

'Make a U-turn Immediately' - The Satellite Navigation experience of Education Policy Reform in a Devolved Wales

Abstract

Education in Wales is changing, so says the body responsible for enacting educational policy reform within Wales. Since the devolution of law-making powers in 1999 from the United Kingdom Government to Wales, the Welsh education system has been reformed with the aim of delivering the best results for learners in Wales. The reform of educational policy in Wales has not been simple, easy or one-off events. This process has changed, reformed, and reshaped the policy framework that schools work within throughout the past two decades. At times, the reform appeared to reform previous reforms, without time for them to have been able to embed or affect any long-lasting change. As Wales works to implement the policy reform that is Curriculum for Wales 2022, this paper will seek to understand the landscape in which this reform sits by charting some of the policy changes of the devolution era. In the same period as the devolution of powers to Wales, there has been a revolution in driving. Satellite Navigation systems have had a reforming impact on drivers and this technological and driving reform provides a lens through which educational reform and the experience therein can be viewed. Just like the navigational devices, educational reforms have the potential to lead to one or two bumps in the road along the way and provides a context for discussion.

Key Words

Curriculum, Reform, Policy, Education, Wales, Navigation

Introduction

Education, the process, system, and delivery of teaching and learning, sits within the political sphere (Looney, 2001, p. 154). As an area of political policy it is suggested that the process of reform within educational policy is almost inevitable as it is shaped and characterised by the political agenda of the day (McTaggart, 1997).

With the devolution of constitutional powers as part of the creation of the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) through The Government of Wales Act in 1998, education and educational policies for the first time since the reform of the Victorian era became the responsibility of the Government of Wales for the people of Wales (Reynolds, 2008). Within Wales there are 1,553 schools of which 1,473 come under direct control of the Welsh Government (WG) (Gov.uk, 2021). In November 2021, there were 25,614 teachers in all schools across Wales, responsible for the learning and education of 484,579 young people (Gov.uk, 2021).

The organisation of this education in Wales currently falls within the remit of the now termed, Minister for Education and Welsh Language, the Labour and Co-operative member of the Senedd (Welsh parliament), Jeremy Miles who has been in post since May 2021. Wales, since devolution has continued to be led by a Labour led government. This stability in governing party could have allowed for a belief that there would be stability in the educational policy agenda. Nevertheless, Wales has been on

a journey of reform since devolution began in 1999 (Connolly, James, James Davies, & Barrance, 2018).

Since the devolution of law making powers over education to Wales from the United Kingdom Parliament in Westminster in 1999, there have been numerous policy changes, reviews and implementations affecting the various aspects of school life; from the legal overarching policy frameworks to the wider reaching curriculum reform. In fact, there have been over 950 policy publications in the last 20 years alone, a staggering average of one per week of each school year since powers were devolved (Welsh Government, 2021). It can be argued that none of these 950 publications and policies so far has been as wide ranging than the current reform of the curriculum.

The Journey of Educational Policy Reform in Wales

In the years that immediately followed the devolution of law-making powers to Wales, there was a period of change within the Welsh education system as it worked to establish its own policy narrative. The then titled National Assembly for Wales (NAfW), now Welsh Government, introduced the overview for its educational aims in a policy document entitled 'The Learning Country' in which policy reforms were outlined, designed to 'get the best for Wales' (The National Assembly for Wales, 2001, p. 2). This document suggested a planned roadmap of reform that could be charted over the coming first decade of the new millennium. The policy explicitly stated that although the Welsh Government shared the same aims as its English counterparts during the decade it would not be afraid to take a different, distinctive path for Wales – the seeds of which we are seeing continue today.

One of the policy changes outlined in this document was the implementation of the statutory Foundation Phase curriculum for all early year's learners from the age of three to seven. Based on global research, the Foundation Phase was largely founded on constructivist theories of the individual development of the child (Wainwright, 2021). The Foundation Phase was argued to be radical shift. It was a bottom up reform that was largely supported by the profession who believed that they had been supported, been provided with funding and given time to implement the reforms (Taylor, Rhys, & Waldron, 2016). It was a reform that was married with the removal of assessments for young people which meant that the system really was starting to suggest the purpose of education was the development of each child and not systematic accountability.

