the language used is rather “fluffy”, and nondescript, with terms such as, “focus efforts”, “deliver our aims”, “work together”, “proactive responses”, etc. Yes, it is necessary for the Welsh Government to work cohesively with other departments within the UK and government, and also with other nations. However, the lack of detailed action on how they will accomplish this goal is vague. A common theme throughout Welsh policy documentation is that it appears as though the perception of reality is more important than the reality. There is much objective language about subjective issues. This can be likened to saying a lot, without saying much at all. Many words, without conveying meaning or point. Perhaps the Welsh Government wants to be seen to be working in a globalised way.

The Welsh Government statement that it intends to increase exports and inward investment is rather difficult to achieve because as already stated, Wales has the worst revenue of all the UK nations; this alone would make inward investment unlikely. Again, the narrow emphasis on the development of only three sectors could limit any potentially interested stakeholders. Going back to the above point, that the tertiary sector is the dominant sector in Wales; this sector is not known for its exports. Changing the dominant sector might help to increase exports.

Another issue with this goal is that manufacturing has largely gone abroad; another point made previously in this assignment. How could Wales possibly export products it no longer makes? How could Wales increase exports when manufacturing is very limited? How can exports be increased when the Welsh Government has narrowed their focus on only three sectors? These are questions which are at odds with the Welsh Government’s policy.

The Welsh Government's third goal; to highlight to the world that Wales is a globally responsible nation also has its flaws. This idea of being globally responsible is also a feature in the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015). Again, the language is vague; there are evasive descriptions of what needs to be done to ensure Wales becomes globally responsible, but no practical details of how they will deliver these aims and how they will be worked out. For example, part of the Act states that its goal is to ensure that Welsh communities provide a welcome to all; and that they should contribute to cultural and social well-being. This is great, but it does not state how they will achieve this. It is good to welcome people who are from different cultures into our nation, and it is admirable to promote this. However, it is at odds with the Welsh language policy. For example, children from a Syrian refugee family would find it pretty difficult to settle in a Welsh language community school, particularly in light of some of the Welsh Government's language agendas. This is due to two of the Welsh Government's policies; Cymraeg 2050 (2017), and the Welsh in Education Action Plan (2017). The aim of these policies is essentially to transform the language delivery of education in Wales to be wholly Welsh medium, in order to accomplish their goal of a million Welsh speakers by 2050. Could these policies conflict with this globalisation agenda? Potentially:

"The purpose of Welsh in education: Action plan 2017–21 is to set out our direction for the development of compulsory Welsh-medium and Welsh language education over the next four years, in line with the vision of Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers", (Welsh Government, 2017, p.4), and again, they quote The Well-being of Future Generations Act as part inspiration: "The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 aims to ensure that public bodies think about long-term strategy and planning. One of the seven goals is a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language, and one of the indicators is the percentage of people who can speak Welsh", (Welsh Government, 2017, p.6). Inclusive of other cultures, and yet promoting a nationalistic agenda? Seems rather contradictory.

Part of the Welsh Government's ideology around global responsibility speaks of ethical procurement of goods and services, including encouraging fair trade. As extreme a situation as this may sound, modern slavery is on the increase in Wales (South Wales Police, 2017). Steven Chapman, the Welsh Government's anti-slavery co-ordinator has stated that modern

slavery is alive in Wales, (Chapman, 2017). This truth is at odds with the ethics of fair procurement and equal opportunities. The Welsh Government's intent is to deal fairly and ethically with other nations around the world, but back home, there are severe ethical contraventions issues in our seeming democracy.

Welsh Government describes Wales' economic situation in its current form as being full of creators, entrepreneurs and leaders, with a wealth of ideas and dreams. Its policy also states that it wants to showcase the 'modern' and 'dynamic' economy, (Welsh Government, 2019). Wales has transformed from being an economy which is largely public sector based, and is now dominated by private, public and third sector enterprises (Welsh Government, 2019). According to the European Commission (2019), Wales accounts for only 3.4% of the total UK GDP, and it is therefore classed as an economic underperformer according to Eurostat (2019).

