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## TITLE PAGE

### **The politics of education and the misrecognition of Wales**

*Sally Power, WISERD, Cardiff University, Wales*

*This paper examines the positioning of the Welsh education system within contemporary policy debate and analysis. It begins by outlining some of the ways in which education policy and provision in Wales differs from that of its neighbour, England, and then goes on to critique how these differences have been represented in both the media and by members of the educational research community. Indeed, the paper argues that these representations constitute a form of misrecognition. It is tempting to counter this misrecognition with assertions of the superiority of the 'Welsh way' – and certainly pronouncements of a 'crisis' in Welsh education appear to be as much politically-driven as evidence-based. However, such an approach would underplay the very real challenges that face Wales – challenges which are both like and unlike those facing England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The paper concludes that we need a serious engagement with national divergences across the four nations of the UK – as well as elsewhere. The case of Wales highlights the need to undertake not only comparative analysis but also relational analysis if we are to enhance our understanding of the changing politics of education.*

**Keywords:** Wales, progressivism, universalism, misrecognition, policy research

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## **The politics of education and the misrecognition of Wales**

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Education in Wales has long been the site of political struggle. Over the centuries, there have been ongoing confrontations, particularly around religion and language, as Wales was governed by administrations in London whose principal concerns were with England (Jones and Roderick 2003). Not only did those in Westminster take little account of the differences between England and Wales, but after the electoral victory of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party in 1979, the Welsh found themselves subjected to reforms by a political party which had only ever received minority support in Wales.

In 1997, the people of Wales voted in favour of political devolution. As a result, the National Assembly for Wales was established in 1999 and given responsibility for the governance of key areas of policy, including health and education. It was therefore not surprising that the newly-formed Welsh Government sought to distance itself from the neoliberal politics which had characterised successive London-based governments, not only the new right agenda of Margaret Thatcher, but also the 'third way' New Labourism of Tony Blair. In 2002, Rhodri

Morgan, the First Minister, made his now famous ‘clear red water’ speech which outlined the different approach that Wales would take:

Our commitment to equality leads directly to a model of the relationship between the government and the individual which regards that individual as a citizen rather than as a consumer. Approaches which prioritise choice over equality of outcome rest, in the end, upon a market approach to public services, in which individual economic actors pursue their own best interests with little regard for wider considerations. (Morgan 2002)

These wider considerations have usually involved the pursuit of greater social justice. Drakeford (2007), former advisor to Rhodri Morgan and now Assembly Member and Minister, argues that the Welsh commitment to social justice is based on a series of core principles which include a belief that ‘good government is good for you’, a commitment to progressive universalism, high rather than low trust, a strong ethic of participation and a commitment to ensuring greater equality of outcome. Table 1 outlines, albeit somewhat crudely, some of the contrasts between the dominant political discourses in Wales and England in recent decades.

#### **TABLE ONE SHOULD GO ABOUT HERE**

Even before parliamentary devolution, when Wales was subject to the same policy regimes and legislative measures as England, the Welsh political and cultural context gave Welsh education a distinctive complexion. Since devolution, this distinctiveness has become ever more apparent, as it evident in some of the key policies outlined in the next section.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Good government is good for you*

The Welsh starting point that ‘good government is good for you’ stands in stark contrast to the ideologies underpinning England’s public sector reforms. Since the 1980s, education policies in England have been driven by an assumption that the notion of good government is oxymoronic and that, in general, government is ‘bad for you’. Successive neoliberal administrations have tried to lessen what they saw as the ‘dead hand of the state’ on schools,

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<sup>1</sup>Because it is impossible to cover the range of policies that have been introduced in Wales at all phases since 1999, the analysis is based on only a selection of what might be seen as the ‘key’ policies in the compulsory phase.

teachers and parents and reduce the power of what were sometimes referred to as 'local education monopolies' (Flew 1991). In England, the capacity of local authorities to redistribute resources and target areas of need has been significantly weakened as almost all funding is now devolved directly to schools. In England, Conservative governments have sought to remove state-maintained schools from the control of their local authorities entirely through encouraging schools to operate independently of local government. Indeed, a significant number of local authorities in England have had their education services privatised.