Evans (2021, p. 4.) has termed this initial period during the first decade of devolution as 'Phase One' of the policy reforms and noted that this was a period characterised (aside from the introduction of the Foundation Phase) by 'dropping' procedures rather than introducing them. It was in this period that it could be suggested that one of the most empirical examples of this decentralisation agenda was the removal of the Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) that in England were still required to complete. These reforms were largely welcomed by the profession, however, it was evident in research conducted at the time that it would take teachers time to embed this change and move to a new system of assessment (Murphy, Lundy, Emerson, & Kerr, 2012; Collins, Reiss, & Stobart, 2010). Teachers were already, even with a reform that was understood to be positive, being challenged in a system that felt it was beginning to over reform. Teachers were being entrusted with new freedoms to teach

and a new trust was emerging between the macro level of the Government and the classroom.

2009 has been argued to be a year of an irrevocable shift in the educational landscape of Wales with the publication of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (Andrews, 2014). The results of this global assessment of the standards of attainment for 15 year olds were damning. Wales's results were at best described as disappointing and at worst, a system in crisis (Connolly, James, James Davies, & Barrance, 2018). What followed from the then Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning, Labour Member of the Assembly, Leighton Andrews, was a twenty-point plan to reform education. His plan arguably reversed much of the work in the previous decade and put in place for example; annual testing of literacy and numeracy for all learners in Wales, the grading and categorisation of schools and a baseline assessment for pupils at the start of the Foundation Phase (Andrews, 2011). It is interesting to note that although some consider him to be a great reformer and not always viewed favourably by the profession, Andrews himself argues that he never set out to reform everything, in fact he wanted 'better implementation; fewer initiatives' (Andrews, 2014). It is for history and a far more comprehensive study than this to decide whether he was wholly successful in this aim. Regardless of whether teachers felt that the harsh tones and the reformist nature of Andrews work was personal, it could not be denied that, as the results showed, the performance of learners in Wales had declined (Evans G. , 2021; Mackie, 2013). What was to follow in the decade since the 2009 PISA results would be an even greater focus on reform and in fact reform at the very heart of the educational policy landscape – the curriculum itself.

In 2014, the Education Minister, Huw Lewis announced that an independent review of the Welsh curriculum would be undertaken by Professor Graham Donaldson, a world-renowned international expert in curriculum design (Lewis, Review of Assessment and the Curriculum, 2014). The subsequent report published in 2015, entitled *Successful Futures*, was the result and the acceptance of all 68 recommendations by the Welsh Government set Wales on the path of one of the greatest policy reforms in its very short history (Donaldson, 2015; Lewis, 2015). The Curriculum for Wales, to now be compulsory from 2022, was a radical departure from anything that had gone before. The change in traditional subject disciplines into combined Areas of Learning and Experience (AOLES) as well as a purpose driven, not outcome defined curriculum set the path for the decade that would follow (The Welsh Government, 2019).

In the years that followed, Wales would see its first Minister for Education not from the Labour Party in Kirsty Williams, the Liberal Democrat Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, who would embark on this curriculum reform journey. In what could be argued to be an about turn in reform, Kirsty Williams removed the data driven accountability that Leighton Andrews had implemented only a few years previously. Removed was the school categorisation system based on data and instead a focus on school self-evaluation was being implemented (Williams, 2017). Moreover, the National Assessments in Literacy and Numeracy would be replaced by personalised assessments for each learner (Williams, 2017). In this context it could be argued that education could often be viewed as just a political football and it is within this context that this paper places itself.

Discussion

The last twenty years has also seen the implementation of another reform – the emergence of Satellite Navigation – the use of which has grown rapidly (Axon, Speake, & Crawford, 2012). Axon, Speake, & Crawford, (2012) researched the impact that the implementation of Satellite Navigation systems had led to and the consequential experiences for the drivers using them. They found several clear unintended consequences of the technology. Firstly, the software being used was at times unable to identify the destination. Secondly, was the issue of the constant need to update the system if it was going to work effectively, something drivers were frustrated by. Thirdly, the pivotal role of the driver in using the system and the renegades who wanted to test it. Finally, they identified the potential for different experiences for different groups of users who all needed different support and instruction to use the technology to its fullest.

