



## **Towards Equity and Quality in Education: Analysing Contemporary Reform in Wales**

*Alma Harris*

*Michelle Jones*



*Anna Bryant*

Cardiff Metropolitan University  
Wales, UK

**Citation:** Harris, A., Jones, M., & Bryant, A. (2026). Towards equity and quality in education: Analysing contemporary reform in Wales. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 34(6).

<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.34.9028> This article is part of the special issue **Advancing Equity Globally: Innovations in Curriculum, Teaching, Teacher Education and Professional Development** guest edited by Maria Teresa Tatto and Trevor Mutton.

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the current education context in Wales (UK) and outlines some of the policy drivers aimed at securing greater equity and quality. In many education systems, equity remains the primary policy priority, as the persistent and endemic impact of poverty on subsequent educational achievement and attainment persists for many young people. Equity is also a central policy driver across many education systems globally, as it is now well established that equity is essential for improved system performance. This article examines how recent reforms in Wales are focused on building teacher professionalism and agency. It outlines how curriculum reform and accredited professional learning at scale offer a policy platform for enhancing professional practice, trust, and agency in ways that could positively impact quality and equity. The article suggests that generating higher levels of professional and relational trust within the system could facilitate significant progress toward equity and quality. The article concludes by suggesting some core system-level conditions necessary to make equitable education and high-quality learning more achievable.

**Keywords:** equity; quality; relational trust; accredited professional learning; teacher education policy; curriculum reform; Wales

### **Hacia la equidad y la calidad en la educación: Analizando la reforma contemporánea en Gales**

**Resumen:** Este artículo se centra en el contexto educativo actual en Gales (Reino Unido) y describe algunos de los impulsores de política orientados a garantizar una mayor equidad y calidad. En muchos sistemas educativos, la equidad sigue siendo la principal prioridad de política pública, dado que el impacto persistente y endémico de la pobreza sobre los logros y resultados educativos continúa afectando a numerosos jóvenes. La equidad también constituye un eje central de las políticas educativas a nivel mundial, pues está ampliamente establecido que la equidad es esencial para mejorar el desempeño del sistema. Este artículo examina cómo las reformas recientes en Gales se enfocan en fortalecer la profesionalización y la agencia docente. Explica cómo la reforma curricular y el aprendizaje profesional acreditado a gran escala ofrecen una plataforma de política para mejorar la práctica profesional, la confianza y la agencia de los docentes, de maneras que podrían impactar positivamente la calidad y la equidad. El artículo sugiere que generar mayores niveles de confianza profesional y relacional dentro del sistema podría facilitar avances significativos hacia la equidad y la calidad. Concluye proponiendo algunas condiciones fundamentales a nivel sistémico necesarias para hacer más alcanzable una educación equitativa y un aprendizaje de alta calidad.

**Palabras clave:** equidad; calidad; confianza relacional; aprendizaje profesional acreditado; política de formación docente; reforma curricular; Gales

### **Rumo à equidade e à qualidade na educação: Analisando a reforma contemporânea no País de Gales**

**Resumo:** Este artigo focaliza o contexto educacional atual no País de Gales (Reino Unido) e apresenta alguns dos principais direcionadores de políticas voltados para assegurar maior equidade e qualidade. Em muitos sistemas educacionais, a equidade permanece a prioridade principal, pois o impacto persistente e endêmico da pobreza sobre o desempenho e a aprendizagem continua afetando muitos jovens. A equidade também é um elemento central das políticas educacionais globalmente, já que está amplamente estabelecido que a equidade é essencial para melhorar o desempenho do sistema. Este artigo examina como as reformas recentes no País de Gales têm se concentrado em fortalecer o profissionalismo e a agência docente. Descreve como a reforma curricular e a formação profissional acreditada em larga escala oferecem uma plataforma de políticas para aprimorar a prática profissional, a confiança e a agência de maneiras que podem impactar positivamente a qualidade e a equidade. O artigo sugere que gerar níveis mais elevados de confiança profissional e relacional dentro do sistema pode facilitar progressos significativos rumo à equidade e à qualidade. Conclui propondo algumas condições essenciais em nível sistêmico necessárias para tornar mais viável uma educação equitativa e uma aprendizagem de alta qualidade.

**Palavras-chave:** equidade; qualidade; confiança relacional; formação profissional acreditada; política de formação de professores; reforma curricular; País de Gales

## **Towards Equity and Quality in Education: Analysing Contemporary Reform in Wales**

The drive for equity within education systems worldwide remains a central policy priority. International evidence suggests that improving equity within an education system is crucial to securing and sustaining system improvement (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). While policymakers generally agree that equity should be a top policy priority, there is little consensus

about achieving this in practice. The complexities and challenges of securing equitable education mean no simple routes or failsafe solutions exist. Consequently, some education systems are embarking on dramatic, large-scale change to remove some of the barriers to equity, anticipating that greater educational quality will follow.