Even before devolution, local authorities in Wales were seen as integral to the governance and administration of education. The Grant-Maintained (GM) Schools policy, ushered in with the National Curriculum as part of the 1988 Education Reform Act, applied to both England and Wales. But only very few schools in Wales (less than 1.5 percent of the total number of GM schools) elected to 'opt out' of local authority control. And while schools in Wales have been given responsibility for budgets, a significant proportion of funding is still retained at local authority level to provide a range of supplementary services. In 2011, England, 90 percent of the total school budget was delegated directly to schools in England. In Wales, the figure was only 70 percent.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, since parliamentary devolution, Wales has not sought to weaken the principle of local authority control through either privatisation or through encouraging schools to operate independently. Even where local authorities have been assessed by Estyn to be unsatisfactory, the solution is not seen to reside in *reducing* government control but rather *instrengthening* it.<sup>3</sup>

### *Progressivism*

Over the last few decades, English education policy has increasingly been characterised by a need to return to the past, while the Welsh Government has upheld the virtues of progressivism. The contrasting orientations to traditionalism and progressivism can be seen in the extent to which England and Wales have developed different curricular and assessment regimes. As already mentioned, the 1988 Education Reform Act which ushered in the National

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<sup>2</sup> This proportion has increased since 2011 (DfE 2014), but the subsequent diversification of school types in England makes it impossible to make direct comparisons between the two countries.

<sup>3</sup> Two reports into local governance have recently been commissioned which have raised a number of issues about the 'viability' of such a small country having 22 local authorities. The Williams Report and the Hills Report have recommended a number of strategies including greater use of regional consortia to deliver educational services and reducing the number of authorities.

Curriculum applied to both England and Wales – but the ways in which it was interpreted and implemented were subtly different in each context. In England, the National Curriculum can be seen as the start of a project of cultural restoration – celebrating ‘English’ culture and the ‘curriculum of the dead’ (Ball 1993). In Wales, the project took a different direction – characterised by ‘a democratic spin with an orientation towards a wider Europeanism’ (Phillips and Sanders 2000: 15).

In the years since parliamentary devolution, the gap between Wales’ progressivism and England’s restorationism has continued to widen. One of the clearest examples of this gap is early years education. In England, the former education minister, Michael Gove, vilified the ‘progressive betrayal’ of children and initiated a ‘back to basics’ curriculum for young learners (Gove 2013). In Wales, the Foundation Phase programme, discussed by Chris Taylor in this Issue, is unashamedly ‘progressive’ in orientation. Inspired by movements in Italy and Scandinavia that are based on the principles of child-centred education, the Foundation Phase is designed to offer children a ‘rich curriculum’ with a central focus on wellbeing (Aasen & Waters 2006, Maynard et al 2013). Even more fundamental differences are likely to emerge as a result of the recently published Donaldson Report on curriculum and assessment. The Report, *Successful Futures* (Welsh Government 2015), recommends the thorough-going re-organisation of the curriculum into ‘areas of learning and experience’: the expressive arts; health and wellbeing; humanities; languages, literacy and communication; maths and numeracy; and science and technology. If these recommendations are fully implemented, we will see the erosion of traditional subject boundaries at secondary school level. The reforms will bring Wales further in line with Scandinavian-style arrangements and even further out-of-step with what is happening in England.

