

'Leave me alone and let me teach.'

*Teachers' views of Welsh Government education policies and
education in Wales*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is twofold: firstly, to discuss what teachers in Wales think about the Welsh Government's recent education (mainly school) policies and secondly, how the educational system in Wales might be improved. It is based on the findings from a general survey conducted by the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD) Education. The views of 220 primary and secondary teachers and head teachers were gathered in 2014. The paper's central theme is that teachers in Wales generally welcome policies with a strong element of social justice but believe that there have been too many educational initiatives over recent years. They think the educational system in Wales can be improved through various means, including: reducing bureaucracy, increasing their professional autonomy, developing quality professional development and clear leadership. The findings are limited by the nature of a small-scale survey but reinforce conclusions reached in other research studies in the United Kingdom, regarding teachers' criticisms of the pace of curriculum change and initiative overload (Berliner, 2011; NUT, 2014) as well as general pointers towards more effective educational systems (OECD, 2014). For its part, the challenge for the Welsh Government is

building consensus at a time when the performance of Welsh youngsters, relative to other countries, is poor.

Key words: education, policy, teachers' views, WISERD survey.

The Survey

WISERD Education, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), undertook the survey. Its broad research remit is to sustain and enhance the quality of learning and the standards of teaching and teacher education in Wales. In devising the questions for this survey, two sources were considered: sweep 4 of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS4) and the General Teaching Council Survey of teachers (Hutchings et al., 2006). The Millennium Cohort Study is a well-established national longitudinal birth cohort study that started in 2000. It is one of four such studies in Britain, which follow a large group of individuals from birth through the course of their lives, charting the effects of events and circumstances in early life on outcomes and achievements later on (Huang and Gatenby, 2010). The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Westminster government jointly funded the studies. The fourth sweep (MCS4) was carried out when the children were aged seven, between 2008-9. The children were monitored for physical activity, completed tests in reading and numeracy, and completed a simple questionnaire. Teachers were also surveyed about the individual study child, their teaching and the class in general. In Wales, 1197 teachers responded (66% out of 1812 eligible to do so).

The second source was the General Teaching Council for England Survey of Teachers in 2006, which drew on a random sample of 10,000 teachers from the GTCE database of 430,000 eligible registered teachers; 3,665 responses were received (37 %). The Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE), at London Metropolitan University, conducted the survey. It concluded by pointing out concerns that schools were experiencing ‘too many change, too fast’, and wanted time ‘to assimilate change’. It also raised concerns about supply teachers being on the margins, arguing that all teachers need to feel part of the profession (Hutchins et al., 2006: 153).

The sample upon which this article is based was made up of 220 teachers working in 30 schools (19 English-medium, 4 Welsh-medium and 5 bilingual/dual language schools). The criteria used to select the sample was phase of education, type of school, geographical location in Wales, medium of instruction, and the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals, a common proxy for socio-economic disadvantage. A special school was invited to participate but decided not to do so due to a forthcoming inspection. Welsh-medium schools were defined as those where Welsh is the language of the day-to-day business and form of communication with pupils, while in bilingual schools at least 80% of subject lessons (excluding Welsh and English) are taught through the medium of Welsh. Dual stream refers to the use of both Welsh and English determined by the nature of the curriculum but in some cases there is a strong emphasis on creating a Welsh-language ethos.

The survey collected basic biographical information about the teachers. The vast majority (92%) work full-time, that is more than 30 hours per week. Two-thirds of the respondents were female (67%) while around 41% were fluent Welsh speakers. In terms of qualifications, 22% hold a higher degree and 72% entered the profession through the Postgraduate Certificate in Education route. Although the

teachers in the sample have been teaching for a range of years, from newly qualified to those in their fourth decade of teaching, on average they have taught for 15.5 years, of which 10.2 years were in the same school. Their phase specialisms covered Foundation Phase through to Post-16/Key Stage 5. Around 66% of the teachers worked in the secondary school, 17% in the Foundation Phase and 17% at Key Stage 2. Many of the teachers serve multiple professional roles, for instance as class teacher and head of department.

The data was collected by questionnaires, completed anonymously by teachers between May and June 2014. The analysis is limited to simple descriptive statistics. Hence this cannot resolve the inherent biases in the data. For instance, although around one in four respondents rated the Foundation Phase for 3-7 year olds as poor or very poor, the high proportion of secondary school teachers (around 66%) skewed this response – around 30% thought that it was poor/very poor while 26% thought the Foundation Phase was a good/very good idea compared to 55% of primary teachers. The extent to which secondary school teachers and those at key stage 2 see the Foundation Phase as not preparing young children sufficiently for the next phase of education needs to be explored further.

