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Editorial Professional Learning for Teachers in Wales

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Introduction

It could be suggested that there is now general acceptance of at least two maxims about education systems. First, that whilst they are important, schools and teachers are only two of the factors that impact upon student achievement in education (Robinson and Aronica, 2015). Secondly, that the competence of teachers represents the single biggest influence which schools can have on young people for 'the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers' (Barber and Mourshed, 2007: 15).

In the current context within Wales, two seminal reports to the Welsh Government have highlighted the importance of this second maxim in relation to the future of initial teacher education (Furlong, 2015) and the role of teacher pedagogy within the school curriculum (Donaldson, 2015). This paper, as does the rest of this special number of the *Journal*, focuses on the role that professional learning of teachers in Wales – the professional development that they undertake following their initial teacher education – should play in creating the successful and equitable education system that Wales desires.

It does so through first, considering the history of professional learning in Wales, particularly since devolution. Secondly, it reports on current developments in developing professional learning in Wales. It then considers

what appear to be the main messages that can be derived from the academic and practitioner contributions to this edition of the *Journal* and how these are supported by other research evidence. Finally, on the basis of the evidence offered here, it offers some thinking on how a successful system of high quality professional learning for teachers in Wales could be constructed in the future.

Pre-devolution historical context

For much of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, opportunities for teachers in Wales to undertake professional development opportunities beyond their initial training were either non-existent (particularly in rural areas) or at best, ephemeral. The McNair Committee of 1944 (Board of Education, 1944) led to area training services being created to supervise both initial teacher training and further professional development. The University of Wales School of Education assumed this responsibility and by the 1950s in-service provision took three major forms: supplementary courses, special courses for experienced teachers and short refresher courses (Williams, 1991).

Professor Charles Gittins in his influential report *Primary Education in Wales* (DES, 1967) set out a series of objectives for teacher professional development aimed at increasing their knowledge of developments in education, education research, outstanding practice in schools and developing the skills needed to evaluate their own practice. Teachers' centres in local education authorities, set up in the post-Gittins era, acted as a fulcrum for stand-and-deliver courses and professional networking. Some teachers became actively involved in the work of the Schools Council (formed in 1964) in areas such as mathematics, science and history.

Despite the progress stimulated by the McNair and Gittins reports, structured, formal professional development still bypassed many teachers. Gittins had spoken about a spirit of 'professional conservatism and complacency' (DES, 1967: 514), which he linked to a voluntary, cafeteria-style system of in-service training in which teachers chose refresher and advanced courses to suit their tastes. This meant that 'those most in need may often show little interest'.

Beginning with the Great Debate on Education, initiated by James Callaghan in 1976 and continuing up to and beyond the introduction of the Education Reform Act of 1988, concerns over student achievement and trust in professional expertise led to a more centralised, managerial approach to

teachers' professional development. Funding became increasingly earmarked for training in national (England and Wales) priorities which critics claimed was of little value to teachers, as it undermined their professional autonomy (Little, 1993; McLaughlin, 1994).

As part of the lead-in to the Education Reform Act of 1988, Kenneth Baker (then Conservative education secretary) introduced the requirement that most schools should provide five days' training to staff when schools were closed to pupils (commonly known as Baker Days). Longstanding concerns have since been expressed over the limited impact of these closure days (Blandford, 2000; Bubb and Earley, 2013; Estyn, 2013).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the relentless focus on raising standards within a competitive and accountability culture led to increased focus on performance management. The central narrative around professional development shifted from individual to whole-school change. The school focus was designed to move thinking on from seeing professional development as 'an addition' to part of the life of every teacher and every school (Hopkins et al., 1994: 115). The narrow connotations of INSET meant that it was increasingly replaced by the term 'continuing professional development' (CPD). This suggested that teachers should continually improve and broaden their classroom practice, learn new skills, reflect critically on their performance and increasingly contribute to the life of the school. It was no longer *only* about developing individual teachers' competence but how each could do their part in meeting the needs of the 'learning organisation', that is the school, for example by responding to pressures to raise standards and engage meaningfully with parents (Bolam, 2000; McMahon, 1999). The Welsh Office (1999: 8) made it clear that 'more rigorous professionalism' was needed: 'The time has gone when isolated, unaccountable professionals made curriculum and pedagogical decisions alone, without reference to the outside world ... Teacher needs to accept accountability even more readily.'