In Wales, within the United Kingdom, pursuing equity throughout the education system has been a long-term goal (Rees & Rees, 2023). Significant educational policy changes have been undertaken in response to major concerns about equity within the Welsh education system. Most recently, a new curriculum has been introduced (Donaldson, 2015; OECD, 2020), and the Welsh government has made substantial investments in accredited professional learning on a large scale (Harris & Jones, 2025). These policy changes are intended to enhance equity and quality within the Welsh education system by positively impacting teachers' professional practice and students' learning.

The current reform process in Wales is driven by a deep commitment to improving quality and equity within education, focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on teachers' professional practice and teacher agency. More than four decades of evidence about school and system improvement/effectiveness point to the teacher as the central unit of change and the critical catalyst in pursuing better student learning outcomes (Jones & Harris, 2020). Consequently, enhancing teacher quality and professional agency is at the heart of many contemporary education reforms within the Welsh system.

This article focuses on three recent reforms: curriculum reform, initial teacher education (ITE) reform, and the establishment of the MA Education (Wales). Collectively, these are key drivers within the contemporary policy landscape in Wales. Each of these system-level levers will be considered from three dimensions. First, the nature and purpose of each reform will be outlined. Second, each reform will be evaluated in terms of its impact on changing professional practice and its potential to improve equity and quality within the system. Finally, each policy imperative is examined through the lens of equity and quality within the context of the Welsh education system. The next section of this article focuses on the theoretical framework used to consider the three policy changes. This framework highlights the importance of fostering greater relational trust to achieve quality and equity.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The emphasis on teacher quality and curriculum change as central drivers of improvement within the Welsh system is predicated on building professional capacity supported by an infrastructure of relational trust. In their seminal work, Bryk and Schneider (2002) propose that relational trust can be found in social exchanges and interactions within any context. The authors propose that relational trust is an organisational property based on reciprocal exchanges between participants. Bryk and Schneider (2002) emphasise the importance of interrelationships and respect for diverse perspectives. They also propose that the presence or absence of relational trust can have profound consequences for any organisation and teachers' collaborative work.

Using relational trust as a theoretical lens is important when examining the potential impact of any system-level change, particularly policies aimed at securing equity and quality. Hofstede (2001) describes relational trust as the distance between parties. It is proposed that if this distance is short, there will be an increased ability to build relational trust. If the distance is long, however, then the converse is true. Covey and Merrill (2006) emphasise the importance of establishing trust quickly and building high-trust relationships to achieve high-trust organisations. It could be argued that professional collaboration is the active act of building collective trust. Covey and Merrill (2006) suggest that trust is the 'one thing that changes everything' regarding classroom, school, and system improvement (p. 1).

It has been argued that relational trust is central to professional capacity building within education systems (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015). High levels of trust are essential for ensuring

quality and equity within any system (OECD, 2020). The evidence suggests that even the most well-intentioned policy change could be derailed without building relational trust at scale (Mayger & Hochbein, 2021). This theoretical framing highlights how the contemporary policy changes featured in this article (e.g., curriculum reform, initial teacher education, and accredited professional learning) rely on relational trust to maintain and sustain complex collaborative processes and programs. To create positive and lasting change at a system level, it is proposed that an environment of trust and safety must be developed and nurtured (Francisco et al., 2023)

In many ways, the reform trajectories that have given rise to the new Curriculum for Wales (CfW), the new approaches to Initial Teacher Education, and the establishment of the MA Education (Wales) are predicated upon strengthening relational trust through building professional collaboration and professional capital throughout the system. Maintaining professional trust through authentic collaboration is complex work, sometimes imperfect, often challenging, but as Hargreaves and Fullan (2015) argue, it is fundamental to safeguard the continuity, quality, and sustainability of any system change.

The international evidence underscores how high-quality professional learning (PL) can enhance classroom instruction and student achievement (Cirkony et al., 2024), provided that high levels of professional and personal trust are in place. It also suggests that, under the right conditions, including professional trust and learning, professional development can be a positive force for educational improvement and a contributor to equitable pedagogical practices (Harris et al, 2017). For these reasons, governments worldwide continue to invest significant resources into professional learning programs, anticipating that classroom, school, and system improvement will follow (McChesney & Aldridge, 2021).