Eurostat attributes this underperformance to low rates of employment, and low average rates of wages. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, Welsh economy was dominated by heavy industries such as coal mining, manufacturing in the traditional sense, oil refineries, and agriculture (European Commission, 2019). This evidence is not reflecting the "good life" that many parents and carers want for their children and young people. Currently the future holds low wages, low GDP, and a narrow focus on industries. Many business grants for start ups in only Welsh language projects limits anyone from outside nations or cultures coming in to Wales to start up businesses, and this only serves to peddle nationalistic prejudices and in theory, Wales is spiting itself. Wales could lose many of its young people to other nations.

With the economic landscape picture painted, and the overall economic output of Wales explored in comparison with Welsh globalisation policy, it's vital to look at how this relates to education, and what a good life could look like for our children and young people.

In June 2019, the Welsh Government held a public consultation with the Welsh public in order to ascertain what was felt nationally about its intended changes to education. Part of the Welsh Government's aims and objectives in developing this new education system was to raise standards, to deliver an improved system that inspires public confidence and national pride, and a system that reduces the attainment gap, (Welsh Government, 2017).

The OECD found that education in Wales was in need of vast improvement, in particular after disappointing PISA scores in 2009, (OECD, 2014). The Welsh Government invited OECD to review their schools system after these disappointing scores, which were significantly below average. The OECD made several recommendations including: schools must ensure that they meet the learning needs of all learners, that schools need to build upon their professional capital, a more coherent assessment and evaluation framework needed to be developed which promotes the involvement of children and young people, and that schools need to develop a long term strategy in education which is built upon core priorities, (OECD, 2014).

The Welsh Government learned from these disappointments, and Professor Graham Donaldson conducted a review of the curriculum in 2015, and advised on a new curriculum structure. Following on from these reviews, the Welsh Government proposed a new curriculum and assessment framework.

During the public consultation process, it became clear that the public did not agree with the Welsh Government's proposals, although they did not make much noise in the media about the public's disagreement. Question one of the consultation was "Do you agree with our approach to legislating for the new curriculum structure?"; 64.3% said no, whilst 20.8% said yes, and 19.9% stated that they did not know. Another question which stands out in the consultation is question five: "Do you agree that age appropriate careers education and work-related education should cover the age range 3-16, in line with the AoLEs?" Those who answered yes were 36.7%, those who answered no were 46.9%, and those who answered did not know were 16.4%. One respondent stated that they do not feel that in a child's formative years that they would have knowledge of future careers and so to have this as a mandatory part of education would be inappropriate as children have no concept of careers or their broader context when they are very young (Welsh Government, 2019).

The most controversial aspect of the Welsh Government's new proposals to education is to make relationships and sex education (RSE), along with religious education and collective worship compulsory; meaning that parents would not be entitled to request to have their children removed from such lessons or activities. Question six respondents highlighted this controversy: "Do you agree with making age and developmentally appropriate RSE

compulsory for 3-16 years?”. The overwhelming majority, 87.5% stated no, 10.2% stated yes and only 2.3% stated they did not know.

In spite of this, the Welsh Government has now made this law in Wales from January 2020, (Welsh Government, 2020, BBC, 2020). Parents do not have the right to remove their children from RSE or religious education. For example, a Christian child might be forced to take part in an Islamic religious ritual, or vice versa, and three year olds might be taught about gender fluidity against their parents consent or before parents feel their children are ready for this information. The Welsh Government has not listened to the people they are meant to serve. This is not just an insult to people of faith, who wish to raise their children with faith, but also to those without faith and to humanists. The right to withdraw from these lessons or from collective worship assemblies seems to be at odds with the cohesive, inclusive and globalised way of thinking that the Welsh Government seems to be keen to perpetuate. Parents are being denied their right to parent their own children, and it is almost insulting that in essence, parents have had to hand over their children to the government without the right to withdraw. Forcing this on children and young people, and their parents, is not beneficial. It is a direct contradiction of freedoms. In doing this the Welsh Government has also severely undermined parents’ role, and have basically stated to parents that they know better with regards to certain matters of health and well-being. This is a divisive strategy, and it is in direct conflict with Welsh parents. This does not facilitate or promote that good life which most people would want for their children and young people. If the government is at odds with parents on such elementary matters, how can both groups work together well? The government cannot expect parents to support their decision if they directly ignore parents’ objections during the consultation process. The questions in the consultation process were rather rhetorical then.

