The Great Divide: separation of care and education in Wales an examination of policy, reform and research evidence

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The Great Divide: separation of care and education in Wales an examination of policy, reform and research evidence

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Non formal early year's preschool education and care provision continues to be a separated entity from education within Welsh Government policy, curriculum and professional development. Despite international research evidence depicting the importance and benefits of combining the early year's elements with formal education the division within Wales remains. This article discusses the opportunity provided by the implementation of educational reform in Wales through 'Successful Futures' and 'Prosperity for All' to unite the care and education systems for young children and the potential benefits of doing so, sifting through robust evidence of the importance and long term attainment benefits of a quality early years' provision, historical missed opportunities and the prospects for change.

Key words: Early Years Policy, Education and Care, Successful Futures, Educational reform, Quality early year's provision.

What is the great divide?

Historically care and education have been seen as separate disciplines, the earliest years of a child's life 0-3 years have been identified as the time when children require close care and stability having implications for their lifelong achievement and development, this is universally accepted and recognised (Public Health Wales, 2017). The 'Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 calls for working and thinking together, supporting the development of joined up initiative and policy with the ultimate aim of '*improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wale*s' (Welsh Government, 2015e:3).

However, within Wales the divide between care and education remains with a clear split in policy and curriculum; formal education policy and preschool care fall under different ministerial responsibilities within Welsh Government impacting on the alignment of policy and procedures in the course of children's care and education (Welsh Government, 2017d). Curriculum guidance for the education of young children starts at three years of age with the Foundation Phase designed for children aged three to seven whilst for children under three with no official curriculum or development support, care and development has been supported by guidance such as the 'Birth to three Matters' and age related developmental stages (Welsh Government, 2015c; Sure Start, 2012).

Currently we are engaged in an opportunity for a revolution in education through the 'Successful Futures' review of education in Wales (Donaldson, 2015). The sixty-eight recommendations from the report have been fully accepted by the Welsh Government and are driving a fundamental change in education for children aged three to sixteen, this includes cross curriculum subjects, alternative assessments and revolutionary teaching approaches. This is reflected in an international context with countries such as Finland changing the face of their education by eliminating separate subjects from their curriculum (Murray, 2016). The drivers for the revolution in education and Wales can be attributed in part to the PISA scoring

system (Programme for International Student Assessment). Currently Wales are scoring significantly below the World leading countries such as Singapore in English, Maths and Science scores. Rated out of the 72 participating Countries Wales positioned 40th in reading, 39th in Maths and 35th in Science, across the UK Wales are the lowest scoring nation falling below England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The PISA rating of Wales impacts on our ability to draw in international funding and potentially impact the future ability of our children to compete in the international job and business markets (Wightwick, 2016, Telegraph, 2016). Within the '*The Welsh Education Reform Journey: A Rapid Policy Assessment' report* (2017) the OECD identifies that in order for Wales to achieve the desired results of a complete reformation of Education, Wales needs to both '*Bring[ing] further coherence across the various reform initiatives*' and '*Continue[ing] the process of co-constructing policies with key stakeholders*' (2017:8) both of these recommendations highlight the importance of a coherent and all-encompassing approach to fundamental change. 'Education 2030' (OECD, no date) sets out the future of education and skills and competencies needed to support future demand for skills, this is reflected in the competencies and areas of learning identified within 'Successful futures' to enable our education system to provide children with the knowledge and skills to adapt to a fast paced developing world.

However, the future care and education of our youngest children is noticeably absent from the proposed revolution. Welsh Government have accepted that

> *Successful Futures provides the foundation for an ambitious, engaging 21st century curriculum shaped by the very latest international thinking. Together we now embark on the next stage of the journey.*
>
> (Huw Lewis WG, 2015d)

Through this vision '*Successful Futures*' is only relevant for children aged three to sixteen and the professionals working with them. This eliminates a 40,000 strong pool of early year's professionals currently working with children under three along with the estimated 85,000 children under two from embarking on the revolution of our children's future (Stats Wales, 2017). The omission of the Early Years sector and under threes is also evident within the Welsh Governments Four-year plan for education '*Education in Wales: Our National Mission*' (Welsh Government, 2017b) where early years' education and care for under threes is markedly overlooked. Internationally the need for institutional change throughout the system is highlighted as a requirement for success with curriculum reform within the OECD (no date) movement '*Education 2030*' stating that '*Changing one element, e.g. curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, etc., may only be useful if other related elements are changed as well*'; in Wales this opportunity is being missed.

The guidance and plans for early years are placed in a separate body of new policy relating to social care, communities and families building on the '*Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan*' (Welsh Government, 2013). The new policies covering early years in Wales are the '*Taking Wales Forward: 2016-2021*' and '*Prosperity for All: the national strategy*' where early years is identified as one of the five crosscutting key priorities for Wales, within which the first few years of a child's life are recognised as being a crucial time period for their lifelong achievement and development; nonetheless the opportunity to establish links and continuity from early years to education are again missed maintaining the separation in policy (Welsh Government, 2016, Welsh Government, 2017e). '*Prosperity for*

all' states that early years' provision should '*build strong key skills, and embeds health awareness, well-being and resilience'* the difficulty with not linking these with education from the outset promotes the separation of teaching/teaching support from early years' professions potentially impacting on transition, mutual respect and the value placed on the others profession (Welsh Government, 2017e:23).