Research suggests that enhanced teacher professionalism remains critical for those within education systems seeking continuous improvement and equitable provision (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006; Mutton & Burn, 2024; Tatto, 2021). A substantial body of evidence within the field of educational change suggests that professional learning can be a key factor in improving teacher quality and, by extension, enhancing learner outcomes. Hitt and Tucker (2016) emphasise the importance of building professional capacity by appointing the right people to their roles and then providing them with ongoing support through the development of trusting relationships.

Other scholars emphasise the importance of collaboration among teachers as a compelling form of professional learning that can benefit individuals and groups pursuing organisational change and improvement (Hargreaves, 2019). In their work, Muckenthaler et al. (2020) note that teachers can receive many benefits from professional learning, including a greater sense of collective achievement and efficacy when engaging productively with others. Writing about the potential of teachers' collective efficacy, Donnahoo, Hattie, and Elles (2018) note the importance of "Linking teachers' actions and student outcomes *explicitly* so that teachers understand that the factors behind student progress are within their collective sphere of influence" (p. 1).

To summarise, it is argued that professional learning alone is unlikely to secure improvements in learning without a commensurate increase in professional trust and collaborative engagement. While professional learning can be a powerful catalyst for changing teachers' practices (Campbell et al., 2016; Chapman et al., 2016; Cordingley, 2015; 2016; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), contemporary evidence highlights the need for more carefully designed, quality-assured, research-informed, inquiry-based programs that explicitly build professional trust and capability.

This article explores the significant changes to accredited professional learning at scale. It also outlines the features of a new Curriculum for Wales that emphasizes quality and equity throughout the system. The next section of this article discusses the complexities, challenges, and potential of the current reform processes to improve quality and equity.

## Curriculum Reform in Wales

In the last 10 years, Wales has embarked upon an ambitious policy transformation, reflected in an extensive set of educational reforms instigated by the launch of ‘Education in Wales - Our National Mission’ (Welsh Government, 2017a). Reforms have included significant changes to initial teacher education (Furlong, 2015; 2016; Welsh Government 2017b, 2023a), renewed professional standards for teaching and leadership (Welsh Government, 2017c); a National Approach to Professional Learning (Welsh Government, 2018a); a National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (Welsh Government, 2021a); and the creation and implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales (CfW) (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2015). Equity and quality have been at the heart of these educational reforms and remain central policy priorities in Wales.

In 2015, ‘Successful Futures’ was published, and a new curriculum was proposed (Donaldson, 2015) with four purposes focusing on how learners should develop as (a) ambitious, capable learners, (b) ethical, informed citizens; (c) enterprising, creative contributors and (d) healthy, confident individuals. The new Curriculum for Wales (CfW) emphasises professional collaboration within, between, and across the system with a robust discourse of pedagogy and teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2021). From day one, this new curriculum was co-constructed with school colleagues collaborating on curriculum planning, pedagogy, and assessments. This signalled a high level of trust in the profession as the new curriculum was not imposed on teachers but was co-constructed by them (Welsh Government, 2020). A group of Pioneer Schools led the curriculum development and has remained integral to implementing the new curriculum.

The development and delivery of the new curriculum in Wales is underpinned by professional collaboration and co-construction. Schools remain at the epicentre of curriculum reform and are front and centre in establishing a coherent delivery and implementation model. CfW has resulted in significant engagement from teachers and school leaders, primarily focused on the curriculum design process and the development of knowledge and experiences. Within the new curriculum, subjects are grouped into six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs): Expressive Arts, Health and Well-being, Humanities, Language, Literacy and Communication, Mathematics and Numeracy, and Science and Technology. Across the six AoLEs, 27 *Statements of What Matters* (SWM) have been developed to drive the key concepts within each area (Welsh Government, 2020). Teachers are guided by ‘Descriptions of Learning’, a series of more specific progression steps for each SWM that increase in complexity as learning develops, and ‘Principles of Progression’, a framework to flexibly cater to learners’ needs (Welsh Government, 2025).

The trust in the profession through the co-constructed nature of curriculum reform is the most potent signal yet that teachers and school leaders are valued and part of system reform in Wales. Curriculum reform has produced a seismic shift in reciprocal trust and professional respect within the Welsh system. It has recalibrated the system by investing in professional agency, responsibility, and action in ways that demonstrate that the profession is valued.

The article will now outline the ITE reform process and the development of the MA Education in Wales. Both large-scale, accredited professional learning interventions have considerably and, to some extent, radically redefined the nature and quality of the professional learning landscape in Wales. They have also underlined the importance of high-quality learning as a professional entitlement and the centrality of relational trust in supporting any change process.