This paper will now turn to look at some of the perspectives of reform through these four findings to reflect the extent to which it could be argued that the experience of educational policy reform in Wales has mirrored the way that Satellite Navigation during the same period has reformed our driving.

Destination Unknown: Coherent or Incoherent Educational Policy Reform

The story of educational policy reform as outlined above in the last twenty years of a devolved Wales reads almost as a list of policy, upon policy, upon policy. It has been argued that the various policies in Wales and the multiple reforms that are conducted parallel to one another often lack consistency and coherence - that the destination is unknown (Knight & Crick, 2021).

An example to illustrate this lack of coherence and direction in educational policy reform sits within the implementation of the Foundation Phase and the subsequent drive towards academic improvement within Wales. Taylor et al. (2016) recognise this tension when highlighting the role of the implementation of Literacy and Numeracy Testing for pupils in Year 2. Within the principles of the Foundation Phase policy document as implemented in 2008, there was a recognition that each child would learn at a different pace and that it was learning that was developmentally appropriate that was important, not a standardised measure that children should conform to. This however did not correspond with the implementation of the Literacy and Numeracy tests where children were tested and then compared to their peers, producing data about where they were in relation to age related expectations (Taylor, Rhys, & Waldron, 2016). In this instance, the classroom teacher had been offered a suite of 'professional learning' that had developed a practice of observational ongoing assessment, specifically designed to put the child at the centre of the teaching, learning and assessment and move away from standardised measures, only to be told that they are in fact going to need to measure children and compare them for measures of Literacy and Numeracy. Some have argued that the Welsh Government would have to react to the PISA results, but the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) who administer the PISA assessments, recognised this conflict themselves when they noted that the aims of the foundation phase were to be real

world and practical and questioned the value of and the coherence of then using standardised testing (OECD, 2014).

It is too simplistic to see the suggested incoherence in policy reform as illuminated in this example in isolation. Education policy sits within an evolving landscape (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). The Welsh Government were reacting to what they argued was a 'crisis' in Welsh education and reform was required (Andrews, 2011).

It can be argued then that it is not necessarily the reforms themselves that are challenging for educators in the classroom or the public more widely to understand, but the technical and professional nature of them – people do not understand how the policy is meant to work (Viennet & Pont, 2017). Wales is embarking on a route and branch reform of the curriculum with the implementation of Curriculum for Wales 2022. The OECD, a partner of Welsh Government in this reform has noted on several occasions that if Wales is to make sustained progress and deliver education fit for the twenty first century, then the reforms to educational policy need to be manageable and coherent (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2014). The positive of this process is that, through the co-construction of this new curriculum, there has been a more recognised coherence. The OECD themselves state:

Wales has also invested in having a clear communication strategy that has brought coherence to the different policy components and clarity on the vision, establishing a strong basis for education professionals to make the “national mission” their own (OECD, 2020, p. 7).

If the OECD are correct in their current analysis, then it may be suggested that the reforms that are currently taking place in Wales could lead to greater success than the previous reforms.

The technology is only as good as the operator: The Impact of Reform on the Teacher

Just like the role of the driver following the instructions of the navigation device, an understanding of the importance of the role of and impact on those enacting the policies, namely teachers and educators, is prudent. It has been noted that in recent decades teachers have been arguing for their role within education as professionals to be heard and understood, they want some autonomy to do the job that they feel they have been 'trained to do' (Vonglais, 2004). Reform is critical to the work life of teachers and 'With its frequent policy promulgation and swift implementation, educational reform has become an integral part of teachers' work life' (Nai-Kwai Lo, Lai, & Wang, 2013, p. 242).

A survey of teachers attitudes towards reform conducted in 2016 by the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD) hub at Cardiff University, noted that the greatest issue for teachers in the classroom was the rapid, continual 'barrage of initiatives' (Grigg, 2016, p. 69). As these policies are subject to rapid change so are the teachers and the roles that they then perform. Grigg (2016) argues that it is the teachers that are responsible for the success or failure of the many policies that are being implemented and that it is this constant change that is causing the greatest challenge to system improvement in Wales.