The high proportion of ‘neutral’ responses in this survey illustrates the tendency among many teachers to ‘sit on the fence’ and, on reflection, it might have been more revealing to force a more positive or negative response in the questionnaire design. Fink (2003) suggests that a neutral category should only be included in a survey design if it is valid. In this context, the key question is whether it is reasonable to think that teachers should have an opinion on the topics and, if this is the case, then a forced choice might have been a better option. Eliminating the mid-point can reduce social desirability bias, where there is a tendency for respondents to avoid

extremes. But this is, ultimately, a subjective call given that it could be argued that researchers should, from an ethical stance, offer respondents the opportunity to express a neutral position.

Before considering the findings from the survey, a brief comment on the policy background in Wales is necessary to provide a context.

Policy Background in Wales

When it was announced in July 2014 that Michael Gove would no longer be Education Secretary in England there was widespread celebration among teachers, even in Wales where his government's policies did not apply. Teachers held impromptu parties and social media, such as Twitter, had a field day (Saul, 2014). Political commentators suggested that Gove was removed because his confrontational style was in danger of losing the Conservatives votes - when Gove compared his enemies to a sci-fi mound of goo, 'the blob', relations with many teachers and educationalists had understandably reached their lowest point. In the survey discussed in this article teachers were asked to name the main obstacles they face, to which one replied: 'Michael Gove.' The 'Govian revolution' in England was contentious for both its nature and speed. Policies on the expansion of academies, school-based teacher training, performance-related pay and changes to the curriculum and assessment, alienated many educationalists.

In contrast, the teaching profession in Wales has generally enjoyed a more harmonious relationship with the National Assembly, created by the Government of Wales Act 1998. In 2000 Jane Davidson, former English teacher and community

worker, was appointed as Minister for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills in the Welsh Government. She said that she spent her first year travelling around the country listening to everyone she could – her goal was to visit every school in Wales during her term of office (Walker, 2008). One of her first major decisions was, following consultation, to end statutory testing at Key Stage 1 and replace it with teacher assessment. She later phased out statutory testing at Key Stage 2 and 3 and GCSE and A-level league tables were abandoned. Her flagship policy, the Foundation Phase for early years, was widely welcomed by the teaching profession and an example of the distinctive direction set out in the National Assembly's vision document *The Learning Country* (National Assembly for Wales, 2001). Davidson also introduced a new Welsh Baccalaureate and championed a higher profile for Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) in the Welsh curriculum. On the whole these policies proved popular with teachers, unions and the electorate at large. However, teachers continued to feel that they had to contend with too many initiatives. In 2007 Keith Rowlands, head teacher of a primary school in Chepstow, wrote an open letter to all chairs of governors in Wales highlighting the issue of initiative overload spanning 35 policies, ranging from traffic management plans to breakfast clubs (Rowlands, 2007). He queried the need for so many initiatives, and the government's lack of monitoring and prioritization.

In 2008, the Welsh Government launched its School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) as the overarching policy framework designed to improve learning outcomes and wellbeing for all children and young people (DCELLS, 2008). It drew upon well-established international evidence on school effectiveness, which showed that the most effective schools were, not surprisingly, well-led and featured high quality teaching, with a relentless focus on raising standards (Reynolds and Cuttance, 1992;

Sammons et al., 1995). Although well conceived, the SEF was a complicated model for busy leaders and teachers to grasp and apply. It was presented as a pizza featuring five core themes (systems thinking; bilingualism; high performance culture; equality; supportive and interdependent [schools]), six elements (leadership; working with others; networks of professional practice; intervention and support; improvement and accountability; and curriculum and teaching), and based on tri-level reform (schools, local authorities and central government).

Not surprisingly, when Leighton Andrews became Minister for Education and Skills in 2009 he stressed the need for ‘better implementation, fewer initiatives and the importance of keeping things simple’ (Andrews, 2010). However, the relatively poor performance of Welsh 15-year-olds in the 2006, 2009 and 2013 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, compared to the rest of the UK and OECD nations, has resulted in a political climate demanding a sharper, focused and more centralized response to perceived low standards. Andrews soon announced a 20-point action plan designed to push Wales into the top 20 school systems measured in the PISA scores in 2015. A new National Literacy and Numeracy Framework was introduced in 2013, including national tests in reading and numeracy for Years 2-9. Welsh government policy has prioritized raising standards of literacy and numeracy and reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment (Andrews, 2011). Teachers did not take to the Minister’s bullish style (Mackie, 2013) and welcomed the appointment of the more conciliatory Huw Lewis, a former chemistry teacher, as Minister in 2013 (BBC, 2013).