Professional learning in Wales since devolution

Devolution brought a political determination to establish Welsh policies distinctive to the needs of Wales, with *The Learning Country* in 2001 promising 'a distinctive "Made in Wales" framework of continuous development for teachers' which would be 'evidence-based, locally supported and capable of commanding international recognition' (National Assembly for Wales, 2001: 44).

Signalling a departure from the government-prescribed and

accountability-driven approaches that, as indicated above, had come to dominate professional learning prior to 1999, the Welsh Government asked the General Teaching Council for Wales (established in 2000) to take the lead in this area on behalf of the profession. The council developed a *Professional Development Framework for teachers in Wales*, a detailed national framework that was intended to allow teachers, their assistants, school leaders and organisations to be able to chart their professional growth (GTCW, 2006). Professional development was defined as ‘all formal and informal learning which enables teachers to improve their own practice’ (GTCW, 2006: 17).

With funding made available by the Welsh Government from 2001 to 2010, the GTCW offered all teachers in Wales opportunities to engage in small, individual or whole-school action research projects, visits within and beyond the United Kingdom to observe good practice and exchange ideas, teacher sabbaticals and opportunities to establish professional networks. The focus was on giving teachers professional scope and support in meeting their individual needs, even if they differed from the whole school. The GTCW had identified this as being the ‘missing’ element of professional learning which could supplement the more general diet offered then, as it had been in the recent past and would be into the future, by local authorities, higher education institutions and private providers.

The scheme was piloted between 2001 and 2004 during which time over half the schools and a quarter of teachers in Wales participated in it. An evaluation of the pilot found that ‘teachers appreciated the worth placed on them as individuals and on their professionalism and valued the opportunity to take responsibility for their own professional development’ (Egan and James, 2004: 3). Overall the evaluation found that the scheme provided good quality professional learning in the schools and ‘allowed a positive climate for CPD to flourish, enhancing the personal effectiveness and professional competencies of teachers’ (2004: 6). Following the pilot, the Welsh Government announced that the programme would become a settled feature of future professional development for teachers in Wales and so it remained up until 2010 with ever increasing demands being made on the funding that was available.

The GTCW Professional Development Bursaries were conceived as part of a wider ‘Pedagogy Strategy’ developed by the Welsh Government from 2005 in line with the commitment for a ‘Made in Wales’ framework set out in *The Learning Country*. This was intended to be a national initiative to facilitate

the sharing of innovative practice in learning and teaching in schools and further education. Following a series of national conferences, a Pedagogy Project Board was created bringing together a range of national organisations in the education field. The board developed a five-year programme to take forward the Pedagogy Strategy and a series of lead-practitioners were seconded from schools/colleges to act as 'Pedagogy Champions' (Egan, Hopkins and Jephcote, 2008). Ultimately the strategy was assimilated into the Welsh Government's *School Effectiveness Framework* (Welsh Government, 2008) which had been developed as a holistic national school improvement programme that had progress in the quality of teaching and professional development as one of its core elements (Egan, 2012).

Whilst these wider developments were underway, from 2006 the GTCW, with support from the Welsh Government, began to pilot a Chartered Teacher qualification. Influenced by the model being implemented at that time in Scotland, it was intended to be a structured professional development programme and qualification for teachers who wished to remain classroom practitioners during their career. The pilot which ran from 2007 to 2009 was undertaken by 122 teachers across Wales who participated in professional learning opportunities offered in the main by local education authorities and higher education institutions. An evaluation of the pilot identified some shortcomings in the scheme, but found that generally it had provided good quality experiences for the teachers, with some outstanding practice (Egan, 2009).

As noted by several contributors to this edition (e.g. Hadfield et al., Harris and Jones, and Swaffield), disappointing results for Wales in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2010 signalled a change in Welsh Government policy towards professional development. In essence, there was a return to the national direction, accountability-led and performance-management culture that had come to dominate the period before devolution. The Chartered Teacher Programme and the Professional Development Bursaries were replaced by the nationally commissioned and directed MA in Educational Practice (MEP) and Professional Learning Communities (WAG, 2010). Both are discussed in this edition by Hadfield et al., and Harris and Jones.