Associated with the moves towards a more progressive curriculum have been other changes in assessment. In general there is far less standardised testing in Wales than in England. In 2006 the Welsh Government abandoned many of the tests introduced as part of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Standardised assessment tests (SATs) for seven year-olds were dropped in 2001 and those for 11 and 14 year-olds in 2004. In the words of the former education minister, Jane Davidson, it was important for Wales to move away from a system where ‘each student was just a statistic’ (Archer 2008). In terms of the debates around standards in assessment, the English administration has tried to eliminate coursework from

GCSE and A levels entirely, while Wales has continued to see coursework as a valuable component. The Welsh Baccalaureate, like the Foundation Phase, assesses self-directed learning through individual projects.

### *Universalism*

In 2001, Alistair Campbell (2007), Tony Blair's Director of Communications, announced that 'the day of the bog-standard comprehensive school is over.' Based on the assumption that uniformity implies mediocrity, New Labour and Conservative administrations have encouraged the diversification of schools in England to the extent that it is now difficult to talk of an education 'system' at all. Wales, on the other hand, has continued to uphold the virtues of a comprehensive education system. Indeed Britain's first comprehensive school (Ysgol Uwchradd Caerdybi) was opened in Wales in 1949. Speaking in 2013, the Welsh Minister for Education and Skills, Huw Lewis, reaffirmed his belief: 'in the worth and the potential of community-based, comprehensive education', adding that 'in their bones this is the way the Welsh people want things to be.' (Lewis 2013)

Unlike in England, where grammar schools continue to exist (and even expand), Wales has no academic selection by ability on entry to state-maintained secondary schools. Neither does Wales have the range of specialist schools nor academies which have mushroomed in England and which attract and select pupils on the basis of aptitude (Coldron, Willis and Wolstenholme 2009). The only form of differentiation of schools within the state-maintained sector in Wales relates to the medium of instruction. Currently, over one fifth (22 per cent) of 7 year olds are taught in the medium of Welsh (Welsh Government 2013). There is some fall-off in numbers as children progress to secondary education – where less than one fifth (17 per cent) are assessed in Welsh as a first language at Year 9. However, there are no selective admissions procedures for these schools and the Welsh Government is committed to providing Welsh medium instruction for every parent that wishes it for their child. The lack of desire for either selective or specialist provision is evident in the very small number of private schools in Wales. In England, over 7 per cent of pupils attend private schools. In Wales, the proportion stands at less than 2 per cent.

### *Cooperation is better than competition*

The explicit rejection of consumerism in the 'Clear Red Water' speech can be seen in the Welsh Government's attempt to reduce rather than heighten competition between schools. With reference to what is happening in England, Huw Lewis (2013), the current Education Minister, comments:

I want a Welsh educational system where we do not have the phenomenon that is starting to play out across the border in England where schools compete for the "best" students, whatever they are, or they play the qualifications game between exam boards ... to improve their public standing.

The Welsh Government does not publish primary and secondary school performance data through which 'league tables' can be compiled. There is currently a colour-coded 'national school categorisation system' which ranks primary and secondary schools. However, this categorisation is based on a range of hard and soft measures (including self-evaluation) and is designed to reflect a school's capacity to improve rather than simple attainment levels. It would certainly provide no simple yardstick on which to base school choice.

#### *High trust rather than low trust*

Relatedly, the Welsh Government claims that its relationships with education providers are based on collaboration rather than mistrust. The Government has traditionally worked *with* teachers – eschewing some of the more hostile portrayals of the teaching profession and the 'education establishment' which can be found in England (most famously characterised by Michael Gove as the 'blob'). For example, the former Minister for Education, Jane Davidson, is reported to have met with the teaching unions individually – as well as together – twice each year (Evans 2015). More recently, Huw Lewis claims that the close relationships with teachers avoided strike action:

... respect through dialogue and negotiation – an open door and a willingness to listen and so Wales has avoided what England is suffering this autumn in terms of a teacher dispute. It is not rocket science to hold on to a sense of respect and a willingness to listen. (Lewis 2013)