### Reforming Initial Teacher Education

The drive to improve the achievement of all young people and to secure system-wide equity has been at the epicentre of teacher education reform across many countries, not least because of the perceived need to improve national performance in international tests, such as the

Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Many attempts at teacher education reform worldwide, as well as the policy imperatives that have initiated them, have been well-documented and discussed (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kosnik et al., 2016; Menter, 2019).

Within Wales, the latest wave of reform in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has explicitly focused on quality and equity issues. As part of its national vision, the Welsh Government has consistently emphasised the need for equality of opportunity for all since 1999. In the context of education, it has focused relentlessly on addressing deep-seated inequities, primarily but not exclusively related to disadvantaged groups and individuals. Consequently, reducing the poverty-related attainment gap remains at the forefront of national policy in Wales and is the cornerstone of its National Mission (Welsh Government, 2017a).

The most recent ITE reforms, therefore, have equity as an explicit consideration, with changes focused not just on “the ‘what’ of education” but also on the need to understand the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of education” (Furlong, 2020, p.38).

This latest reform of ITE in Wales was redefined by introducing new criteria for the accreditation of ITE programs (Welsh Government, 2017b), which included requirements for all university ITE providers to develop collaborative partnerships with schools. This collaborative approach required new ways of working from three critical perspectives. First, university and school partners had to be jointly accountable for ITE programs. Second, ITE providers needed to develop a governance structure that represented all key stakeholders within the partnership, including schools, universities, student teachers, local authorities, and regional education consortia. Third, providers had to co-construct their ITE curriculum with school partners (Welsh Government, 2017b).

To meet the new accreditation criteria, a close integration between school and university learning was stipulated based on a model of research-informed clinical practice (Burn & Mutton, 2015), clearly outlined in the newly refreshed ITE criteria (Welsh Government, 2023a). There is also a requirement for ITE partnerships to develop a Welsh Language Strategy and a commitment for all student teachers to receive 35 hours of Welsh language development each year in the recently refreshed ITE accreditation criteria (Welsh Government, 2023a). This Strategy is committed to expanding the range of opportunities for student teachers to study through the medium of Welsh and experience the Welsh Language to support the long-term ambition of ‘Cymraeg 2050’ to create a million Welsh speakers by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017d).

In terms of equity, ITE providers must address the ‘Welsh in Education Workforce Plan’ (Welsh Government, 2022) and collaborate with ‘The National Virtual College for Welsh’ (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol) and the ‘Welsh Centre for Adults’ (Cardiff Partnership for ITE, 2024a). In practice, student teachers must compile a portfolio of evidence to document their progress in speaking, listening, reading, writing, and Welsh language development, as well as pedagogical approaches. Other examples of the increased focus on the Welsh language within ITE include the design of an additional school-led training day focusing on Welsh language development for student teachers, opportunities for student teachers to undertake research and inquiry tasks on a range of different Welsh language aspects, and a greater focus on the recruitment of teachers into Welsh medium education (Cardiff Partnership for ITE, 2024a).

Most recently, the refresh of the ITE accreditation criteria has addressed specific issues around equity more explicitly. ITE programs are required to prepare teachers equipped to teach *all* learners, including those with additional learning needs. Additional Learning Needs (ALN) is the term used in Wales to designate learners previously referred to as those with special educational needs (SEN). An example of this explicit focus includes a greater emphasis within modules on ALN, partnerships using the expertise of ALN schools, the design and delivery of an additional school-led training day focusing on ALN for student teachers, and a dedicated ALN conference that enables student teachers dedicated time to recognize their responsibilities

in line with the Welsh Government (2021b) Additional Learning Needs Code and Act (Welsh Government, 2021c; Cardiff Partnership for ITE, 2024a).

The refreshed ITE criteria aim to ensure that ongoing ITE provision takes account of the changing context of schools in Wales, “including the role of community-focused schools tackling the impact of disadvantage, poverty, and inequity on attainment” (Welsh Government, 2023a, p.8). Finally, the new accreditation criteria also explicitly provide “an increased emphasis on supporting the well-being of all learners and a new recognition of the importance of anti-racist learning and teaching” (Welsh Government, 2023a, p.8). To address this in practice, the Cardiff Partnership for ITE has adopted an approach to student teachers' wellbeing that draws on the Welsh Government's Framework for embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2021c).

In 2021, the Welsh Government published an ITE action plan to ensure the proactive recruitment of trainee teachers from Black and racially minoritised backgrounds in Wales (Welsh Government, 2021d). Consequently, ITE providers must publish their global majority recruitment and retention plans (Cardiff Partnership for ITE, 2024b). Furthermore, this work aims to decolonise pedagogy and curriculum delivery, reimagining ITE within an anti-racist paradigm (Davis et al., 2024).