Nonetheless, as the survey results discussed in this article show, the teaching profession in Wales still perceives that the Welsh Government is pushing too many initiatives too quickly. Many respondents remain concerned about unnecessary

bureaucracy. When asked ‘What is the biggest obstacle in [your] professional lives?’ teachers responded with comments such as: ‘regular changing of priorities’; ‘shifting of the goal posts’; ‘form filling’; ‘additional paperwork’; ‘too many initiatives’; ‘constantly changing priorities, a barrage of initiatives. Just give us the curriculum and let us teach’; ‘not enough time to embed initiatives before they are replaced’; and

...having to jump through hoops to satisfy various initiatives. I have been teaching 30yrs, I know what works for me, leave me alone + let me teach!!!’

The last comment illustrates the sense of exasperation felt by a few teachers. Increasing levels of over accountability was another cause for concern, summed up by the following:

Paperwork and bureaucracy are overwhelming. Teaching and lesson planning takes up only about 50% of my time. The rest is ticking boxes and making sure paperwork and evidence of my work as a teacher is available for when I am assessed.

These comments raise questions about professional autonomy and identity.

Day (2002) argues that professional identity – seen as critical to sustaining motivation, commitment, efficacy, job satisfaction and effectiveness – has suffered by the relentless pressures of complying with external demands. In the process of reform, the basic question of what it means to be a professional teacher is being redefined. The success or otherwise of education strategies is determined, ultimately, not by collective political will but by individual teachers and heads responsible for implementation. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991: 4) attributed the failure of educational reform to ignoring what teachers have to say or oversimplifying what teaching is about. The authors, writing at a time of profound changes in education (e.g. the introduction of the national curriculum, standardized testing and reform of teacher training), called for the government to focus on ‘the right things’ which are ‘rooted in

the basic working conditions and lives of teachers as these in turn affect the learning of pupils.’

Teachers’ Views of Welsh Government Policies

Teachers were asked to rate ten Welsh Government policies on a scale of 1-5 (1 - very poor, 2 – poor, 3 – neutral; 4 – good; 5 - very good). The most popular policies are the reduction of tuition fees in higher education, welcomed by 54% of respondents and the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG), rated by nearly 50% as good or very good. Both reflect a tradition of supporting a fairer and more equitable educational system although the PDG has not been fully used for its intended purpose of supporting disadvantaged children i.e. those eligible for free school meals and looked after children (Welsh Liberal Democrats, 2013). Flying Start, the Welsh Government supported pre-school programme for disadvantaged children, also attracted support from a third of teachers.

Table 1

Policy	1 very poor	2 poor	3 neutral	4 good	5 very good	Responses
Flying Start	5 (4%)	14 (10%)	71 (53%)	31 (23%)	14 (10%)	135
Foundation Phase	13 (8%)	28 (17%)	62 (37%)	55 (32%)	12 (7%)	170

Reading & Numeracy tests	16 (8%)	33 (17%)	83 (43%)	53 (27%)	9 (5%)	194
Learning Pathways 14-19	7 (4%)	24 (14%)	81 (48%)	50 (30%)	5 (3%)	167
Welsh Baccalaureate	29 (16%)	37 (20%)	63 (33%)	49 (26%)	8 (4%)	186
Pupil Deprivation Grant	5 (3%)	26 (14%)	61 (34%)	53 (30%)	33 (19%)	178
Literacy Numeracy Framework	13 (6%)	31 (14%)	69 (32%)	74 (34%)	29 (13%)	216
Education Maintenance Allowance	10 (6%)	33 (20%)	75 (45%)	34 (21%)	14 (8%)	166
Welsh Medium Strategy	17 (10%)	26 (15%)	86 (50%)	28 (16%)	15 (9%)	172
Tuition fees	25 (14%)	19 (10%)	41 (22%)	54 (30%)	44 (24%)	183

Table 1 Teacher rating of Welsh Government policies

In the following section, four of the policies that triggered more polarized views among teachers are selected for further commentary.