#### *Ethic of participation*



It is not only dialogue with professionals which is sought after. Wales was the first, and remains the only, country in the UK to make school councils mandatory. The Schools Councils (Wales) Regulations introduced in 2005 require all schools to establish a council which will be convened at least six times each year and will enable pupils to discuss matters relating to their school, their education and any other matters of concern to them. Although Estyn inspections (2008) and other research (Farrell 2010) indicate that these councils may not always be as effective or as participatory as many would like, they do provide a symbol of participatory democracy. In addition, pupils are routinely invited to contribute to policy consultations. For example, the recent consultation undertaken as part of the Donaldson Review elicited over 350 individual responses from school pupils. The Children's Commissioner has just launched a major national survey called 'What Next?' inviting children to highlight issues which might help determine the key areas of work.

#### *Greater equality of outcome*

Finally, the Welsh education policy agenda emphasises the importance of reducing educational inequalities. The relationship between poverty and attainment is as strong in Wales as elsewhere, but the Welsh Government has tried to put in place measures to ameliorate the worst effects of poverty. Tackling the impact of poverty on attainment is Wales' 'top priority' (Lewis 2013). In order to help more disadvantaged pupils, Wales has retained some of the targeted funding, such as the Educational Maintenance Allowance (a means-tested bursary provided for those from poorer backgrounds to stay in education after the leaving age of 16), which England has abandoned. Similarly, at higher education level, Wales has tried to soften the impact of raised tuition fees through subsidising the fees of Welsh-domiciled students, avoiding the payment of up-front fees through making loans available and providing a wide range of means-assessed grants for those from poorer backgrounds.

Of course England is also concerned to minimise the impact of social background on attainment, but the discourse there tends to focus on equality of *opportunity*. In Wales, the emphasis is much more in equality of *outcome*. Huw Lewis, claims: 'My ambition then, is to eradicate inequalities in learner outcomes' (Welsh Government 2014: 4).

## **The representation of Wales: a case of misrecognition?**

In spite of – or most probably because of – this growing divergence between England and Wales, developments in the Welsh education system have either been largely overlooked or derided. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Wales suffers the injustice of misrecognition. Fraser (1997) argues that misrecognition occurs when peoples or practices are rendered invisible (non-recognition), routinely derided and/or subject to cultural domination. Each of these dimensions can be found in the way in which Welsh education policy and provision features in current debates and analysis.

### *Non-recognition*

Wales is often rendered largely invisible in media and academic coverage of education policy and practice. Most UK-wide newspapers make two common errors in their coverage of education. One is to not make any reference to the country at all to which the article relates - because it is just assumed it is England. The other is to lump England and Wales together as if they were a single polity. More surprising, though, is the relative neglect of Wales in academic writing on education policy.

Over twenty years ago, Phillips (1995: 103) commented that within the growing field of education policy sociology there was 'a tendency to avoid the Welsh agenda', noting that 'virtually no reference is made either to the Welsh education policy initiatives or to the unique' debates over cultural expression.' It might have been thought that the subsequent emergence of even greater divergence within the UK as a result of parliamentary devolution would attract some attention. However, in general, post-devolution reform continues to be ignored by the field. An examination of education policy textbooks published recently shows that, with the commendable exception of Stephen Ball's (2013) *The Education Debate* (which is explicit about the use of 'England' and 'English' at the outset and recognises that there are significant differences between English education policy and what is happening elsewhere in the UK), Wales continues to be overlooked. Chris Chapman and Helen Gunter's (2009) edited collection *Radical Reforms: public policy and a decade of educational reform* contains no reference either to Wales or to Scotland – nor does it mention democratic devolution amongst its list of significant New Labour reforms. Abbott, Rathbone and Whitehead's (2012)

*Education Policy* also makes no reference at all to devolution and does not acknowledge that the contents refer only to England.