On balance, the new ITE criteria demonstrate a national commitment to tackling issues of disadvantage and equity through appropriate partnership intervention. The aim is that “student teachers should develop the values, knowledge, skills, and attitudes to meet the impact of poverty on educational attainment and equity, to ensure high aspirations and standards for all learners” (Welsh Government, 2023a, p. 24). Programs of ITE accredited by the Welsh Government must ensure that preservice teachers understand “the diverse barriers which learners face at school affecting educational attainment and impacting equity” (Welsh Government, 2023a, p. 29). The criteria are straightforward: such an understanding is essential in informing classroom practice so that new entrants to the profession can meet the needs of a range of different learners, specifically those “from diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds ... from diverse socio-economic backgrounds ... with additional learning needs (ALN)” (Welsh Government, 2023a, p. 29).

Consideration of equity issues has been central to the development of ITE policy in Wales over the past decade, both as part of a broader national mission and as an integral part of education policymaking. What is also essential (and, in terms of a national approach to ITE, somewhat unique to Wales) is the specific pedagogical model through which the knowledge and skills of preservice teachers are to be developed. The original and the latest iterations of the criteria promote an approach to preservice teachers' learning that ensures “that ITE in Wales is both rigorously practical and intellectually challenging at the same time” (Welsh Government, 2023a, p.9).

The accreditation criteria describe how preservice teachers might engage with different forms of knowledge (knowledge about levels of child poverty in Wales, theories that relate to inclusive teaching, what they learn from observing experienced teachers, knowledge of key concepts within a specific subject area so that this knowledge can be made accessible to all learners; their own experience of the classroom, etc.) and bring these different types of knowledge together. Thus, “(t)hey learn to develop, reflect on, and articulate their understandings of professional practice, and thereby increasingly bring it under their control; in doing so, they start to become true professionals in their own right” (Welsh Government, 2023a, p. 11). This approach, however, presents challenges for accredited ITE programs across Wales. The new ‘vision’ requires a very different approach to the traditional model of university-led teacher education, and collaborative partnership working requires both shared conceptual understandings and a new shared language. It also requires high levels of reciprocal trust and respect for diverse experiences, knowledge, and professional dispositions.

As highlighted earlier, the reform of ITE and its implementation have coincided with the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020). Both include significant reform of special educational needs provision and the new ALN requirements (Welsh Government, 2021), meaning that teachers are initiating new professional practices explicitly aimed at reducing inequities within and across schools. To further assist teachers and other professionals with such challenges, a new national qualification (MA Education Wales) was launched in 2021, offering high-quality professional learning for all educators working within the Welsh education system.

### **MA Education (Wales)**

In 2019, the Welsh government funded the development of a new MA Education (Wales) to complete the triumvirate of reforms established to improve quality and equity. The primary aim of this significant policy move was to ensure high-quality, accredited professional learning as a professional entitlement and to offer a clear postgraduate progression route for teachers and other education professionals. The MA Education (Wales) is premised on professional collaboration between Universities and is predicated on building professional trust to co-design and co-deliver the program.

Within Wales, seven universities have collaborated to co-design and co-develop this national postgraduate qualification. A quick scan of the professional learning literature indicates that while universities worldwide accredit and deliver a wide range of professional learning programs, they often undertake this work independently (Nielsen et al., 2021). The lucrative nature of the professional learning marketplace typically means that universities seek a competitive advantage through a single exclusive provision to maximise student numbers and revenue.

Partnership arrangements involving more than two or three universities are rare, primarily because the challenge of brokering different teaching and learning policies, quality assurance arrangements, regulations, and bureaucratic red tape appears insurmountable and is often deemed not worthwhile. In Scotland, the mandatory leadership program for those entering headship, known as 'Into Headship,' is a joint initiative shared among seven universities. However, the program is delivered separately by each participating university, even though it is jointly owned (Harvie et al., 2024).

Currently, the MA Education (Wales) is a shared responsibility among all participating universities, with the core expectation being to work collaboratively and collectively at all stages of the program, including delivery. The seven participating universities that currently accredit and deliver the MA Education (Wales) are Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wrexham University, Swansea University, University of South Wales, and University of Wales Trinity Saint David. All universities remain fully engaged in program co-delivery and are committed to ongoing program evaluation and improvement. The program only works because of the high levels of professional trust and engagement among all university partners.