Current developments

During the period of the fourth National Assembly for Wales (2011–16), the approach to professional learning in Wales has continued to follow this national direction either through centrally funded initiatives such as the MEP

and Professional Learning Communities, or via the Regional Education Consortia developing school-to-school professional networking as part of their accountability and challenge role (Welsh Government, 2014a; Welsh Government, 2014b).

Alongside this, however, the concept of 'The New Deal' for teachers and other educational professionals was introduced. This has now been incorporated into the wider 'Education Reform Programme' with the reforms to teacher education being taken forward following the Furlong Report (Welsh Government, 2016) and the work on the new curriculum flowing from Graham Donaldson's report (Donaldson, 2015). In alignment with the overarching concept of developing a 'self-improving schools' system' the professional learning aspects of this are to be led by Pioneer Schools working with Welsh Government and the Regional Education Consortia.

Whilst at the time of writing (October 2016) much of what is going on is 'work in progress', it is possible to discern the key elements of an emerging strategy. In 2009 the Welsh Assembly Government instigated a review of professional development, which resulted in a new Practice, Review and Development (PRD) model. The PRD model links performance management to the most powerful elements of professional development, namely: coaching and mentoring, reflective practice, action research and professional learning communities (Welsh Assembly Government, 2012). Its core purpose is to encourage evaluation of professional development experiences and their impact on practice. These elements have now been incorporated within the New Deal's 'Professional Learning Model'. Resources have been produced to support teachers in these areas and are available on the Learning Wales website (Welsh Government, 2015a; Welsh Government, 2015b; Welsh Government, 2015c; Welsh Government, 2015d).

The Pioneer Schools development appears to have refined this model and identified the following means whereby professionals would identify, access and record the professional learning they require:

- Revised Professional Standards;
- action inquiry to establish what is needed;
- auditing what is known already; and
- A Career Development Pathway (linked to a 'passport' administered by the Education Workforce Council).

The intention is that professionals, through facilitation by the Regional Education Consortia and Pioneer Schools, would access the professional learning they require and that this would be based on school-to-school

working as part of the overarching vision of a 'self-improving' system. Following the demise of the MEP and earlier aspirations as part of the 'New Deal' that all teachers should be able to access MA level accreditation, schools and consortia are encouraged to work more closely with higher education partners.

More recently, OECD support for the concept of schools as successful 'learning organisations' has influenced Welsh Government thinking (OECD, 2016). 'Learning organisations' are defined as places where 'the beliefs, values and norms of employees are brought to bear in support of sustained learning'. Based on a series of key elements identified by the OECD, schools are offered a development process towards being recognised as successful 'Learning Organisations'. It is believed that this approach is to be introduced into Wales and it could be anticipated that these schools would be the hubs of the planned school-to-school networks.

Whilst these developments can be seen to represent a synthesis between 'accountability-led' and 'entitlement-based' approaches to professional learning and represent a clear commitment by Welsh Government, they remain somewhat unclear in relation to practicalities and continue to be protracted in gestation.

Reflecting on the contributions to this special edition

What light then do the contributions to this special number throw on the past, present and future development of professional learning in Wales? We gain insight from reading the views of prominent academic researchers who played a key role in two of the major developments over recent years: the MEP (Hadfield et al.) and Professional Learning Communities (Harris and Jones). There are also perceptive commentaries on one of the signature policies of education policy since devolution, the Foundation Phase (Kingston and Siraj) and the situation of Welsh-language education (Hopwood). Kevin Smith and Kimberely Wigley's analysis of the use of educational research by teachers in Wales is particularly apposite to current developments. Given that the focus in this edition is very much on teacher professional learning, David James's contribution on further education provides an interesting comparison.

What we are particularly pleased with is the four contributions we are able to include from practitioners as early researchers. Two are schoolteachers (Jackson and Thomas) and their experiences as MEP graduates highlights both their own learning journey and the impact this can be seen to have had

upon their students. Helen Lewis's contribution reminds us of the too-little considered situation of professional learning for those in teacher education while Lizzie Swaffield's article provides an example of how master's level study has influenced the perceptions of a policy professional.