Foundation Phase

The Foundation Phase is the statutory curriculum for all 3 to 7 year old children introduced in Wales in 2004 as a pilot and applied to both maintained and non-maintained settings. It is based on the principle of ‘learning through doing’, which operates across seven Areas of Learning. The Welsh Government commissioned a three-year (2011-14) independent evaluation of the Foundation Phase to consider how well it is being implemented, what impact it has had, and ways in which it can be improved. The research team, led by Professor Chris Taylor at WISERD, to date convey mixed findings in their reports (Taylor et al., 2013; Welsh Government, 2015a). While there are reported improvements in pupils’ attainment, wellbeing and attendance, as yet there is no evidence of a reduction in the inequalities in attainment between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. Moreover, the quality of provision varies according to local authority support. The key factors in determining successful implementation of the Foundation Phase are the attitude of the head teacher and senior management and staff skills, qualifications and training (Taylor et al., 2013; Davies et al., 2013). The common barriers to the development of the Foundation Phase include:

- structural changes
- funding for resources
- direct outdoor access and
- site-specific issues (e.g. funded non-maintained pack-away settings).

(Taylor et al., 2013).

In this teacher survey, of 170 responses, 25% thought that the Foundation Phase was poor or very poor, 39% considered it to be good or very good and the remainder neutral. Even when this is broken further down by phase, only 55% of primary school practitioners thought that it was good/very good while 15% thought it was poor/very poor.

The survey does not cover what specifically concerned the teachers about the Foundation Phase. But given the huge level of investment, the number of positive responses is disappointing (accepting that two-thirds were from secondary school teachers) and echo concerns elsewhere. A short-term independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase reports variability in its implementation within and between maintained schools and funded non-maintained settings (those privately run or voluntary settings, some of which are funded by local authorities, to provide the Foundation Phase for 3-4 year olds). Only one in five maintained schools and funded non-maintained settings were implementing the Foundation Phase ‘very successfully’ although many schools are moving ‘in the right direction’ (Siraj, 2014: 3). The report’s author does not consider there is anything to be alarmed at, citing the fact that the Foundation Phase represents complex change and as such will take several years to become embedded. She refers to UNESCO’s conclusions that educational policies should not be treated in isolation and their success requires time and rests upon well-motivated and supported staff (UNESCO, 2004).

The first of 23 recommendations is for the Welsh Government to appoint a representative group of Foundation Phase experts from across and beyond Wales to lead long term strategic planning (spanning 10 years) for the implementation and consolidation of the Foundation Phase. The Welsh Government continues to remain committed to its development (Welsh Government, 2013a). But there remain

significant challenges in terms of implementation. Perhaps the most concerning one is the lack of shared understanding of how children learn in a play-based approach among Early Years' practitioners, setting aside what colleagues teaching older pupils think about the Foundation Phase.

Reading and Numeracy Tests

In September 2013, the Welsh Government introduced the statutory Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) to replace the communication and number elements of the non-statutory Skills Framework, setting out higher expectations of what pupils should learn. Around 65% of primary school respondents in this survey welcome the LNF rating it as a good or very good initiative. The LNF is a tool for curriculum planning. It was introduced partly as a result of Estyn's criticism that schools were not doing enough to embed literacy and numeracy skills in different contexts within the curriculum. It was also brought in out of concern about the relative underperformance of Welsh 15-year-olds in the core areas of reading, mathematics and science, as tested by PISA. The LNF is accompanied by formal tests in reading and numeracy for Years 2 and 9. Around a third of teachers (32%) welcomed the tests but a quarter did not (25%). A sizeable minority (43%) were undecided. There were no significant differences of opinion among primary and secondary teachers.

We know from other sources that focusing on performance outcomes rather than learning processes can have a negative impact on pupils' attitudes and enjoyment in learning and constrain creativity in school (EPPI-Centre, 2002). The perception among some teachers in Wales may be that tests are inappropriate for the younger

year groups and may de-motivate learners. There has been sustained teacher union opposition to the introduction of national reading and numeracy tests on the basis of workload and age appropriateness – with media stories of anxious Year 2 children reduced to tears (Evans, 2015). More fundamentally, there are questions about how such tests align with the Foundation Phase philosophy. This might explain the relatively lukewarm response in this survey.

The Welsh Government expects the four regional consortia to draw up action plans to monitor how well schools are using funding (through the School Effectiveness Grant) to drive up literacy and numeracy standards. Effective use of reading and numeracy tests is one of the Welsh Government's six literacy and numeracy identifiers to see how well schools are doing. The others are: ensuring teachers have the skills to teach the LNF; effective use of assessment to improve teaching; providing support so schools can implement the LNF; sharing best practice, including coaching and mentoring of those in need of support by outstanding teachers; ensuring targeted support is available to stretch the more able and talented pupils (Welsh Government, 2013b).

Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification

Teacher opinion in this survey was fairly evenly distributed on the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ) – taking all responses into account, slightly less than a third were supportive (30%), a third were neutral and slightly more than a third (36%) were against it. Of those working in secondary schools, 34% were in favour of the WBQ but a significant minority (around 42%) considered it to be poor/very poor. Unfortunately, the respondents did not elaborate on why they held such strong views.