In addition to overlooking Wales, there is a tendency to lump the two countries together – and nearly always with the assumption that what happens in England must also apply to Wales. As we have seen, even before parliamentary devolution, such an assumption was problematic and ignored the significant differences between the two nations. After devolution, eliding Wales with England is even more misguided. For example, a recent collection of essays published by Demos (Wood and Scott 2014) claims to be about ‘the education system in England and Wales’ even though the contents only relate to policies and research in England. This is particularly disheartening given that Demos is an organisation which claims to be ‘at the centre of policy debates’. Similarly, Paul Adam’s (2014) textbook *Policy and Education* refers sometimes to the UK and sometimes to England without any precision. Students are given no indication that the book really only applies to England and that the policies discussed have no remit in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

### *Derision*

Over the last five years, where Wales has come into the spotlight it is almost always cast in a negative light, as the following selection of headlines demonstrates:

*Pisa tests show pupils in Wales falling behind (BBC News 7/12/10)*

*Wales worst in UK for global education rankings (Daily Post 3/12/13)*

*School standards in Wales 'causing concern' (The Guardian 29/1/13)*

*I have seen the Labour future and it doesn't work. It's called Wales (The Daily Telegraph 6/12/13)*

*The policies that have wrecked Wales – coming soon to a Miliband government near you (The Spectator 11/7/14)*

As can be seen from the last two headlines, the judgments have a party political dimension. Speaking in 2012, Michael Gove, then England’s Secretary of State for Education, told the House of Commons:

... it grieves me that the Welsh education system went backwards under Labour, and it grieves me even more that every objective assessment of what has happened under Labour in Wales shows that education has improved more quickly and effectively in England than in Wales. (Gove 2012)

A year later in December 2013, Gove warned voters in England that 'you need only look over the Severn to see a country going backwards.' In 2014 he referred to Wales as 'an object lesson' in what happens when you abandon reform – claiming that 'This decline is traceable directly to the Labour Party's refusal to embrace reforms we've been pursuing in England. In fifteen years not a single academy or free school has opened in Wales'. In the run-up to the 2015 UK General Election, the Conservative-led coalition rarely seemed to miss an opportunity to pass negative judgement on what was going on in Wales to the extent that many Welsh politicians claimed that they had launched a 'War on Wales' (e.g. Williamson 2014).

In some ways it is not surprising that those on the right in England should seek to gain political mileage out of maligning the more left-wing Welsh Government. Rees (2012) notes that there has been an interesting shift in perception in recent times from largely positive views of Wales' education reforms in the first few years of devolution to the current portrayal of these same reforms as being little short of disastrous. This shift may be less about the changing fortunes of the Welsh education system and rather more about the changing political climate in England. A Conservative-dominated coalition was hardly likely to view developments in Wales with a sympathetic eye. Michael Gove, known to be a keen supporter of private education, traditional teaching methods and a narrowly academic curriculum, could hardly be expected to warm to a system based on progressivism and a commitment to comprehensive schooling and a broad-based curriculum.

However, the discourse of derision is not only about party politics but reflects a more fundamental cultural domination of Wales by its larger neighbour. There are several dimensions to this. One simply relates to scale. It is not surprising that most media coverage and academic analysis of education policy refers to England, simply because that is where the greater number of readers are to be found. However, it is not only about numbers. England is much larger and more economically and politically powerful than Wales. It is English

priorities which dominate, with the agendas of Wales and the other small home nations being largely by-passed. The inequality between the nations is clearly illustrated in the Leighton Andrews' (2014) account of the debacle around the re-grading of English GCSE assessments in the summer of 2012. Andrews, who was then Minister for Education, outlines the disrespect with which Wales and Northern Ireland were treated by the English regulatory agency, Ofqual, and Conservative politicians. His successor comments on how the Westminster-based government's approach to Wales reveals 'the seemingly indestructible colonial attitudes buried in the dark heart of the Conservative Party in England.' (Lewis 2014)