Bringing these contributions together, we can reach several conclusions about professional learning:

- if it is to be successful, professional learning needs to be systematic, supportive, collaborative, sustained and intensive, based on sound theory and practice;
- it is far less likely to be successful if it is externally implemented, as part of an accountability agenda, based on decontextualised 'policy borrowing' and prone to changing political priorities;
- far too little research evidence is able to influence practice, but teachers and other education professionals are seeking such knowledge through active participation in professional learning which they control. They believe this enhances the autonomy that they feel is being eroded currently and is leading to turbulence in the profession and negative effects on teacher retention.

These headline findings are supported by much of the other research evidence available on professional learning. It is widely accepted that professional learning should be about having the confidence and time to experiment, take risks, make mistakes, reflect, evaluate and modify behaviour. As one head teacher has put it, 'teach less, and teach better' (Sutton Trust, 2015: 3). It is also now seen as axiomatic that this should be both an individual and collaborative exercise, with the value of professional dialogue and networks in shaping teachers' thinking about their practice being well established (Stoll, 2007).

Teachers need to be prepared in 'the art of the conversation' if they are to acquire the necessary working knowledge of how schools operate, what Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (2014) term 'ecological intelligence'. We also know that the value of teachers' own biographies and reflexivity cannot be ignored in understanding how individuals grow professionally and personally (Brown et al., 2016). Research has highlighted the value of listening to teachers' stories about 'what it means to be a teacher' and it is clear that many go 'above and beyond' their duties (Cunningham and Gardner, 2004; Day et al., 2014).

We understand far more than previous generations about the role of leaders in creating the culture in which teachers feel challenged and supported in

their professional growth. Significantly, knowledge is now much more immediate, explicit and shared than in the past, for instance in practical resources such as a rubric for assessing the degree of trust in schools (Sutton Trust, 2015) and strategies which move from 'push' to 'pull' so that teachers 'get what they want, when they want it' (Jayaram et al., 2012: 2). We also know that action research and thoughtful reflective practice are key drivers in professional development. A recent survey of 220 primary and secondary teachers in Wales found that they regard reflection as the most valuable means of improving their own practice although few (15 per cent) undertake action research regularly (Grigg, 2016).

The form and nature of professional development has changed considerably over recent decades, partly because of financial constraints that force schools to look within themselves and among clusters, but also because of technological change. The professional gains accrued through informal opportunities afforded through social media (e.g. Edutopia, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest) is an area that deserves further research. In 2014, Teacher Toolkit compiled a list of 101 teachers to follow on Twitter, including teachers in Wales, which illustrates this growing field of grassroots professional development (Forte et al., 2012). There are also schools, albeit a minority, that are beginning to use classroom technologies such as Iris Connect to inform research and reflective dialogues among teachers rather than performance management tools. In practice, teachers have access to an improving set of e-resources such as Hwb and Hwb+, together with a wide range of structured opportunities for professional development hitherto unknown.

Despite recent advances, Kempton's (2013) argument that there is very little current CPD that is 'continuous', 'professional' or developmental has a ring of truth in Wales. The OECD (2014) report on Welsh education highlighted the lack of coherence in professional development at all stages in the careers of teachers and leaders. Inspection reports on professional development have highlighted weaknesses in evaluation and impact (Estyn, 2005; Estyn, 2007a; Estyn 2007b; Estyn, 2013).

Powerful meta-reviews of research on professional development such as those undertaken by the OECD (OECD, 2016) and by Penny Cordingley et al. for the Teacher Development Trust (2015) support the analysis offered above. They suggest that carefully designed professional learning, supported by sustained resources and commitment and with a strong focus on improving student outcomes can have a significant impact on student

achievement. They point to the importance of collaborative work, using outside expertise, focusing on both generic and subject specific pedagogy and ensuring that learning is able to quickly impact upon classroom practice.

Taking Forward Professional Learning in Wales

If Wales is to create a successful and equitable education system in the future, it seems clear that one of the key factors in this will be ongoing work to improve the quality of teaching in our schools and that professional learning has a critically important part to play in achieving this.