The Curriculum for Wales 2022 implementation puts teachers at the heart of the reform of curriculum policy. The co-construction of the curriculum, with teachers writing the curriculum from the start, has been argued to be a positive factor in addressing some of the concerns noted by teachers about the policy reforms they have had to enact thus far. Hughes and Lewis (2020, p. 297), conducting research into the role of teachers within the current reform of the curriculum in Wales note that a proportion of teachers in their study felt as though this change is another initiative of many that may not be carried through to the conclusion. They also highlight the changing role of the teacher. In the last decade teachers have moved from delivering a curriculum based on skills into a period of curriculum authors (Hughes & Lewis, 2020). This is to be then followed by autonomous teachers, delivering and evaluating the curriculum structures and assessment arrangements that they have designed. It could be argued that without the support of and offer of a well structured, planned and funded professional learning programme, there will be huge challenges to this, the greatest of all reforms (Power, Newton, & Taylor, 2020; Hughes & Lewis, 2020).

System Requires Update: Reform Fatigue across the system

Through the educational policy reforms that have been documented in this paper so far, it could be argued that at all levels of the education system in Wales, from those writing policies to those enacting them, there may be some understanding of a feeling of 'not again'. As with the drivers being given a barrage of instruction and constant diversions, this reform could be one too many.

In education this constant reform of educational policy has been described as reform fatigue the consequences of which are best understood as the process through which:

'In the face of frequent change, workers become less able or to implement successive reforms as the continual effort to do so depletes their personal resources' (Lyle, Cunningham, & Gray, 2014, p. 45).

This educational policy reform fatigue can be evidenced as Lyle et al. (2014) argue from continuous reform, something that the last twenty years has seen in education policy in Wales – all 950 policy releases (Welsh Government, 2021) and it is against this backdrop that the profession is being asked to reform again. There has been a body of research that has investigated the impact of this 'reform fatigue' on the workforce and the teaching profession with a large body of research emanating from Australia where they too have recently undertaken major policy reforms within the field of education (Evans G. , 2014; Bernerth, Walker, & Harris, 2011; Bailey, 2000). The research suggests that this reform fatigue is to be found in curriculum reforms internationally and it is one of the elements that can impact the success or failure of such policy reforms (OECD, 2014). This growing body of international evidence highlights some of the potential threats to the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales in its current form. It is arguably vital that global reform lessons can be implemented as part of the narrative of reform within education in Wales (Chapman, 2020). Elving, Hansma, & De Boer, (2011) argue that including staff in the process of change as well as ensuring that staff understand the aims and goals of the reform that they are working to (that which has referred to as ensuring that leaders explain the 'why' (Sinek, 2017)), is one way to reduce fatigue as ownership allows for staff to see

the end goal. The OCED too makes it clear that for any reform to be a success, the pace of reform needs to be appropriate (OECD, 2014). Understanding the role of the pace of reform is critical in the context of the current curriculum reforms in Wales where there has been great debate about the timing of the roll out (Wilson, 2021).

It has been suggested that the system is already experiencing elements of reform fatigue – that the last twenty years of reform have taken their toll on the profession for some of whom Curriculum for Wales is simply another reform (Hughes & Lewis, 2020). It could be understood that this means there is a body of staff who believe that they have seen many reforms before and this is another in a long line and they are tired of the constant change of direction.

Reform or change fatigue as a potential ‘silent killer’ could be fatal to any future reforms in education unless its impact is acknowledged at all levels of the system (Lyle, Cunningham, & Gray, 2014, p. 59). Sng (2008) and their work on the Chinese reform of education, also argues that as enacting policy reforms is part of an organisational and institutional shift it is the role of the whole system to understand the impact that change has. It is intriguing though, that although this is known, the body of research as described often reflects the impact that reform fatigue may have on the schools, its leaders, teachers and students without reflecting the impact that it may have on the system and policy makers themselves. There is arguably a void in the research as to the impact of change on the system itself and those who write the policies and it must be questioned as to why. There are tentative moves into this area that have begun to reflect the gap between the policy writers as part of the civil service and the political masters that create the ‘innovation’. Those who write the policies may have experience of other reforms and may try to make new policies align, whereas the political voices are subject to more regular change (Hallsworth, Parker, & Rutter, 2011). Looking back at the earlier definition of reform fatigue it could be argued that if policy makers are being asked to change policies for the sake of the news headlines for politicians, then policy writers too may not perform to their best ability and as such policies that are written as a result, may be less effective. It is this system wide understanding of the impact of policy reform that is important so that those enacting the reformed policy appreciate the context in which it was written.