The Welsh Government introduced the WBQ for post-16 learners in September 2003 as a pilot scheme. Since 2007, there has been a planned, staged roll-out of the WBQ at Advanced and Intermediate levels across a significant number of schools and FE colleges. The WBQ was designed to offer a more rounded education and is one of the education policies that sets Wales apart from England. Estyn (2008) reported that one of the barriers to the expansion of the Welsh Baccalaureate was that it does not contribute to headline performance indicators such as five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C at key stage 4. More recently, the inspectorate has called for a review of the structure of the programme following weaknesses in assessment (Estyn, 2012). A report examining the relationship between the WBQ and higher education found that students who followed the programme were more likely to get into a leading University (by 31%) but less likely (by 15%) to achieve higher degrees than those who did not (Taylor et al., 2013). While on the one hand the programme offers important learning gains in study skills and aspects such as time management, this is seen to be at the expense of subject knowledge, which explains the comparative underachievement at degree level. Estyn (2008) found that in most of the schools it surveyed, teaching of the Welsh Baccalaureate was good overall. The most recent review of the WBQ, led by Huw Evans, presents a mixed picture. While students gain a broad range of skills and experiences that employers and universities look for, and there are worthwhile opportunities for individual investigation, there are concerns over the portfolio assessment, duplication in learning and variations in the quality of delivery (Welsh Government, 2012).

Following recommendations from the Evans Review, the Welsh Government announced plans to make the WBQ more rigorous from September 2015. The programme will have stronger focus on essential employability skills

(communication, numeracy, digital literacy, planning and organisation, creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and personal effectiveness) based on a Skills Challenge Certificate. These skills are to be assessed in a range of real-life contexts through ‘challenge briefs’ and an individual project.

Educational maintenance allowance

The Educational maintenance allowance (EMA) was introduced in 2004/5 to provide incentives for 16-year-olds to continue with their education after leaving school. By 2006/7 the Government extended the scheme to 16-18 -year-olds. The EMA is directed at those from low-income families, with students claiming up to £30 per week for day-to-day costs such as travel, books and equipment. Critics dismissed the EMA as ‘beer money’ and a ‘Christmas bonus’ for students, arguing that there was no evidence that it had any positive educational benefits although supporters pointed out that it did increase participation and retention in full-time post-16 education (Kalil, 2010; see also Bolton, 2011). In 2010/11, in a period of economic restraint, the Coalition Government officially put an end to EMA because it was not satisfied that it was providing value for money – citing the fact that 90% of the young people who received EMA would still have participated in learning if they were not granted the benefit. However, supporters maintained that the EMA increased staying-on rates and encouraged progression and good study habits. An evaluation of the EMA in Wales revealed the overwhelming view that financial support for students from low-income families in post-compulsory education should continue, although this should be better targeted (Welsh Government Social Research Unit, 2014). The report presented a more mixed picture as to whether the EMA was making a difference to student

attainment and achievement although there are pointers that higher attendance led to better attainment. Teachers who responded to the WISERD survey were fairly divided on the EMA. Around a third thought it was a good/very good idea, while a quarter rated it as poor/very poor – 45% remained neutral.

Teachers' views on the educational system in Wales

The second part of this article considers broadly what teachers had to say about improving the educational system in Wales. Despite the pressures faced by teachers and media reports of low morale, most teachers in this survey (94%) enjoy their jobs and most (86%) enjoy teaching in their particular schools. Just over half (54%) felt demoralized by teaching but around one in five (22%) did not. Also, around one in five respondents thought that it was better to be a teacher in England than Wales, about the same number who thought the opposite. Over the years there has been no shortage of advice on how teacher morale can be improved, policies implemented successfully and, ultimately, how to improve the educational system. Broadly speaking, solutions focus on improving various inputs (Figure 1) – the content of education (aims and purposes, curriculum, assessment), the resources (teacher supply, teacher quality, school buildings) and the structures (administration, accountability frameworks).