The dominance of England, coupled with the almost hegemonic hold that neoliberalism enjoys over education policy in Anglophone countries (Rizvi and Lingard 2009), gives the impression that to take an alternative path is nothing less than perverse. For example, Reynolds's (2008: 754) argues that what he calls the 'producerism' of Wales goes against the grain of 'policies seen as axiomatic internationally' (2008: 754). He claims that rather than being based on evidence, Welsh reforms have been driven instead by 'hostility to the English policies .... marked by a principle of not doing what England did.' (2008: 756). In a similar vein, Prowle (2012) in an article headlined 'Bottom of the Class' asserts that 'Welsh collaboration gets poorer results than English competition.' He goes on to advise us that:

Wales must be careful of dismissing initiatives from England on the basis of political ideology or nationalistic pride and instead consider their effectiveness on the evidence available.

Both Reynolds and Prowle imply that Wales has somehow diverged from a steady reform course being ploughed in England. In reality, the continuities with the past are much stronger in Wales than they are in England. It is possible that the growing gap between England and Wales may be explained less by Wales' 'deviation' from some internationally accepted norm and rather more by the distinctive and ideologically narrow policy path which England is pursuing. What both Reynolds and Prowle also ignore is the significant amount of doubt and debate about the efficacy of market-led reforms in education – and their rejection by governments of some of the highest performing countries. Both Reynolds and Prowle overlook the fact that Welsh reforms *do* have an evidence base. The Foundation Phase, for

example, is based on the Scandinavian model which is widely acclaimed as one of the most successful models of early childhood education.

### **A politics of recognition for Wales?**

If it is the case that Wales is subject to the cultural injustice of misrecognition, one strategy would be to develop a politics of recognition (Taylor 1992). This might involve a number of approaches, but is likely to include countering the discourse of derision, exposing its ideological underpinnings and re-affirming the worth of the Welsh approach.

There are many grounds on which the evidence used to deride Wales' education system can be challenged. The 'objective assessments' to which Michael Gove refers are certainly less robust than his confident claims assert and are often based on a lack of acknowledgment of different levels of resourcing, different levels of scale, different assessment regimes and different educational aims.

In terms of resources, there is a significant and growing discrepancy in per capita funding with levels of educational expenditure lower in Wales than in England. In 2011, the spend per pupil in Wales was £604 less than in England. As Gorard (2002) noted over ten years ago, if one controls for socio-economic factors, differences in attainment between the two countries are far less marked. There are also differences in scale which make simple England-Wales comparisons rather problematic – it is unsound to compare a country with a population of nearly 55 million with one of 3 million, not least because it discounts significant within-country variation. Rees and Taylor (2014) have modelled a 'synthetic Wales' through matching the 22 local authorities in Wales with the 22 (of 353) local authorities in England that most closely resemble them in terms of economic and social characteristics. This kind of matching significantly reduces the attainment gap between England and Wales. The issue of scale may also be a significant aspect of the apparent 'underperformance' of Wales in the PISA tests. PISA tests are undertaken in only a sample of classes and because Wales is a much smaller country than England, a far greater proportion of Welsh pupils are sampled than English pupils. Given all that we know about sampling, response rates and systematic bias, it is almost certain that the test data from England will be less reliable than that from Wales.

Moreover, it may well have led to a significant over-estimation of the test scores for England (Micklewright, Schnepf and Skinner 2010).

However, even controlling for resources and scale there are still important differences which make comparisons difficult. As already mentioned, Welsh school children no longer take the standardised key stage tests which would enable straightforward comparisons with England to be made – and which might also give them equivalent experience of being tested (Goldstein and Leckie 2016). But the wider context has also meant that English and Welsh schools prioritise different activities. There is little doubt that the emphasis on league tables and targets in England has led to a significant amount of ‘gaming’ which can artificially ‘inflate’ school-level performance. For example, an oft-quoted study by academics in England claims to show that the ‘policy reform in Wales reduced average GCSE performance and raised educational inequality’ (Burgess, Wilson and Worth 2013). However, data from the English schools include a significant number of vocational qualifications which have only approximate equivalence with GCSEs. As Rees and Taylor (2014) point out, if the comparison is based on GCSEs alone, there is actually very little difference between England and Wales.