Evidence for Unification

In an international context the importance of early years' education and care and the unification with education has been brought together, with Norway for example providing universal Early Childhood Education and Care from the age of one (Eliassen et al., 2017) and Australia, China and Singapore bringing together policy, curriculum and education from birth under the same ministerial umbrella (Tan, 2017; ACEAQA, 2016; Zhou, 2009; Van der Aalsvoort, 2015). In Wales there is evidence of unification and the positive impact of this; health and early years have been brought together through a number of recent policy movements and initiatives such as the '*Flying Start'* initiative; this unification has continued within the cross cutting priorities in '*Prosperity for All'* (Welsh Government, 2014c; Welsh Government, 2017e*)*. This continued blending of public services and support for Wales' youngest children and families is supported by a £140 million investment into Flying Start and £45 million investment in 30 hours' free childcare within the '*Taking Wales Forward Plan 2016-2021' (*Welsh Government, 2016). Positive impacts have been noted from both health and educational perspectives of the integration of early years and health with educational attainment improvements seen between children that have attended Flying Start and those that have not with a common core skills increase from 70.6% to 76.1% at key stage 1 (Welsh Government, 2017f). Links have also been made to long term health benefits of early childhood intervention including lower blood pressure, and lower risk factors for cardiovascular and metabolic diseases (Campbell, 2014). Following on from this Public Health Wales are investing a further £38 million to extend and expand the first 1000 days' initiative and Adverse Childhood Experiences projects (Bishop, 2016).

There are significant implications from a linked set of robust research for the long term and quality impacts of Early Years provision on children's learning and development. Data from the Effective Provision of Preschool Education/Effective Preschool Primary and Secondary Education (EPPE/EPPSE) studies (Sammons et al., 2004; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2014); Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) case studies (Siraj et al., 2002) and the ongoing Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) (Melhuish, 2016; Melhuish et al., 2017) have provided a substantive and ongoing body of evidence detailing the impacts of high quality preschool on children attainment and lifelong outcomes. Skills acquired in high quality early years' provision are essential to life long and later academic achievement as identified via the (EPPE/EPPSE) studies, with positive impacts seen on language, cognitive and social development at age five followed by continuing positive effects seen on GCSE attainment at age 16 (Sammons et al., 2004; Sylva et al., 2014).

Throughout these studies the role of care and education has been inextricably linked with early year's provision recognised as a crucial element of a child's education. In addition to this attendance at a high quality preschool was identified as significant in the attainment of

children at age 16, at post compulsory education and in positive life choices with an exchequer gain of £8,090 per household following an increase to lifetime earnings (Sylva et al., 2014). Evidence was also identified supporting a benefit to children's social, emotional and behavioural development from attending quality preschool, supporting children to be curious and active learners when entering formal education (Sammons et al., 2004). Recent neurobiological evidence has highlighted the positive impact emotional regulation and control formed during the pre-formal educational years of a child life have a significant impact on their cognitive development and ability in later education (Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016). The impact for educational reform here is to build on and maintain the impacts of high quality early years' provision when moving into formal education, aligning the two sectors would provide for shared policy, guidance, good practice and professional development.

Implementation of Reform: Opportunity for unification

The evidence of the potential impact of early year's education and care has not been ignored in Wales forming much of the basis for the childcare element of the Flying Start intervention program, a central element in delivering the Welsh Governments seven core aims for Children and Young People (Welsh Government, 2015b). The '*Flying Start Annex - Quality Childcare Guidance'* (Welsh Government, 2014a) set out standards for achieving high quality childcare making reference to the findings of the EPPE/EPPSE and linked studies as a basis for the quality childcare provision criteria, significantly the qualification level of staff and the importance of transitioning into the Foundation Phase. However, the divide between care and education policy remains with Flying Start sitting under Children and Social Care rather than education (Welsh Government, 2017d).

Recognition of the need to unify systems and policy for care and education has previously been recognised by Welsh Government (2014b) in the '*Independent review of childcare and early education registration, regulation and inspection'* report. Recommendations were made within this report highlighting '*a body of growing international evidence'* (Welsh Government, 2014b:5) supporting the unification of care and education systems within Wales both within legislation and at ministerial and policy levels, further recommendations were made regarding the joint working of the separate inspectorate bodies for care and education, Estyn (no date) and Care Inspectorate Wales (2017) (CIW previously CSSIW). Since this report progress has been made with regard to inspection where a joint inspection framework (CSSIW, 2016) has been developed between the two inspectorate bodies for non-maintained settings providing Foundation Phase provision for three to four year olds, although this is limited for three to four-year-old provision it is a step in the right direction to aligning the sectors with initial pilots complete and roll out expected in Autumn 2018. In addition, a '*Foundation Phase Excellence* Group' has been established to share good practice between maintained and non-maintained providers of Foundation Phase including training and a dedicated section on Welsh Governments Flagship online educational support system 'Hwb' (Welsh Government, 2017i). Recommendations within the review of childcare and early education report were that ministerial responsibility for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) were placed under one responsibility by 2016, however at this point in time the divide within the cabinet remains with the responsibility for children and social care

(Minister Huw Irranca-Davies AM) remaining within Health and Social Services (Cabinet Secretary Vaughn Gethin AM) separate from the responsibilities for education (Cabinet Secretary Kirsty Williams AM), (Welsh Government, 2017c).