Arguably, the consultation process is no more than a facade, much like some of their other policies. This does not prepare children and young people for a good life; inefficient and even ineffective co-working and collaborating with parents could potentially damage and jeopardise positive outcomes. To ignore parents concerns is a blatant betrayal and only seeks to further damage parent and government relations.

The new curriculum will come into effect in 2022, and according to the Welsh Government, it is needed in order to better equip children to succeed in a fast changing world. The National Mission document which outlines the proposed changes talks of children becoming more adaptable and learning new skills which will support them in employment. (Welsh Government, 2017). The new policy has highlighted that employers have identified skills gaps, and part of the new curriculum will be the development of these skills, and outlines what they call, the four purposes: 1) Children should be capable and ambitious learners who remain active learners throughout their lifetime, 2) Children should become creative and effective contributors, 3) They should grow and develop to become confident and healthy individuals, 4) Children should become informed and ethical citizens, (Welsh Government, 2017, Donaldson, 2015).

The four purposes clearly support the good life mentioned in the title of this assignment. If Welsh education can successfully incorporate these aspects into practice, then this would be of benefit to our children and young people. The new curriculum will include the following subjects: science and technology, mathematics and numeracy, languages, literacy and communication, humanities, health and well-being, and the expressive arts, (Welsh Government, 2017). It is most encouraging to see health and well-being as a subject in its own right, far too often mathematics and other “core” subjects have taken the place of this fundamentally important topic. It is good to learn to count, but if a person does not have good well-being, then maths will be of no use. It does seem that the curriculum subjects have been packaged slightly differently. However, it would be a travesty to continue in the same vein as before. In essence, it is hoped that this new curriculum will not be the same product but with a different label.

If the new curriculum is successfully implemented, then it does have the potential to offer children and young people a varied and wide experience of different subjects, and could also offer greater opportunities for learning. As stated previously in this assignment, the current model has not changed to reflect the diversified and evolved economy that currently exists in Wales and it is outdated. The new curriculum has the potential to change the stalemate; but only if the powers at be in schools and in government can get it right.

Donaldson (2015, 2019) has stated that the curriculum in Wales needed to be changed from a coverage based curriculum to a purpose based one. The curriculum needs to have purpose. He also states that having purposes helps teachers and education staff to discover what really matters and to only include this in the curriculum. Purposes also help to shape the curriculum and education by defining what it is schools are trying to achieve. This is important, particularly as it does somewhat address the fact that the old curriculum has remained unchanged for over three decades when the world has clearly moved on. Donaldson has also stated it is vital to whittle out some of the content that is irrelevant and that this is imperative because it is easy for curriculums to become overloaded. The curriculum must include creative and imaginative pedagogies without the punctuation marks of key stages. Donaldson continues to argue further that the current assessment methods are based upon judgement and verdict; the young person or child is judged as to whether they have hit the mark or not, and this is not always beneficial to the individual. The new curriculum's assessment methods are based on a learning pathway approach to assessment; the teacher and child or young person working together to see where the child is on their learning journey, and what can be done to support them to progress (Donaldson, 2019, Donaldson, 2015). These are good points; the old way of assessment could be seen as a way of working which looks at the child's deficit, rather than from a strengths based viewpoint. The new way of assessment certainly seems more holistic and offers a collaboration between teacher and child,

The question in the title asked whether education prepares children and young people for a good life, in the context of a rapidly changing global context. It is worth discussing what is meant by the term a 'good life'. A good life could be seen as having a good standard of living, or accomplishing certain achievements and goals in life. The Merriman-Webster dictionary defines a good life as a life which is marked by a high standard of living, (Merriman-Webster, Nd). These are fair and rather accurate definitions, however, they are subjective. What one person might deem as a good and high standard of living may not be the same for another person. It would be fair to suggest that there are basic elements of what a good life could consist of; enough food, a warm house, economic security, loving relationships, and good health. However, a person could have all of these boxes ticked, and still feel unfulfilled in life or feel that something is missing. It might be unfulfilled aspirations

or dreams, mental health issues, health ailments; there are many variables. People have different and individual goals and dreams.