More robust data are available from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) which has followed the progress of approximately 19000 children born in 2000 and tested them on a wide array of aptitudes at the ages of 3, 5 and 7 years. Sophisticated cross-country statistical comparisons (Taylor, Rees and Davies 2013) show the complex nature of relative progress. For example, at aged 7, it does appear that children in England have made greater gains in literacy than their counterparts in Scotland and Wales. However, this pattern is not replicated in other important areas of cognitive development. In terms of maths ability, Welsh children score just as well as comparable children in England and better than comparable children in Scotland. In terms of measures of pattern construction, children in Wales do significantly better than their counterparts in either England or Scotland. Moreover, despite their lower level of literacy attainment, analysis of the MCS data also shows that ‘poor’ children in Wales and Scotland generally report greater levels of wellbeing than comparable children in England. Taylor et al (2013: 301) speculate that ‘attention on developing literacy skills in England could come at the expense of children's subjective wellbeing’.

Similarly, Wales' 2012 PISA scores may be lower than England's, but there are ways of examining the data which emphasise different aspects. For example, the OECD note that:

Wales has a relatively equitable education system ... The performance of 15-year-old students is not as closely related to their socio-economic background as it is in most other OECD countries. A student's socio-economic background explains 10.4% of the variance in students' performance in mathematics, which is considerably lower than the OECD average of 20.8%.... (OECD, 2014, p.21)

As Rees (2012) points out 'it is instructive that the bench-marks against which Welsh educational performance have been judged are *external* ones'. On criteria of equity and wellbeing – both of which are components of Wales' 'progressive' reform agenda – it could be argued that the MCS and PISA analyses indicate that Wales is actually doing *better* than England. From this perspective, it is tempting to counter the kind of discourse of derision which has been levelled at Wales with assertions that the 'Welsh way' is better. Indeed, many commentators *do* hold Wales up as an admirable bastion against the global tide of neoliberalism (e.g. Toynbee 2014).

However, valorising the 'Welsh way' runs the risk of ignoring the very real challenges facing Wales. The policy directions outlined earlier are only aspirations and are a long way from being achieved. Education in Wales is not making significant progress towards realising even its own objectives. For instance, despite a political preference for collaboration, competition exists in for places in the 'best' state schools. And despite attempts to move towards greater equality of outcomes, the connection between poverty and low educational attainment remains strong (Taylor et al 2013).

What this suggests, and in contrast to Conservative-led critiques of what has happened in Wales, is that we are experiencing not the efficacy of the devolved government to effect change, but its *inefficacy*. Focusing on the lack of capacity of the Welsh Government to effect change draws our attention away from the specifics of the policies themselves and onto the social and political landscape in which they have been implemented. In Wales, this landscape is characterised by social and economic disadvantage and the legacy of post-industrialisation. Wales is also subject to complex, and often conflicting, layers of governance – pressured by



the needs of many small local authorities, a relatively new devolved parliament and the funding and legislative controls of Westminster.

Looked at from this perspective, Wales needs more than simply a politics of recognition. As Fraser (2000) argues, misrecognition is rarely a 'free-standing cultural harm'. Wales' misrecognition is linked to other forms of injustice – participatory and economic – which inhibit its capacity for transformative change. Wales may not need a politics of recognition, it might need other kind of political remedies – a politics of redistribution and/or a politics of representation.