Figure 1

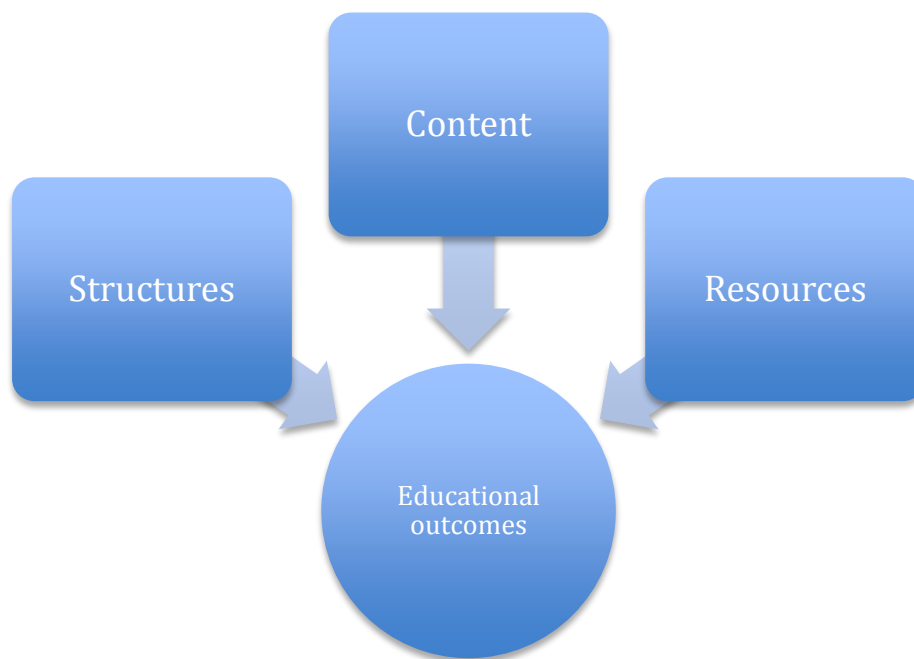


Figure 1. Inputs that affect educational outcomes

In terms of content, teachers expressed concern over frequent changes in the curriculum. They want a more relevant and engaging curriculum and these thoughts were echoed in the Donaldson review. Teachers who responded to this survey want ‘a slimmed down curriculum’ and ‘a sensible and consistent curriculum and assessment structure that meets the needs of students and the world of work without creating ‘a game of hurdles’ for schools to jump.’

Regarding structures, a handful of teachers picked up specific issues such as large class sizes, but a more prominent theme focused on excessive administration - ‘over accountability’, ‘survival against accountability’, and too much ‘political interference’. The ‘system’, however this was interpreted, was seen to be too

bureaucratic ‘creating excessive and unnecessary workload’. In England, the Government has acknowledged similar sentiments when surveying teachers’ views of how to reduce ‘unnecessary and unproductive tasks’ (DfE, 2015). Nearly 44,000 teachers responded. They highlighted recording and analyzing data along with excessive marking as their two main burdens (Gibson et al., 2015). Among teachers’ suggestions of what works well in reducing bureaucracy, are: deploying staff to take responsibility for reprographics, sharing resources, peer marking and use of specialist software for marking and tracking data. The government has responded by agreeing to slow down the pace of change and to focus on professional training. This has fallen short of union demands to move away from high-stakes accountability, which is seen as the key driver of unnecessary teacher workload. Nonetheless it does reveal an acknowledgement among central policy-makers in England that there is too much bureaucracy and their continued commitment to reduce this.

A few teachers in the survey for this article recognised that leadership in their schools or more generally in the Welsh educational system could be stronger. When asked whether there was ‘unity between teachers and the head on the school’s aims and values and how these are implemented through teaching and learning’, only around three-quarters agreed. However, more than 9 out of 10 thought the school had a clear vision and mission statement.

Around a third of teachers in this survey regarded funding as the most pressing issue in their school. Comments included lacking funding to ‘employ sufficiently trained teachers’ or for professional development, or budget cuts leading to redundancies. Although there were also a few concerns expressed over a lack of suitable resources, most teachers (61%) agreed or strongly agreed that the state of learning resources in their schools was excellent; less than 20% disagreed with this

statement. However, inconsistencies in resource provision between schools is seen as a concern, expressed by the following teacher's desire to:

...bring standardisation across Wales in terms of resources, pupils class sizes, roles responsibility, L.A. + WG support. Should be same for all pupils regardless of where they live - it isn't now.

Action is clearly necessary to address shortcomings in the Welsh educational system. But most commentators agree that between 5-10 years are needed for any educational reform to work, beyond the political cycle. As one teacher in the sample put it: 'let the previous 10 years of reforms have time to work. Short-term political gain means that few policies are evaluated for their effectiveness –there is very little follow up even when policies are adopted with only 1 in 10 policies assessed for their impact (OECD, 2015). One of the particular challenges is sustaining reforms, especially at school level, when there are changes in leadership (Fullan, 2001).