Despite a number of worthwhile past and contemporary developments in professional learning, the evidence presented above suggests that Wales has not successfully developed a systematic, evidence-informed and professionally supported programme of professional learning for its teachers. In particular, an over reliance on national direction, borrowing rather than learning from policy initiatives elsewhere and changes in the political weather have been impediments to developing a high quality system of professional learning for teachers. If the hugely ambitious reform programme that the Welsh Government has now adopted is to be successful, these past weaknesses will have to be overcome. There will also need to be, even in these difficult financial times, a significant increased budgetary commitment to teacher development.

What then should be the key elements of the excellent professional learning system that Wales requires? Whilst there is inevitably more research to be done and evidence from elsewhere needs to be adapted to the particular contexts of Wales, there nevertheless seems to be a high degree of congruence in the evidence provided in this edition of the *Wales Journal of Education* and more broadly in the research field (Timperley et al., 2007; Timperley, 2011; Walter and Briggs, 2012) in supporting the following conclusions about professional learning:

1. It should be detached from accountability and performance management.
 - 1 It should learn from evidence and initiatives that are in place elsewhere, but it should not 'borrow' them.
 - 2 It should be based on teacher entitlement.
 - 3 It should not be implemented through a 'top-down' strategy, whether that is from national or international directions.
 - 4 It should enable teachers to follow their own needs and to be part of collaborative networks.
 - 5 The core of the professional learning model should be based on professional enquiry, action research and reflection.

6 It requires support mechanisms and sources to be in place, provided by independent organisations such as the Education Workforce Council and universities – perhaps through something like an Institute for Advanced Teaching (Hood, 2016).

Should it also embrace key pedagogical principles that provide it with a ‘common language of teaching’? Such an approach is likely to be controversial, but it would respond to the challenge offered by Richard Elmore (2008: 42) that ‘education is a profession without a practice’. It might be argued that through the work of the likes of John Hattie (2009, 2012), the Sutton Trust (2015; Higgins et al., 2014) and Robert Coe (Coe et al., 2014), we now possess sufficient evidence to make such a pedagogical ‘charter’ possible – not a mandatory or a complete syllabus for professional learning, but one that could be placed at its core. It is interesting that Kingston and Siraj in their contribution for this special edition suggest that the Implementation Plan for the Foundation Phase in Wales (Welsh Government, 2016) is a fit-for-purpose approach for professional learning. It includes a set of key pedagogical principles developed jointly by practitioners, researchers and policy makers as the starting point for the plan (see Appendix below).

There is a well-known anecdote related by a university professor about the university professor who has researched schools and teaching for many years, producing many learned tomes and yet has never visited a school since he left the one he attended as a student. One day he is persuaded to break this habit and visit an actual school. After a short period of time he is seen to be leaving the school at great speed. When stopped and asked if all was well, he reportedly replies ‘Yes – but I must get back to the university to think about if all this works in theory!’ For too long the professional discourse of teaching in Wales, as in many other nations, has been held back by the disjoints and confusions captured in this apocryphal tall tale. It is time to put that all to an end and develop a discourse of teaching supported by lifelong professional learning that is created and controlled by the teaching profession.

Appendix: pedagogical principles in the foundation phase action plan

The Child

- Exercising choice, participating, being involved, initiating and directing their own learning over a period of time.
- Learning from first hand, exploratory and practical, hands-on activities.

- Appropriately challenged and supported by the adults and learning environment, so that good progress is made.

A Learning Environment

- Providing flow between continuous, enhanced and focused activities, located indoors and outdoors, that reflect and engage children's interests.
- That allows children access to resources that enable them to use choice and develop independence in their learning.
- Which enables children to apply, use, consolidate and extend their skills across areas of learning and experience.
- That includes opportunities for children to be physically and cognitively active as well as having 'quiet time' for contemplation and thought.

Practitioners

- Who prompt the child to think about and reflect upon their learning experiences in order to extend their learning when appropriate.
- Who plan developmentally appropriate, engaging learning opportunities informed by regular observation and assessment of children's abilities.
- Who actively engage parents/carers in the school/setting community, seeing them as partners in their children's learning
- Who look to continuously develop themselves professionally, sharing and learning from excellent practice across Wales

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