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## **PISA and the Politics of Welsh Education**

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Something peculiar seems to have happened to education in Wales. Not long ago, there was widespread consensus that parliamentary devolution had allowed successive Welsh Assembly Governments to develop important and imaginative policies across the whole range of educational provision, from early years to the universities. These policies were celebrated not merely because they were distinctive from those in other parts of the UK, but rather because they were seen to be tailored specifically to the needs and aspirations of Welsh citizens. More recently, however, popular perception has shifted dramatically. Now, the emphasis is on the failure of Welsh schools – and increasingly other educational institutions – to provide adequate educational opportunities for our children and young people. Educational attainment is not reaching appropriate standards, to the detriment of individuals' prospects, as well as those of the Welsh economy more widely.

It seems unlikely that this change in the terms of the public debate reflects *actual* changes in educational provision or even in educational attainment. Indeed, levels of attainment have been rising year-on-year. What *has* happened is that political priorities in relation to education have shifted. The emphasis now – and rightly so - is on what the post-devolution education system is actually delivering to Wales. And in this context, it is instructive that the bench-marks against which Welsh educational performance have been judged are *external* ones, in particular the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international measurement of 15-year-olds' performance on tests in reading, mathematics and science.

Wales's results in the 2009 round of PISA have not only been roundly criticised in the British media, but have also been highlighted by the Minister for Education and Skills in the Welsh Government (as he now is), Leighton Andrews, as demonstrating the need for a major overhaul of Welsh schools in particular. As in many other countries, the PISA results for Wales are argued to provide incontrovertible proof of educational failure and the need for fundamental change, irrespective of any local opposition.

It is undoubtedly the case that the PISA scores do tell an important story about the state of Welsh education. However, as with any measurement of educational attainment, the PISA scores have to be *interpreted* carefully. Certainly, the public debate in Wales gives no indication that there is a very substantial technical literature which is *critical* of the analytical approach on which PISA is based. This is not to argue that all the criticisms are correct, but rather to suggest that PISA results should not be seen as unambiguously definitive.

PISA's strength is in providing a *snap-shot* of educational attainment and its correlations with selected aspects of a national educational system. It can tell you that you probably have a problem, but – simply because of the kind of survey that it is - not what the causes are and, hence, not how to solve it. To address the latter requires exploring other sources of data and analysis. As Professor Harvey Goldstein, one of the UK's most eminent statisticians of education, argues, rather than using PISA results to construct what are in reality dubious 'league tables' of educational performance, they should be seen 'as a way of exploring country differences in terms of cultures, curricula and school organization.'

In the Welsh context, then, there should be no debate that educational performance could – and should – be much improved. However, the much remarked decline in PISA scores between 2006, when Wales first entered the Programme, and 2009 should not be taken to indicate an actual deterioration in the performance of Welsh schools. Given that each round of PISA assessment involves different groups of 15-year-olds, at least part of the – rather small - difference between the two measurement dates is attributable to differences between the two groups of pupils, especially as a larger number of schools and a wider cross-section of pupils agreed to participate in 2009.

Moreover, the PISA results need to be interpreted in the light of Wales's very recent entry into the Programme. Unlike in most other countries, schools and their teachers have had little incentive to learn how to approach the PISA tests and, hence, to instruct their pupils how to do so. This will almost certainly change now that schools are being required to prepare young people

specifically for these tests. But what will this really mean in terms of young people's attainment and future prospects?

The crucial issue here is the extent of the 'fit' between what PISA requires and the GCSE curriculum. PISA seeks to measure qualities in pupils, especially capacities to interpret and apply information, which are different from those that are emphasised in GCSEs, where demonstrating the acquisition of knowledge is prioritised. And it is important to remember that it is on GCSE performance that schools have hitherto been judged and for which pupils actually acquire qualifications. Clearly, what this highlights is the need for serious debate about what the school curriculum in Wales *ought* to be aiming for; but this is a debate that is in danger of being pre-empted because of the current preoccupation with PISA.

The critics of Welsh education will, of course, point out that schools in Wales do not fare much better if GCSE performance is taken as the basis of comparison with other parts of the UK and, in particular, England. This sort of 'home international' analysis is useful, as it not only avoids many of the technical difficulties associated with PISA, but also depends on qualifications which schools, teachers and pupils undoubtedly take seriously. Indeed, this sort of evidence has been used to question the quality of Welsh schools and to criticise particular policies, such as the abolition of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs).

It is true that, since the early part of the present decade, there has been a progressive widening of the shortfall between Wales and England in terms of the standard measure of attainment at the minimum school-leaving age, now known as the Level 2 Threshold. The latter is frequently described as the achievement of 5 A\* to C grade GCSEs. In fact, its full definition is 5 A\* to C grade GCSEs *or equivalents*; that is, the measure includes not only GCSEs, but also a wide range of vocational qualifications, the best known of which are BTECs. This detail is significant because if we look at GCSEs *alone*, then (on the basis of the Welsh Government's data) the proportion of young people in Wales achieving the Level 2 Threshold is almost exactly equivalent to that in England; 56% in Wales compared with 56.3% in England in 2009/2010. Whilst there is an *overall* shortfall between Wales and England of some 12 percentage points, this is wholly accounted for by the fact that more young people in England attain the Level 2 Threshold through vocational qualifications.

The performance of Welsh schools therefore appears in a somewhat different light. On this evidence, it would appear that there *is* a problem of educational attainment in Wales. But it is a problem which relates very specifically to the provision of opportunities to pursue vocational qualifications. That this should

be so is not entirely surprising. Historically – right back to the Intermediate Schools established in the 1890s - as access to secondary education has been widened, Welsh schools have been far more effective in providing an academic curriculum than they have in making available opportunities to pursue vocational options. Currently, it may well be that the lower levels of funding that go to Welsh schools compared with those in England are accentuating difficulties here, as vocational provision is more expensive than the academic equivalent.

This relative failure of vocational provision is likely to have the greatest impact on pupils from more educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, who are far less likely to be motivated by the academic curriculum. Indeed, it may be that this goes some way towards explaining the significant under-performance in Wales's PISA scores at the lower end of the attainment range that was recorded in 2006 and again in 2009. And, in this context, improving motivation through the imaginative development of vocational options may contribute significantly to the Welsh Government's objective of improving the basic reading and mathematical literacy of young people. Moreover, reducing the numbers of low-achievers should not be seen as somehow restricting the development of high-achievers. Indeed, as societies as diverse as Finland and South Korea demonstrate, achieving the highest attainment levels is wholly consistent with relatively weak relationships between social background and educational achievement.

Public concern about Wales's education system is entirely legitimate. However, evidence and analysis need to be approached in an open and enquiring way. Presently, the danger is that simplistic readings of PISA and other external bench-marking of Welsh educational performance are serving to close off debate, rather than to open up new avenues for educational development.