A recent OECD (2014) report on improving schools in Wales identified the lack of clarity in long-term policy making as one of the key weaknesses in Welsh education. It calls upon the Welsh Assembly to develop a shared long-term vision with a few measurable objectives, which resonate with teachers and are easy for the public to understand. The OECD report pointed to the example of the successful Ontario education strategy. Following years of tension, in 2004 the Ontario government set out to build trust and shared ownership among all partners, and good communication with the general public, students and parents.

We know that the quality of teaching is the most important school-based factor in raising standards (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Hanushek and Rivkin, 2012). At the primary and secondary phase, increasing numbers of schools are in need of follow-up inspection by Estyn because there are significant shortcomings in their provision,

notably in teaching, assessment and leadership. Estyn (2014) ducked its own question: ‘Is the quality of teaching improving?’ but implied that it was not – highlighting, for example, that teachers lack appropriate mathematical knowledge to develop pupils’ numeracy skills (Estyn, 2014). In short, there are very few schools judged to be excellent in Wales. As the Hill report of the future delivery of education services in Wales notes: ‘schools must take responsibility for their own improvement and foster a culture of open classrooms’ where teachers can learn from each other (Hill Review, 2013: 6). In higher education, initial teacher training throughout Wales is only ‘adequate’ and the providers need to ‘raise their game’, for instance to address shortcomings in teaching and leadership (Tabberer, 2013:2).

In response, the Welsh Government has introduced a Professional Learning Model (PLM) designed to raise the status of teaching. Schools are expected to detail how practitioners and leaders will be supported in their professional development to meet school priorities and professional learning goals, through the publication of three-year school development plans (Welsh Government, 2014a). The PLM is part of the Welsh Government’s key strategic education improvement plan to 2020, *Qualified for Life* (Welsh Government, 2014b). It contains nearly 50 commitments built around four strategic objectives: professional workforce development (14), an engaging and attractive curriculum (8), qualifications reform (9) and improved leadership (18). Although the details are to be worked through, practitioners are expected to take greater responsibility for their professional development and share what they learn with colleagues. We know, however, that teachers face a range of challenges including establishing how professional development makes a difference to pupils’ learning (Cordingley, 2015).

Most teachers in the survey had undertaken some form of professional development over the last 12 months (Table 2). Yet less than half of respondents frequently collaborate with colleagues, despite the launch of the professional learning communities model in 2011 (Welsh Government, 2013c). Moreover, only 15% of respondents in this survey undertake action research frequently. The Welsh Government recognizes the challenges this brings and has provided guidance to support teachers in making the most effective use of data and other evidence (Welsh Government, 2015b). The survey does not tell us what the teachers thought about the quality of professional development, or whether they have evaluated its impact on their teaching.

Table 2

Strategy	Frequently	Occasionally	Not in the last 12 months	Responses
Participate in a mentor or coach scheme either as a mentor/coach or mentee	98 (45%)	56 (26%)	64 (29%)	218
Collaborative learning with colleagues and/or external partnership/networks	95 (43%)	92 (42%)	33 (15%)	220
Engaging with subject or specialist associations	56 (26%)	103 (47%)	59 (27%)	218

Participating in the Masters in Educational Practice (MEP)	8 (4%)	3 (1.5%)	188 (94.5%)	199
Studying for other postgraduate qualification (e.g. Masters)	20 (10%)	9 (4%)	174 (86%)	203
Undertaking action research (e.g. a school-based enquiry project)	30 (15%)	46 (22%)	130 (63%)	206

Table 2. Types and frequency of professional development activities for teachers in Wales, over the last 12 months

Most teachers in this survey believe that reflecting on their own practice and working with colleagues are the two best ways of improving their teaching (Table 3).

Table 3

Strategy	Very useful	Fairly useful	Not useful	No experience	Responses
Reflecting on my practice	155 (70%)	65 (29%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)	221
Reviewing my practice as part of self evaluation	99 (45%)	94 (42%)	22 (10%)	7 (3%)	222
Working on my performance management objectives	68 (31%)	106 (49%)	42 (19%)	2 (1%)	218
Doing my own enquiry or research	64 (30%)	88 (41%)	17 (8%)	45 (21%)	214
Acting upon other people's research	32 (15%)	115 (54%)	29 (13.5%)	39 (18%)	215

Table 3. Strategies valued by teachers to improve their practice

When asked to suggest one thing to improve education in Wales, there was no strong consensus among teachers. But the theme of giving teachers time to establish initiatives again appears as a prominent theme, illustrated in the following comments:

Clear direction with less constant change. Strong support from LEA. Detail and time to fully implement planning and improvement

Remove political interference - allow initiatives to embed & be evaluated. Stop constant change.