Mourshed et al. (2010) within the research report 'How the World's most improved systems keep getting better' states that to implement reform successfully changes must be made to the '*very fabric of the system pedagogy'* (2010:71). The Mourshed et al. (2010) report utilising data from twenty international reform systems identifies levels of intervention termed 'intervention clusters' the highest levels of intervention clusters involve a holistic undertaking and understanding of reform at all levels of involvement including the decentralisation of pedagogy and collaborative practice amongst educators. A central element of these levels of improvement is the journey from the bottom to the top, with the professionalisation of all educators deemed essential to move from 'good to great'. Does this not then support the notion that 'Successful Futures' (Donaldson, 2015) provides an opportunity for Wales to make these fundamental changes to both the care and education system from birth unifying the policy, regulation and quality from birth to sixteen.

Main & Pendergast (2017) undertook an evaluation of a large scale roll out of training on major changes to curriculum delivery in Australia and found that a positive element of the effectiveness of the professional development for curriculum change was the collective participation of leaders and leadership teams able to work together to implement change across the board, an element of Desimone (2009) five core features for effective professional development. Male and Palaiologou (2017) further identify the success of pupils and schools is linked to collaboration and effective communication with communities both families and organisations, both sets of research evidence supporting the unification of both systems.

The recognition of the need for professionalisation of the education and care workforce in Wales comes from the Childcare, Play and Early Years Workforce Plan (WG, 2017a) and the move for registration of Learning Support Staff although currently this is limited to learning support assistants based in schools. The Childcare, Play and Early Years Workforce Plan (WG, 2017a) is a positive move towards lifting the profile of a career choice to work in early years rather than a fall back, historically childcare and health and social care qualifications have typically been chosen at age 14-16 by students who do not have the academic achievement or prefer a more vocational course (Jin et al. 2010), the qualification level needed for quality and effective early years care and education is emphasised by the IPPR report '*Early Developments Bridging the Gap between Evidence and Policy in Early Years Education'* (Parker, 2013). The report includes a recommendation to double the number of graduates working in early years' education to improve quality of provision, Social Care Wales support this through their list of approved and recommended qualifications for professionals working within early years, which now includes a number of degree programmes integrated with practical qualifications (Social Care Wales, 2017). The professionalisation of the early years and education sector is also an issue outside of Wales with Scottish Parliament highlighting the need to professionalise the sector to encourage early year's educational learning support as a desirable career path (Redford, 2017).

Conclusions and recommendations

Taking these findings into account Welsh Government should also consider the roll out of successful futures reform to leaders of all pre-school and non-maintained to implement fluidity and enhance understanding, buy in and transition into formal education.

A unified system provides an opportunity for the continuation of relationships established with parents and families in early years care and education facilitating transition and parental support and involvement for their children's education. Studies have evidenced the positive impact parental involvement can have on children's education and achievement (Kingston et al., 2013; Anderson and Minke, 2007), early years care and education in Wales facilitate the building of open channels of communication and involvement of parents, one of the four strands of the Flying Start initiative is the Parenting support including Language and Play programmes to support and facilitate the involvement of parents in their child's care and education (Welsh Government, 2014c). The National Evaluation of Flying Start has highlighted the key elements families felt were successful within Flying Start as part of the second wave of family's research report. The key elements identified were the supportive and strengthening relationships with the early year's professionals within the Flying Start programme and families felt confident and involved in their children's care and education (Welsh Government, 2017g). Unified policy, curriculum and inspection would facilitate the continuity of this relationship into formal education boosting family and community engagement.

Funding implications for a unification of care and education systems in Wales are also positive, based on the proposed budget for Wales 2018-2019 and investment by Public Health Wales into early years intervention and prevention projects potentially there is a combined funding of £650 million to drive forward a coordinated holistic approach to care and education that does not exclude the earliest and most important years this; includes the previously mentioned Flying Start and Public Health Wales investments as well as £93.7 million for the Pupil Deprivation Grant (both early years and standard) and an allocated £314 million in additional funding for education (Welsh Government, 2017h). A combined approach and unified funding would allow Wales to transform the education and development of children from birth to sixteen providing a coordinated, holistic approach for parents, early year's professionals and teachers, providing the opportunity to create a system that can compete with successful education systems across the World and improve the life chances of our children (Kalicki et al., 2017).

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