The UNCRC (1989) stipulates certain rights which are specific to children and young people, and are recognised by the international community. These rights are to be protected in order for children and young people to have better outcomes and a good life. It explains what must happen at local and national levels to ensure that governments must do what they can to promote children's rights. Children should be respected, realised, and protected. Those who have responsibilities to help realise children and young people's rights include not only those in government, but also social workers, teachers, educators, parents and health professionals. Schools and education departments have a responsibility to ensure children are included in decisions which affect them; and the new way of assessment and learning is certainly a more child focused way of working. Children are active participants in society and their families, and the promotion of children's rights aids and supports better outcomes for children and young people, in particular, the attainment of a good life.

Governments, schools, the media and all adults should help them with this. The Convention also confirms that children are active participants in the lives of their families, communities and society, so governments and adults must create opportunities for children to play a role in the realisation of their rights, (UNCRC, 1989).

The UNCRC is also supported by the UK Government green paper, Every Child Matters (2003), which was published in 2003 after Lord Laming's report into the death of Victoria Climbié. The Every Child Matters framework pre-empted the Children Act (2004), and it covers five outcomes which all practitioners working with children and young people should work towards to ensure they achieve a good life. These are: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, achieve economic well-being, (UK Government, 2003).

It could be argued that the current, and soon to be old, curriculum in Wales may hamper the outcomes in the Every Child Matters framework, in particular the last three; to enjoy and achieve, to make positive contributions, and to achieve economic well-being. It is clear that currently, Wales is performing poorly in terms of economic output, which may hinder the last outcome from being realised, particularly in the rapidly changing global context.

The new proposed curriculum changes could hinder the third outcome, to enjoy and achieve, due to the fact that parents opposed the legislation of it. The Welsh Government might want to rethink making parents their enemies. The government being at odds with those whom they wish to support their new curriculum could jeopardise children and young people's likelihood of enjoying and achieving in life and from making positive contributions.

Particularly if aspects of the curriculum are being forced on them without the freedom of choice. This could be in direct conflict with the UNCRC's second, twelfth and fourteenth articles; Article 2: the UNCRC applies to every individual, regardless of social position, wealth, race, sex, nationality and religion (this means that the right to withdraw on these grounds should be respected).

Article 12: Governments must ensure that children and young people have the rights to freely express their opinions and views. This also means that children and young people have the right to be heard in administrative and legal matters that have an effect on them. Interestingly, the writer found no evidence of children having been consulted with on the new curriculum or during the consultation process.

Article 14: Children and young people have the right to freedom of religion and thought, and for the government to show respect to parental guidance. This article is a strong case against the Welsh Government's unethical determination to legislate a new curriculum against the parents wishes, and also that parents have no right to withdraw their children from collective worship and RSE.

In conclusion, on the one hand, the new curriculum could be seen as a welcomed breath of fresh air from the old, outdated and potentially archaic National Curriculum from thirty years ago. However, its inception is controversial, because it not only defied parents opinions and wishes in the consultation process, but also in its removal of parental, child and young person consent to withdraw from relationships and sexual education and religious education and collective worship. This is most definitely a contravention of the UNCRC.

The four purposes give the new curriculum better focus, because it gives the curriculum a definite journey pathway, and it's holistic and collaborative assessment methods between teacher and child give the child a voice, and take into account the individuality of each child and young person. This is a definite improvement on the judgement and verdict style of assessment currently in use. The purposes also help the child and young person identify what

they want to achieve as individuals, and the new subjects offer children the opportunity to learn the skills needed for a changing world. The recognition of health and well-being as a subject is a milestone; this is definitely a more holistic aspect to the curriculum. Children and young people are worth more, and have more to offer than simply what knowledge they can learn by rote learning and regurgitate onto a test paper.

The new curriculum changes are controversial, however it is evident that the old curriculum was not preparing children and young people adequately enough, and according to the Welsh Government (2017), many young people were entering the workforce without the necessary employability skills needed for a rapidly changing global context.

It could be argued that there are positives and negatives to both sides of the argument. What is evident is that Wales has some way to go before it could be a greater GDP contributor, however, the Welsh Government are working to make things better, and are trying to make the right changes, however many mistakes they might make along the way.

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