Allow teachers a voice - this will directly impact on quality of teaching and learning

Cysondeb a peidio newid o hyd (consistency and stop constantly changing)

Ministers must listen to teachers.

Many of these comments chime with the views expressed in other surveys. For instance, a primary teacher in Cardiff responded to the NUT (2014) workload survey by claiming: 'Data! Data! Data! No one is interested in teachers and pupils anymore, just numbers on a piece of paper!' In that survey, 39% of 2,000 respondents attributed increased workload to excessive government initiatives. Brennan (1996) refers to the development of 'managerial professionalism' in which teachers manage the curriculum, meet corporate goals, work efficiently in meeting targets and standardized criteria and respond to the school's accountability processes. International research suggests that while education policies can bring about more consistency in what is taught and how teachers deliver the curriculum, teachers may ignore these in practice, treat them as 'add-ons' or adapt them to suit their needs (Smylie, 1997). Teachers and heads often mediate local and central government policies. Half a century of research

in motivational theory confirms that change that comes from within (expressed as desire), tends to be more enduring and less stressful than responding to external demands, which invariably is seen as a matter of compliance (Berlach, 2011). So it makes psychological (as well as political) sense to engage with the teaching profession.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that the Welsh Assembly Government has not invested significantly in trying to improve educational provision, whether through its Foundation Phase programme or Masters in Educational Practice for newly qualified teachers. There is sometimes a tendency to play down politicians' sincerity in seeking to improve the state of education. Most of the policies that they introduce are not designed to damage or inflict pain. However, politicians need short-term answers and it requires considerable political courage to remain committed to policies, such as the Foundation Phase, which will take several years to work through. Coe's (2013) analysis of strategies to raise standards (over the past thirty years) suggests that many have failed and not stood up to scrutiny. He concludes

The message of this talk is not 'What we have done so far has not worked, so let's try some different things,' but 'What we have done so far has not worked, so let's try some different things and this time evaluate properly whether they work or not.' (Coe, 2013: xvi)

The Welsh educational system has become too disjointed. As Hopkins (2013) points out, the stronger the relationship between improvements inside and outside the classroom, the more successful schools are likely to be in raising standards.

One of the dangers with any educational initiative is that it soon enters a cycle of initial enthusiasm, followed by uncertainty over the fundamental concepts driving the initiative, implementation difficulties, and a depressing conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results. The reform is then abandoned and the

search for the next promising initiative begins (DeFour, 2004). When asked to identify the biggest professional obstacle, one respondent put it this way:

New initiatives thrown in at such a rate that they become watered down or good former practice is less good because there is not time to keep it all going.

In sum, teachers in this survey see an improved educational system in Wales linked to having greater professional autonomy than at present, less bureaucracy, time for quality professional development and clear leadership.

Conclusion

The findings of the WISERD Survey are limited by the nature of a small-scale survey, but reinforce longstanding concerns raised by other studies, regarding the pace of change, the growth of bureaucratization in schools, initiative overload and a perceived failure to engage fully with teachers (Osborn et al., 2000; Curtis, 2003; Evans, 2013). The gap between government policy-makers and teachers has meant that there has been, until very recently, little national conversation about education in Wales, unlike in Scotland. But there are promising signs that this might change. The well-received recent Donaldson review of the curriculum signaled the start of what the Welsh Government calls ‘the Great Debate on Welsh education.’ James Callaghan, MP for Cardiff, launched the most famous ‘Great Debate’ in education in 1976. Then, it resulted in central government having a greater say in what was taught in school. The process of questioning teacher autonomy over curriculum policy began, culminating in the national curriculum. Will the current great debate take Wales in a different direction? Donaldson recommends an end to a subject-based

national curriculum, which is said to have stifled creativity and ‘inhibited professionalism’ (Donaldson, 2015: 12); or as a teacher put it in this survey when asked for one thing to improve education in Wales: ‘Allow teachers freedom to teach, and not be constrained by having to teach all of National Curriculum.’ Donaldson wants schools to take greater ownership locally and reports that there is ‘a real desire’ for schools and teachers to have ‘more (but not) complete autonomy’ to make decisions about the curriculum (Donaldson, 2015: 15). But will providing teachers with greater autonomy improve standards and raise the bar? Huw Lewis calls for the teaching profession to play a critical role in this debate. The respondents in this survey are likely to welcome such an opportunity, to participate in what Hallgarten (2014) calls for a ‘year of reflection’ (2015-16) devoid of new policies and initiatives. One respondent summed up what Welsh education needs at this time:

Clear direction with less constant change. Strong support from LEA. Detail and time to fully implement planning and improvement.

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