

Blog post

BERA Blog: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/through-adversity-comes-strength-educational-policy-reform-and-developing-research-capacity-in-wales>

## Through adversity comes strength: Educational policy reform and developing research capacity in Wales

Kevin Smith, Cardiff University, 14 November 2018

Education in Wales is currently experiencing an unprecedented level of reform. In *Successful Futures*, Professor Graham Donaldson (2015) introduced a radical reimagining of the national curriculum for Wales that minimised the structuring of learning outcomes and skills into discrete subject groups, and organised content into broader faculties of knowledge called 'areas of learning and experience' (Donaldson, 2015, p.34). With a nod to *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011), the new curriculum suggests a process model approach that has been broadly interpreted (and celebrated) as a more 'progressive' organisation of teaching and learning. However, it also provides a new set of challenges for teacher training and continuing professional development.

Complementing the curricular reform is the 'Pioneer School' programme, the intention of which is to enable educators to develop aspects of the curriculum. As with all curricular initiatives, these interventions have their features and faults. Unfortunately a lack of clarity and communication regarding these initiatives has spared them from robust, critical analysis. Still, many educators, academics and policymakers remain hopeful and (cautiously) optimistic.

In *Education in Wales: Our national mission*, the cabinet secretary for education sets out an ambitious action plan intended to 'raise standards, reduce the attainment gap and deliver an education system that is a source of national pride and confidence' (Welsh Government, 2017, p.3). Political posturing aside, the action plan draws on a number of sensible strategies to achieve its lofty aims. One of the primary themes embedded within these strategies is the promotion of teachers' engagement with research and the establishment of collaborative networks between higher education institutions, consortia (organisations that facilitate school improvement in Wales) and schools.

The articles in this special issue of the BERA Blog – which will be published between Wednesday 14 and Friday 16 November – are written by teachers and researchers in Wales who have been involved in various aspects of this current era of reform. The first article (14 November) is written by James Wise, a history teacher from Cardiff High School. In his post, James describes his experience in applying research on cognitive load theory as he planned his lessons for his pupils.

The second entry is from Dr Nigel Newton, a research associate at the Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research Data and Methods (WISERD). In his post, Nigel discusses research with teachers involved in the Pioneer School programme.

Our third entry is from Damian Benney, a secondary school deputy headteacher and active blogger. Damian describes his experience in applying spacing and retrieval practice in his classroom.

Our final entry is co-written by Claire Pescott and Eleri John at the University of South Wales. In it, Claire and Eleri discuss innovative methods for reflection with higher education students using 'sandboxing' techniques.

Each of these articles demonstrate a different approach to education research and its application in Wales by those concerned with improving education here. Collectively they demonstrate the various levels of expertise in educational research, but also suggest the growing, commonly shared interest among educators across the sector in improving the capacity of people engaged in education in Wales to engage in more, high-quality research projects.

The dearth of educational research activity in Wales (Smith & Horton, 2017; Furlong, 2002) over the years has led to a small but sustained effort at capacity building (for example, the Higher Education Funding Council in Wales investing £1 million into education research in 2012) — with varying levels of success (Power & Taylor, 2017). However, not all advances have been on such a grand scale. Apart from large investments in educational research, there is also a growing constellation of research activity emerging in schools, colleges and universities.

This series of blog entries represents a small sample of these efforts. Given the current combination of political support from the Welsh government, financial and organisational support delivered through school consortia, and the enthusiasm and expertise of individuals in institutions, perhaps Wales faces not only a successful future with regard to teaching and learning in schools, but also the emergence of a new generation of developing educational researchers in schools, colleges and universities as well.

## References

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