The MA Education (Wales) affords those who have completed their ITE program and those at different professional career stages the opportunity to move into post-graduate study supported by the Welsh Government. The MA Education (Wales) commenced in 2021, offering high-quality professional learning experiences at the post-graduate level for education professionals throughout Wales. Within the program, there is an expectation that all participants will complete an independent enquiry or piece of research that will benefit the system. With two modules focused explicitly on equity and two addressing issues of inclusion and Additional Learning Needs (ALN), many students have completed research and enquiry on issues with practical suggestions for improving equity and quality. In this respect, the MA Education (Wales) is raising awareness about equity and quality issues and building new professional knowledge and forms of advocacy around equity and quality through the collective work of program participants.

To date, over 700 students from across Wales have enrolled in the MA Education (Wales) program, establishing a substantial cohort of education change-makers within the Welsh system with the potential to enhance professional capacity and foster trust throughout the system. As with the Curriculum Reform and the latest ITE developments, equity and quality are central to MA Education (Wales), not just in the design principles but also in content, delivery, and pedagogy. All modules in the program consider issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in the area of expertise being covered, such as Leadership, Curriculum, and ALN. All the modules comprising the MA Education (Wales) are designed to engage professionals in a deep consideration of equity and quality within their settings and across the system.

The MA Education (Wales) is a bilingual, blended learning program incorporating face-to-face sessions, synchronous online National Conference days, and asynchronous activities for all modules. Academic Module Leads from each university co-teach on the program, and the seven universities jointly accredit the qualification. The program is delivered bilingually, drawing upon expertise in the Welsh Language across the seven universities. All students in the program have access to Welsh and English-medium specialists drawn from across the university partnership.

Six Principles of Master's Level Professional Learning in Wales directly inform the pedagogical content, the face-to-face and online instructional design. These six principles are:

1. Professional learning positively impacts all learners at the centre of the National Approach to Professional Learning
2. Professional learning enables *all* practitioners to take a sustained, critical, contextual, and collaborative approach to professional practice.
3. Professional learning is led by practitioners' individual needs and interests and is aligned with the National Mission
4. Professional learning develops practitioner research and inquiry skills and knowledge through critical analysis and reflection on practice.
5. Professional learning fosters research literacy and evidence-based practice.
6. Professional learning enhances pedagogical content knowledge and informs the improvement of professional practice and judgment. (Welsh Government, 2017a).

Regarding the governance structure, the Vice Chancellors of each of the seven participating universities in Wales signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in March 2020 to support the collaborative design and delivery of the joint program. The Vice-Chancellors of each participating university also signed a further Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) to strengthen the partnership arrangements further. These agreements underpin the collaborative delivery of the program and reinforce the joint governance arrangements that ensure that joint program delivery is quality-assured and collectively managed. The National Academic Board of Studies oversees the program, and a National Management Board comprising senior university leaders across the partnership is responsible for decision-making and managing the partnership.

The MA Education (Wales) aims to build professional capacity and trust within the system by focusing explicitly on improving quality and systematically reducing inequities. The program's core principles align with the Welsh Government's revised Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership in Wales. These standards reinforce that practitioners are professional learners who engage in career-long development, collaboration, and innovation. The Standards emphasise that all professionals should be engaged in a community of research and inquiry, utilising evidence to inform and enhance their practice, thereby improving quality and reducing inequities.

Looking at other education systems, it is clear that the development of high-quality professional learning at scale has become an increasingly prominent focus of contemporary

educational policy and reform (Osmond & Campbell, 2019). The international literature on professional learning emphasises the importance of creating the right conditions, including trust, for teachers to learn effectively and transfer that learning successfully to their classrooms. Far less is said about how to do this consistently and comprehensively. In such large-scale programs, prescription levels often tend to be high, accompanied by stringent accountability measures that ensure the fidelity of implementation and consistency of delivery. Those delivering this form of professional learning often have little latitude to deviate from the program's content. The main aim of such large-scale professional learning can often result in compliance and conformity, offering teachers little choice or agency.

In contrast, within Wales, both ITE and the MA Education (Wales) emphasise shared ownership and co-construction underpinned by personal reflection and inquiry. The primary aim of engaging participants in both programs is to generate new professional knowledge and understanding through collaborative work, networking, engagement, and trust with experts at both academic and professional levels. There is scope within both programs to be flexible and responsive to the needs of individuals and cohorts. Both programs employ a rigorous approach to self-evaluation, ensuring continuous improvement. External evaluation processes provide a continuous feedback loop for improving quality and reducing inequities in the Welsh system.

A distinguishing feature of the MA Education (Wales) and ITE is that teachers are not coerced into this form of professional learning. Instead, they actively participate and select this route as part of their ongoing personal and professional journey. Work by Schalkwyk et al. (2015) highlight the centrality of choice in effective professional learning programs that teachers value and are well-respected. Hence, in designing any effective large-scale professional learning program, it is argued that an element of choice must be aligned with the scope to follow different pathways and options.

