

A crisis in Welsh Education?

New approaches in harsh times

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Abstract: *Since 1999 it was the view that parliamentary devolution had enabled Welsh Governments to pursue a wide range of imaginative policies across the whole gamut of educational provision. More recently, however, the focus of political discourse has shifted to the perceived failures of Welsh schools. This 'crisis of Welsh education' has provided the basis for the introduction of new policy approaches. However, in this article, Gareth Rees argues that a more nuanced analysis of Welsh educational attainment suggests that policies aimed at addressing educational inequality may be more appropriate.*

Something peculiar seems to have happened to education in Wales. Not long ago, there was widespread consensus, at least within Wales, that parliamentary devolution since 1999 had allowed successive Welsh Governments¹ to develop imaginative policies across the whole range of educational provision, from early years to the universities. Certainly, it is true that Welsh Governments have pursued distinctive priorities, building on the national educational strategy set out in 2001 (National Assembly for Wales, 2001). Only some aspects of this system have been widely remarked upon outside, such as the abolition of 'league tables' and subsequently key stage testing (Davies, 2011).

¹ Until 2011, the executive within the Welsh system of governance was known as the Welsh Assembly Government. It has now been re-designated the Welsh Government. For simplicity's sake, I shall use 'Welsh Government' throughout.

However, in reality, it is reflected across all the phases of education: from Flying Start and the Foundation Phase for early years; to a commitment to non-selective, 'community-based' comprehensive schools at the secondary level; new curriculum provision for 14-19-year-olds through the Learning Pathways and the Welsh Baccalaureate; and, most recently, innovative provision for the organisation and funding of higher education (for example, Rees, 2007). Moreover, these policies have been celebrated not merely because they were distinctive from those in other parts of the UK, but rather because they were seen to be tailored specifically to the needs and aspirations of Welsh citizens.

More recently, however, popular perception has shifted dramatically. Now, the emphasis is on the 'failure' of Welsh schools – and increasingly other educational institutions – to provide adequate educational opportunities for Welsh children and young people. Political discourse – supported by the views of some academic commentators – has come to be dominated by the argument that educational attainment in Wales is not reaching appropriate

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standards, to the detriment of individuals' prospects, as well as those of the Welsh economy more widely. This perceived 'crisis in Welsh education' has been further amplified in media reports, which have been very ready to highlight what are seen as the shortcomings of educational provision in Wales.

It seems unlikely that this change in the terms of the public debate reflects actual changes in educational provision or even in educational attainment. Indeed, levels of attainment have been rising year-on-year. What has happened is that political priorities in relation to education have shifted. The emphasis now – and rightly so – is on what the post-devolution education system is actually delivering to Wales. Perhaps the key to this shift has been the appointment of a new Minister for Education and Skills (as he now is), Leighton Andrews. Since assuming office in 2009 and being re-appointed following the 2011 Welsh Assembly Election, he has focused attention on what he sees to be the relatively poor levels of educational attainment in Welsh schools and the need to bring about improvements

across the school system as a whole. Most notably, in a much quoted speech in February 2011, he set out a 20 point programme of policy change; and has returned to this subsequently to provide reports on progress towards achieving his 20 points (Andrews, 2011a and 2011b).

In what follows, I attempt to assess the nature and likely impact of these new policy directions in Wales. I shall argue that their effects may well be less significant than is hoped. Perhaps more fundamentally, it will be shown that a more nuanced analysis of the character of Welsh educational performance suggests alternative policy approaches may be more appropriate.

Current approaches to schools policy in Wales

It is clear from the Minister's public pronouncements, as well as the academics whose influence he acknowledges, that these new approaches in Wales are based much more strongly than hitherto on the conventional wisdom of 'school effectiveness' and 'school improvement'. Hence, the Minister's 20 point policy programme is focused around a number of key themes, which have become familiar over some considerable time through the relevant literatures and the practices that have been developed from this research and analysis (for an interesting take on this see Reynolds, 2008).

There is thus a strong emphasis on ensuring that all schools share the 'best practice' that is currently undertaken only by some, with 'professional learning communities' and 'families of schools' providing important mechanisms through which such practice can be transmitted and monitored. Moreover, there is to be a statutory basis for guidance on school improvement, emphasising 'high reliability teaching practices'. Teachers themselves are seen to be central to enhancing educational attainment, with new approaches planned for initial teacher training, teacher induction and CPD. There is to be more systematic monitoring of pupil progress, through the more effective collection and utilisation of data; and the implementation of data strategies by schools is to be evaluated through Estyn inspections. The key responsibilities of governors in ensuring that their schools are effectively led and managed are to be highlighted. And there is to be a renewed emphasis on the centrality of children's literacy and numeracy to their wider educational development, with national plans for these basic skills, including the adoption of standard testing procedures.

Put in these somewhat abstract and general terms, it may well be that for most observers there is little to object to here. However, translating these rather high-level principles into the everyday practices of schools may prove more challenging than is being suggested. Arousing greater controversy, however, are some of the other key themes within the Minister's programme.

