

Welsh Education: what's occurring?

There was no golden age in Welsh education. Grammar Schools, while open to more pupils than in many parts of England, created failure in the second and third ten percent. Many children who passed the 11+ left with little or nothing to show for it. Those who went to Secondary Moderns were denied even the chance to fail. After the comprehensive reforms, in the '60's, attainment improved considerably. The 'tail', however, remained poorly done by. The number of Grammar Schools in Wales turned from advantage into disadvantage: ex Grammar School teachers for years afterwards bemoaning the fall in standards as they failed to get to grips with the new diverse intake. Things improved in the '80's. University departments and local authorities were big providers of in-service training. There were many advisory teachers. Teachers' centres existed and the Caerleon Convention was a model of in-service training. Teachers responded by participating in working groups to develop curriculum. There was an explosion of interest in practical approaches to individualised and integrated learning. Sadly the development in the late '80's of the Thatcherite National Curriculum largely killed off experimentation in favour of league tables and stereotyped Ofsted-led teaching by numbers.

Two steps forward

After devolution, education in Wales took a turn for the better. While Rhodri Morgan was First Minister and Jane Davidson, the Minister for Education, education in Wales diverged from that in England, in many ways to Wales's advantage. Examples include the abolition of testing at 7 and 11, the Foundation phase, 14-19 education, the absence of academies and free schools, the existence of an inclusive, cooperative, and comprehensive ideology and the Welsh baccalaureate. Other later advances included the retention of the Education Maintenance Allowance, reduced university tuition fees, breakfast clubs and nutritional standards in schools.

..... one and a half steps back.

However, after Rhodri stepped down, things took a turn for the worse. There was pressure to conform to the English Education system. The Welsh Government stood out for some things such as the commitment to comprehensive education. But it reacted to every criticism in the Local Press in particular over the PISA results. PISA stands for Programme for International Student Assessment. It is sponsored by the OECD and produces test results in reading, mathematics and scientific literacy, at age 15. Journalists and politicians are liable to attacks of "PISA shock", a condition caused by finding that one's own country is only mid league. The UK sample is not extensive enough to allow valid comparisons between England and Wales, although this does not stop journalists from doing so. There was a promise that there would be a limit on new initiatives. But it was unfulfilled. Welsh raw results were lower than England so it was said that 15 year olds should be schooled on the PISA tests. Predictably this failed to raise achievement.

Banding and colour coded categorisation

"Banding" in 2011 amounted to re-imposition of league tables. The local papers certainly thought so and published full details of every secondary school. The data was misleading. For example some schools in band 5, the lowest, were rated by Estyn as good and there was much instability from year to year. The banding figures were created by dividing schools into quartiles for 11 different aspects and then adding the data together. No account was taken of the fact that most things measured tend to cluster around the mean so there might be no statistically significant difference between a school in the top quartile and another in the 3rd (or even 4th). The system does not allow for overall improvement since there will always be a bottom quartile, however high the average achievement. The latest minister, Huw Lewis, admitted that the banding system was "clunky". It was replaced in 2015 by a four colour categorisation (red, amber, yellow, green). This had the advantage that it was not tied to quarters (for example in 2015 there were 238 green schools, 778 yellow ones, 446 amber and only 81 red ones). However it was now totally subjective instead of falsely mathematical and the results were still at variance with inspection results.

The previous minister had given up on reforming the 22 Local Education Authorities in Wales and created four Educational Consortia to supplement them. The four proceeded to go their own way, to offer a variable range of services and to create their own relationships with the local authorities.

The Donaldson report

At the same time there were some educational attempts at improvement. The Welsh Government published the Donaldson report on the school curriculum in Wales in 2015. Graham Donaldson was Chief HMI in Scotland and thus free of the dead hand of Ofsted and the DfE. One advance he promoted was the abolition of national curriculum subjects, always controversial, with eternal arguments on what can or can't be left out. They are to be replaced by a return to the HMI areas of learning. The document, although long (120 pages) is not the prescribed list of content and targets that we were used to in the old national curriculum. Instead it invites teachers and educationalists to accept the philosophy and translate it into a living curriculum through specification of areas of experience and achievement outcomes. The Welsh Government will no longer gather information of performance on a school by school basis "but should monitor performance in key aspects of the curriculum through annual testing on a sampling basis". This, at a stroke, removes one of the major constraints on education under the present system and unhealthy approaches in many schools.

Schools Challenge Cymru

At the same time Schools Challenge Cymru was launched. This takes its inspiration principally from the successful London and Manchester Challenges. It is an initiative led by Professor Mel Ainscow of Manchester University. It centres on 40 secondary schools in Wales (including six in Cardiff). While it brings in the expertise of school improvement advisors, this initiative is based on bottom up school collaboration a far cry from most top down initiatives in England.

Special needs

There is also a move to improve Additional Learning Needs (ALN) arrangements. The change will involve a large training programme, which is to be welcomed, although many questions remain about the provision, scale, cost and timing of such training. We welcome the aspirations behind the draft legislation, in particular the attempt to bring together all forms of ALN and all forms of provision including health and social services as well as education. We also welcome the recognition that ALN provision is not separate but is part and parcel of good teaching and learning and is the responsibility of all teachers. We hope that resources will permit the achievement of some at least of these goals.

Local government in Wales

The funding gap between Wales and England continues to grow. The gap was £58 per pupil in 1999/2000. In 2010, it was £604. It is difficult to be clear about finance now since the Welsh statistical office has been unable (or unwilling) to produce comparative figures on school spending. There are too many small local authorities. There is confusion about how local authorities relate to the four educational consortia, to the Government's standards unit, to Estyn and to Schools Challenge Cymru. Bureaucracy must be reduced and local democratic control re-established. Trust in teachers must be underlined and categorisation, targets and league tables removed. Teacher training must remain part of higher education and available throughout a teacher's career. Cooperation between clusters of schools, primary, secondary and special, is the way forward. Estyn must be returned to its position as critical friend not as second rate Ofsted. All schools in Wales should have a bilingual dimension but segregation by Language (and social selection) is destructive. The goal remains a good local comprehensive school for every child in every neighbourhood. Nevertheless, there is a high level of deprivation and consequently real underperformance in Welsh schools. This cannot be removed by blaming schools or kneejerk sticking plaster solutions. Underachievement can only be eliminated when the inequality that promotes it is itself eliminated.

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