Many writers and researchers in the field of professional learning emphasise that teachers should make their own choices about their professional learning and collaborate with other professionals to generate new knowledge and create collective professional capital (Menter, 2019). The notion of the self-regulating professional is critically important here, as it implies that rather than being passive recipients of standardised professional training or pre-packaged professional learning, teachers become the active co-constructors of their own learning experiences and actively choose and map out their professional learning (Tatto, 2023; Tatto & Menter, 2023).

Reflecting on the ITE and National MA (Wales), a critical question remains: What are the key conditions for generating quality and equity through accredited professional learning? One of the most quoted studies on effective professional development by Desimone (2009:2) suggests five critical features of program effectiveness:

1. Content focus refers to the knowledge and skills required for teachers to carry out their day-to-day professional learning effectively within the classroom.
2. Active learning refers to opportunities for participants to engage actively in meaningful discussions, planning, and practice during the professional development (PD) activity and in the reality of their day-to-day work.
3. Coherence refers to the connection between the PD activity and the reality of the classroom.
4. Duration refers to the need for the professional development (PD) to be sufficient to enable engagement, leading to possible intellectual and pedagogical changes.
5. Collective participation refers to the opportunity for participants to undertake professional development (PD) with others from the same school or group. This sets up the potential for interaction and discourse, which can be a powerful form of learning.

Considering these points, an analysis of ITE in Wales and the MA Education (Wales) is outlined. Initially, in terms of content, ITE and the MA Education (Wales) focus on developing a broad range of pedagogical and leadership practices that enable professionals to carry out their daily work effectively. Applying knowledge and skills is of paramount importance in both programs, and it is accompanied by the latitude for individuals to choose the topic or pathway that is most applicable and directly useful. Both programs offer opportunities to connect professional learning directly to context and give participants a choice by focusing on issues of direct meaning and importance.

ITE and the MA Education (Wales) offer continuity of learning experience and ongoing engagement with experts from both national and international contexts. The nature of both nationally accredited programs means that participants are supported in their learning over a prolonged period, ensuring that their learning is deep and that their thinking is challenged and extended throughout a sustained period of intellectual engagement.

Ultimately, participants in both accredited programs establish independent networks or communities of practice, where they connect with others to engage in collaborative learning and learning experiences. These groups are not led by the university teams but are set up and led by participants in the pursuit of mutual and deeper learning. They are formed to take learning to a new level and test ideas with other professionals in practical and applied ways to enhance quality and reduce inequities. The next section of this article reflects on the complexities and challenges of reform at scale and the conditions required for improving quality and equity.

## Conclusion

The challenges of securing quality and reducing inequities remain real and pervasive within most education systems. This article does not suggest that curriculum reform or accredited professional learning alone can solve such deep systemic problems. The evidence from Wales suggests that carefully positioning and reinforcing certain conditions within the system, such as professional collaboration, engagement, and trust, offers a range of approaches that can potentially move the system towards quality and equity.

International evidence underscores that enhancing teachers' knowledge is a pathway to transforming professional practice and, by extension, influencing classroom outcomes. While policy formation and top-down interventions aimed at tackling inequities might initially help, what happens in classrooms matters far more if reducing inequity and improving quality are the long-term aims.

The reform processes outlined in this article illustrate that professional knowledge and agency in Wales are being carefully and collectively calibrated in ways that place equity and quality at the core of collective agency, inquiry, and change. The central aim of the reform processes is to ensure that *quality through equity* is achieved and that the Welsh system is increasingly defined by its equitable practices, leading to better outcomes for all young people. While there is always more that can be done, it is argued that these latest reforms are establishing a new evidence-informed teaching and learning infrastructure that has the potential to move the system in the right direction.

Taking a critical perspective on current reform in Wales suggests that to achieve quality and equity, certain system conditions must be in place. Such system conditions are fragile and subject to erosion. A sudden change in policy or leadership direction can quickly and permanently unravel everything that has been established and implemented. Such is the policy environment and the vulnerability of policy formation in any system (Fullan, 2023).

In summary, it is posited, based on the evidence outlined in this article and broader international evidence, that securing quality and equity within any system requires the following conditions to be in place.