First, and most controversial, is the introduction of a grading system for schools' performance, with each school to be allocated annually to one of five

bands, on the basis of its attainment levels in the context of the socio-economic characteristics of its pupils (Welsh Government, 2011). Not surprisingly, a frequently expressed concern has been that this amounts to the re-introduction of 'league tables', thereby undermining a central element of the distinctive Welsh system of educational provision that has been developed since 1999. Again not surprisingly, the Minister himself has been at pains to argue that this is not the case; the banding system is not intended to provide the basis for the 'naming and shaming' of individual schools, he argues. Rather, it is intended to provide local authorities and consortia of local authorities with the sorts of information that will permit – in conjunction with the School Standards Unit – the identification of where and how support can best be channelled to improve performance.

Exactly how this will work out remains to be seen. However, it does seem extremely unlikely that there will be any marked shift to more 'marketised' forms of allocating pupils to schools in Wales. Although Welsh schools do operate 'open enrolment' systems, there remains a deeply embedded commitment to 'community-based' primary and comprehensive schools, which are seen to serve the interests primarily of their local catchment areas; and this is especially the case outside of the major urban areas and Cardiff, in particular.

Second, there is the question of how far the new policy approaches imply a strengthening of the power of central government control, at the expense of local authorities and of schools themselves. A Schools Standards Unit has been established within the Ministry for Education and Skills, to oversee and to monitor the implementation of essential aspects of the 20-point programme. Considerable significance has also been attached to Estyn's new Common Inspection Framework, whose adoption has coincided with the identification of more problems in schools and, indeed, in local authorities than was the case hitherto. However, it is instructive that the local authorities are seen to have a central role in the implementation of the new banding system. This suggests that there are seen to be clear limits on the extent to which control over the new policy initiatives are to be concentrated in the hands of central government (in sharp contrast to the situation in other parts of the UK and England especially).

In fact, much more pertinent to understanding the likely future role of local authorities in Wales is the question of finance. The coming period will pose especially acute problems of implementation that arise from the wider economic stringencies that the Welsh Government will face. At root, this extremely difficult financial situation reflects the policies adopted by the Coalition Government in Westminster. However, within the parameters set by the overall allocation of funds through the Block Grant, the Welsh Government will also face extremely difficult choices. Even before the Assembly Election, the Minister had acknowledged the importance of this

issue in his emphasis on shifting funding from administrative functions to the 'front-line' of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, despite this extremely astute 'pre-emptive strike', funding is set to be a continuing source of conflict and dispute over the coming years, as the full effects of the Westminster Government's policies bite. Moreover, the impacts of intensifying competition for increasingly scarce resources will be felt not only in schools (and their local authorities), but also in further education colleges and universities.

In summary, therefore, the new approaches to schools' policy that the Minister, Leighton Andrews, is introducing will necessarily operate in extremely difficult financial circumstances. And it may well be that it will be the effects of the latter that will be felt most acutely in Welsh schools.

Understanding educational attainment in Wales

There are also important questions to be posed about the characterisation of Welsh educational performance on which the new policy approaches are based. In this context, it is instructive that the bench-marks against which Welsh educational performance have been judged are *external* ones, in particular the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), measuring 15-year-olds' performance on tests in reading, mathematics and science.

Wales's results in the 2009 round of PISA have not only been roundly criticised in the British media, but have also been highlighted by the Minister. Indeed, in his speech in February 2011, it was PISA results which he held to demonstrate the need for a major overhaul of Welsh schools in particular (Andrews, 2011a). As in many other countries, the PISA results for Wales are argued to provide incontrovertible proof of educational failure and the need for fundamental change, irrespective of any local opposition.

It is undoubtedly the case that the PISA scores do tell an important story about the state of Welsh education. However, as with any measurement of educational attainment, the PISA scores have to be *interpreted* carefully. Certainly, the public debate in Wales gives no indication that there is a very substantial technical literature which is *critical* of the analytical approach on which PISA is based (for example, Hopmann and Brinek, 2007). This is not to argue that all the criticisms are correct, but rather to suggest that PISA results should not be seen as unambiguously definitive.

PISA's strength is in providing a *snap-shot* of educational attainment and its correlations with selected aspects of a national educational system. It can tell you that you probably have a problem, but – simply because of the kind of survey that it is – not what the causes are and, hence, not how to solve it. To address the latter requires exploring other sources of data and analysis. As Harvey Goldstein, one of the UK's most eminent statisticians of education, argues, rather than using PISA results to construct what are in

reality dubious league tables of educational performance, they should be seen “as a way of exploring country differences in terms of cultures, curricula and school organization.” (Goldstein, 2008: 7)

In the Welsh context, then, there can be no debate that educational performance could – and should – be much improved. However, the much remarked decline in PISA scores between 2006, when Wales first entered the Programme, and 2009 should not be taken to indicate an actual deterioration in the performance of Welsh schools. Given that each round of PISA assessment involves different groups of 15-year-olds, at least part of the rather small difference between the two measurement dates is attributable to differences between the two groups of pupils, especially as a larger number of schools and a wider cross-section of pupils agreed to participate in 2009.