### **Repositioning Wales**

In terms of analytical ways forward, rather than address the injustice of misrecognition with a politics of recognition which affirms the 'Welsh way', it is probably more fruitful to reposition Wales – and the other small home nations – to a more central role in policy debate and research. Wales, like Scotland and Northern Ireland, has been subjected to the 'peripheralisation of Britain' (Lovering 1991) and needs to be brought in from the margins to mainstream analysis. Such a repositioning will be of benefit not only for those of us working in Wales, but also for the educational research community more widely. Rather than seeing Wales as some kind of peripheral distraction, its reform trajectory can be used to improve our analyses from policy science to policy scholarship (Grace 1991: 3). In general, parliamentary devolution can tell us not only about education policies, but about the politics of education (Dale 1989).

The issue of how Wales can be repositioned within policy research brings us back to longstanding and fundamental debates about the different ways of framing and analysing educational policies and processes. Thirty years ago, Dale (1986) outlined three different projects of policy research: the 'policy analysis' project, the 'social administration' project and the 'social science' project. Each of these different projects – which have different purposes and different audiences – might benefit from looking across the UK.

The 'policy analysis' project, according to Dale, seeks to evaluate specific initiatives without necessarily questioning the underlying direction or assumptions embedded within a policy.

This project is perhaps most closely embodied in the ‘what works’ agenda which underpins evaluations such as those funded through the Education Endowment Fund in England. Even these very focused evaluations might be enhanced through a more comparative dimension.

The ‘social administration’ project can be epitomised by the political arithmetic approach (Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980) in which systems (and system change) is charted. Although, as Ozga (2000) argues, this kind of approach tends to focus on and within a national system, the increasingly divergent systems of the UK offer huge and as yet largely unrealised potential for political arithmetic through the use of ‘home international’ comparison proposed by Raffe et al (1999). As Taylor et al (2013) remark, the shared characteristics of the four nations means that there is greater control for exogenous factors than with many ‘fully’ international comparisons – enabling a greater confidence in the attribution of relationships between policies and outcomes.

However, it is to the ‘social science’ project that the repositioning of Wales and the other ‘peripheral’ nations might contribute most. Rather than being tied to the concerns of policy-makers – whether they be in Cardiff, Edinburgh, Belfast or London – the social science project seeks to understand *how* policy works rather than simply *whether* it works (Ozga 2000). In trying to understand the nature and direction of shared characteristics and national divergence we need to look not only at the trajectories of the four nations as if they were independent entities but at the historical, political and cultural relations *between* them. Thus, the repositioning of Wales will foster not only comparative research but *relational* analysis.

What has hopefully been made clear from the analysis offered here is that narratives of what is happening in Wales can *only* be understood in relation to what is going on elsewhere – and particularly in England. The recent debates around the relative performance of Wales highlights the very *political* nature of education policy and education policy research. The Conservative Party’s so-called ‘War on Wales’ in the run-up to the UK General Election was as much about legitimating what was happening in England as it was about effecting any change in Wales – at least at that point in time.

The experience of Wales also illuminates some of the consequences of the ‘governance by data’ charted by Ozga (2009). Attainment data have been used by the UK government to influence not only what goes on in England but what goes on elsewhere. As Rees and Taylor

(2014: 3) argue, the narrative of Welsh underperformance has had major impacts not only on how Welsh schools are perceived inside and outside the country but also on the actual form of policy-making in Wales. Although it would be hard to describe the Welsh Government's education reform agenda as especially radical, its politically dominant neighbour has sought to mobilise the 'tyranny of numbers' (Ball 2015) to squeeze out alternative conceptions of what might constitute a 'successful' education system.

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Table

**Table 1: The 'clear red water' of contrasting policy discourses**

| <b>Wales</b>                           | <b>England</b>                              |
|--|---|
| Good government is good for you        | Government control should be minimal        |
| Progressivism                          | Cultural restoration                        |
| Universalism                           | Diversification                             |
| Cooperation is better than competition | Competition is necessary to drive standards |
| Trust professionals                    | Challenge professionals                     |
| Ethic of participation                 | Ethic of consumerism                        |
| Greater equality of outcome            | Greater equality of opportunity             |