- A system-wide commitment to quality and equity.
- Dynamic and determined leadership at all levels.
- Deep collaboration based on trust and mutual respect among all system partners.
- Specificity in program design and consistency in high-quality delivery.
- Continuous non-judgmental program evaluation and improvement at all levels in the system.
- An explicit theory of change that is understood and shared.
- Reciprocal trust

Of all these conditions, the quality of collaboration based on reciprocal trust and mutual respect is unquestionably the most important. According to Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), authentic collaboration, coupled with mutual trust, is essential for creating lasting value. Consequently, within any system, attention to the nature and quality of trusting relationships remains imperative if any professional learning at scale is to thrive and survive. Once trust is lost, the potential for authentic system improvement is also lost, and with it, any viable attempt to address quality and equity issues.

Closing the poverty-related attainment gap is an aspiration that will require considerable and relentless effort in all parts of every system, not just education. Poverty is a multi-faceted problem with many dimensions and cannot be tackled by educators alone. It is a fact, however, that those currently working in kindergartens, schools, colleges, and universities connect with individual learners living in poverty and experiencing disadvantages, marginalisation, and hunger daily. Through their responses, interactions, empathy, and care, front-line help can be offered to children and young people at risk of going unnoticed or unaided (Author and Author, 2019). Educators can— and do —make a difference in ways that mitigate the most damaging effects of poverty and disadvantage on future life chances and learning. However, it requires support at a system level to make improvements in quality and equity sustainable.

As this article has highlighted, there are no easy solutions or quick fixes to secure equity and quality in education. It is an ongoing challenge, so it must also be an ongoing commitment for all education systems, regardless of their context or circumstances. Based on the experience in the Welsh system, it is proposed that preparing and equipping education professionals to be knowledgeable, critical, and research-informed about equity and quality offers one potential way forward to dismantle the barriers to learning that so many children and young people face.

The imperative to build professional knowledge and trust within the Welsh system is the hallmark of current education policy. Time will tell if this direction of travel benefits learners, particularly those who experience disadvantage and discrimination (evaluation studies are underway, see Welsh Government, 2023b). One thing is clear: while the structural configurations of any system change can be reconfigured and replaced, teachers remain constant and central to the learner experience, well-being, and outcomes.

Investing in teachers and quality professional learning at scale is unquestionably wise. Changing the curriculum to be more learner-focused is also a bold but correct decision. This policy investment within the Welsh education system is already creating new pathways, opportunities, and actions focused on improving quality and equity. Most importantly, there is a system-wide commitment to building professional knowledge, enquiry, and trust in respectful and enabling ways to ensure all learners succeed and reach their full potential.

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## About the Authors

### **Alma Harris (Corresponding Author)**

Cardiff Metropolitan University

AHarris@cardiffmet.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5554-3470>

Professor Alma Harris is a Co-Director of the Centre for International Research on Leadership in Education (CIRLE) at the Cardiff School of Education and Social Policy (CSESP), Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, UK.

### **Michelle Jones**

Cardiff Metropolitan University

Professor Michelle Jones is the Welsh Government's Lead for the National EdD and National MA Education (Wales). She is also the Co-Director of the Centre for International Research on Leadership in Education (CIRLE) at the Cardiff School of Education and Social Policy (CSESP), Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, UK.

### **Anna Bryant**

Cardiff Metropolitan University

Dr. Anna Bryant is Director of Teacher Education and Professional Learning at the Cardiff School of Education and Social Policy (CSESP), Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, UK.

## About the Editors

### **Maria Teresa Tatto**

Arizona State University

[Maria.Tatto@asu.edu](mailto:Maria.Tatto@asu.edu)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4955-1420>

Dr. Maria Teresa Tatto is a Professor of Education Policy, Practice, and Leadership at Arizona State University and the Borderlands Professor of Comparative Education at the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation. Dr. Tatto is an internationally respected expert in comparative and international education whose research focuses on teacher education systems and, more broadly, on how the intersection of research, policy, and practice can lead to more equitable and widely accessible educational opportunities for disadvantaged populations. Her recent research addresses the impact of mathematics teacher preparation on teaching and learning, as well as the effects of globalization on education. She is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of the American Education Research Association.

### **Trevor Mutton**

University of Oxford

[trevor.mutton@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:trevor.mutton@education.ox.ac.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8756-0411>

Trevor Mutton is an Emeritus Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Oxford, UK, and a Visiting Professor at Cardiff Metropolitan University, UK. His principal research interests are in initial teacher education, teacher education policy, and teachers' professional learning. He is Deputy Editor of the *Journal of Education for Teaching* and a member of the editorial boards of *Teacher Development* and *Teaching Education*.

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### education policy analysis archives

Volume 34 Number 6

January 13, 2026

ISSN 1068-2341



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Please send errata notes to Jeanne M. Powers at [jeanne.powers@asu.edu](mailto:jeanne.powers@asu.edu)