Moreover, the PISA results need to be interpreted in the light of Wales’s very recent entry into the Programme. Unlike in most other countries, schools and their teachers have had little incentive to learn how to approach the PISA tests and, hence, to instruct their pupils how to do so. This will almost certainly change now that schools are being required to incorporate PISA into the assessment regime of Welsh secondary schools. But what will this really mean in terms of young people’s attainment and future prospects?

Public concern about Wales’s education system is entirely legitimate. However presently, the danger is that simplistic readings of PISA and other external bench-marking of Welsh educational performance are serving to close off debate, rather than to open up new avenues for educational development.

The crucial issue here is the extent of the ‘fit’ between what PISA requires and the GCSE curriculum. PISA seeks to measure qualities in pupils, especially capacities to interpret and apply information, which are different from those that are emphasised in GCSEs, where demonstrating the acquisition of knowledge is prioritised. And it is important to remember that it is on GCSE performance that schools have hitherto been judged and for which pupils actually acquire qualifications. Clearly, what this highlights is the need for serious debate about what the school curriculum in Wales *ought* to be aiming for; but this is a debate that is in danger of being pre-

empted because of the preoccupation with PISA. However, it is interesting that, more recently, Mr. Andrews has adopted a more nuanced position on Wales's performance in the PISA 'league tables' (see Evans, 2012).

The critics of Welsh education will, of course, point out that schools in Wales do not fare much better if GCSE performance is taken as the basis of comparison with other parts of the UK and, in particular, England. This sort of 'home international' analysis is useful, as it not only avoids many of the technical difficulties associated with PISA, but also depends on qualifications which schools, teachers and pupils undoubtedly take seriously. Indeed, this sort of evidence has been used to question the quality of Welsh schools and to criticise particular policies, such as the abolition of 'league tables' (Burgess *et al.*, 2010).

As in other parts of the UK, there has been a year-on-year improvement in Welsh GCSE attainment levels over the past decade (and more). However,

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since the early part of the present decade, there has been a progressive widening of the shortfall between Wales and England in terms of the standard measure of attainment at the minimum school-leaving age, the Level 2 Threshold. The latter is frequently described as the achievement of five A* to C grade GCSEs. In fact, its full definition is five A* to C grade GCSEs or equivalents; that is, the measure includes not only GCSEs, but also a wide range of vocational qualifications, the best known of which are BTECs. This detail is significant because if GCSEs *alone* are considered, then (on the basis of the Welsh Government's data) the proportion of young people in Wales achieving the Level 2 Threshold is almost exactly equivalent to that in England; 56 per cent in Wales compared with 56.3 per cent in England

in 2009/2010. The overall shortfall between Wales and England of some 12 percentage points, is wholly accounted for by the fact that more young people in England attain the Level 2 Threshold through vocational qualifications (cf. Wolf, 2010).

In the context of these data, the Welsh 'crisis of attainment' appears in a somewhat different light. On this evidence, it would appear that there is a problem of educational attainment in Wales. But it is a problem which relates very specifically to the provision of opportunities to pursue vocational qualifications. That this should be so is not entirely surprising. Historically – right back to the Intermediate Schools established in the 1890s – as access to secondary education has been widened, Welsh schools have been far more

effective in providing an academic curriculum than they have in making available opportunities to pursue vocational options (Rees and Istance, 1994). Currently, it may well be that the lower levels of funding that go to Welsh schools compared with those in England are accentuating difficulties here, as vocational provision is more expensive than the academic equivalent (Wolf, 2011).

This relative failure of vocational provision is likely to have the greatest impact on pupils from more educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, who are far less likely to be motivated by the academic curriculum. Indeed, it may be that this goes some way towards explaining the significant under-performance in Wales's PISA scores at the lower end of the attainment range that was recorded in 2006 and again in 2009. And, in this context, improving motivation through the imaginative development of vocational options may contribute significantly to the Welsh Government's objective of improving the basic reading and mathematical literacy of young people.

Conclusion

Public concern about Wales's education system is entirely legitimate. However presently, the danger is that simplistic readings of PISA and other external bench-marking of Welsh educational performance are serving to close off debate, rather than to open up new avenues for educational development.

As befits the broadly social democratic tenor of successive Welsh Governments, achieving a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities has consistently been emphasised as a means of creating a fairer distribution of life chances more widely. There have been persistent efforts to reduce the gaps in attainment between schools, where their catchment areas are broadly similar in social terms. Nevertheless, substantial challenges remain. Research by the Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (Davies, *et al.*, 2011) suggests that educational inequalities between social groups have probably been increasing in recent years. This is the greatest challenge that the Welsh Government faces. It indicates that, in addition to bench-marking levels of educational attainment, we should also be measuring the extent to which the Welsh education system is contributing to a more equitable and just society.

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