Where are the instructions? The role of professional learning on Reform.

All new technology is understood in different ways by different people. Some people adapt to new technology and in this analogy, new policy reforms, at different speeds. Adapting the work of the diffusion process, the way that people take on board new ideas and reforms, as outlined by (Rogers, 2003, p. 11) there are those who will immediately take on board all reform those who will wait until the last minute, then there is a continuum of those within the middle. The route to reform, just like the adoption of satellite navigation systems is not linear.

Welsh Government in 2019, outlined that the need for professional learning would be at the heart of the delivery of Curriculum for Wales 2022. They recognised that professional learning would be central to whether the implementation was a success (Welsh Government, 2019). The Welsh Government acknowledged in writing that teachers needed a well written manual to use the curriculum framework effectively

(Welsh Government, 2019). Evans (2021) too has argued that the need for coherent professional development, the de facto instruction manual to reform, is to be critical if this current policy reform is to be successful. However, Evans (2021) has reflected that there is a debate to be had as to whether this professional learning, or the manual, has been delivered well enough and suggests that this could lead to the potential failure of the policy reform. If the policy reform that is Curriculum for Wales 2022 is to be implemented effectively, this professional learning offer must be able to guide those using the framework about how to use it as it was originally envisaged.

Hughes and Lewis (2020) argue that if this implementation is to be successful that greater levels of professional learning are required and that the current guidance simply does not go far enough. If not improved they suggest that the problems of coherence – finding that destination and the misunderstood directions – will remain.

Conclusion

Summer journeys have for some become charted by the voice of the Satellite Navigation system. These navigation devices and their instructions are characterised by initial warnings before the inevitable authoritarian solution of 'make a u turn'. Instead of finding an alternative route, the go to instruction is to loop back to where the mistake happened. This paper has suggested that this experience of navigation systems could also define the context of educational policy reform in Wales. Instead of taking time to address the issue and find a new way, the solution of choice has been to implement another reform, to make a U-turn, to update again.

Educational policy reform has been one of the markers of the evolution of devolution of power in Wales in the last two decades. From its outset, the then National Assembly for Wales and the now Welsh Government, has sought to reform the education system in Wales, trying to set a destination without being afraid to make it distinct in order to ensure the aim of delivering the best education for the children of Wales (The National Assembly for Wales, 2001).

Being aware of the policy reform journey within education in Wales during the post devolution period and the lessons from other global contexts for policy reform in this sphere, is critical as Wales embarks on the greatest policy reform so far – creating, evaluating and implementing the Curriculum for Wales 2022 framework.

This policy reform, creating a purpose driven, progressive and balanced curriculum that will allow for all learners in Wales to reach a successful future remains 'The National Mission' of the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in Wales, even within the context of the COVID 19 pandemic.

The implementation of Curriculum for Wales 2022, is a reform of policy designed at its heart, to bring together all elements of the system into a long term education policy reform and set a direction that is structured to last and is flexible enough to self-reform as its users see fit (Donaldson, 2015, pp. 17,93). The reform of the Curriculum for Wales has the opportunity to ensure that the challenges of an over reformed system can begin to be laid to rest. That there is a clear destination plotted and a clear route mapped.

To deliver this pathway the system must ensure that this reform is successful, long lasting, supported by all stakeholders, given time to embed, accountable to the users and fit for purpose and that any diversions are communicated clearly and in plenty of time. Teachers and those implementing the reform need a clear manual. They need to know how the system works. Educators need time to be able to put the device aside, to use the traditional map reading skills they have, so they can navigate to the destination themselves.

These are not small challenges, but they are challenges that the entire system is going to have to work to achieve if our national mission is to be anything but a mission impossible.

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