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Devolution, diversity, and data: Research evidence informing reading and writing policy and practice in Wales

Manon Jones

manon.jones@bangor.ac.uk

Bangor University

Carl Hughes

Wrexham University

Cameron Downing

University of York

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Abstract

Wales provides a distinctive case study of evidence-informed literacy policy because its devolved education system has enabled the development of a bilingual literacy policy that has followed a different trajectory from those of other UK nations. Drawing on a documentary analysis of national literacy policy since devolution (1999), this paper examines how research evidence has informed successive phases of literacy reform and considers what the Welsh experience contributes to wider international debates concerning evidence-informed policymaking. The analysis demonstrates that Welsh literacy policy has evolved from an initial emphasis on educational standards and accountability, through curriculum reform and professional agency, towards increasing engagement with evidence from the Science of Reading. Rather than interpreting these developments as a choice between competing research traditions, we argue that literacy policy encompasses multiple policy questions requiring different, though complementary, forms of evidence. Evidence from the Science of Reading provides the strongest available empirical foundation for decisions concerning reading instruction, whilst evidence relating to bilingualism, curriculum design, professional learning and implementation informs how those instructional principles are interpreted and enacted within Wales' distinctive educational context. The Welsh case suggests that the central challenge for evidence-informed literacy policy is not whether research should inform policy, but how different forms of evidence can be organised within a coherent and sustainable literacy strategy.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, governments have increasingly justified literacy reform through reference to scientific evidence, presenting policy change as a response to an established research base (Castles et al., 2018). These developments have underpinned substantial reforms in England, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, where evidence from the Science of Reading has increasingly informed curriculum policy, teacher education and classroom practice, including through instructional approaches such as structured literacy and systematic synthetic phonics (Hruby, 2025; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Consistent with Shanahan (2020), we distinguish between the interdisciplinary body of research concerning reading development, drawing on cognitive psychology, linguistics, neuroscience and related disciplines, and the Science of Reading as a term that has also become associated with policy and advocacy, where it is sometimes mobilised, selectively or otherwise, to support particular approaches to literacy instruction. Throughout this paper, we use the term Science of Reading primarily to refer to the underlying research evidence, except where we explicitly discuss the policy movement.

Alongside these reforms, the language of educational policy has changed. Governments increasingly describe literacy reforms as evidence-based, science-informed or research-led, often suggesting that longstanding debates concerning the teaching of reading have been resolved through scientific consensus. Whilst there is widespread agreement that systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics forms an important component of beginning reading instruction (Castles et al., 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000), there is less agreement regarding how research evidence should inform

broader literacy curricula, including writing, oral language, reading comprehension, disciplinary literacy and multilingual education (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Wyse & Hacking, 2025). Consequently, recent literacy debates increasingly centre around not only what research demonstrates, but also how research is selected, interpreted and used within policy processes.

International comparisons suggest that countries differ not only in the policies they adopt but also in the ways they use research evidence. In some jurisdictions, literacy reform has been explicitly informed by the Science of Reading, drawing upon evidence from cognitive science, experimental research and systematic reviews concerning reading development and instructional effectiveness (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022; Petscher et al., 2020). These reforms are often justified on the basis that this body of research provides the strongest available empirical evidence for decisions concerning how reading should be taught. In other contexts, policymakers have drawn more extensively upon curriculum research, practitioner expertise, professional enquiry and local knowledge. Such variation suggests that the key question is not whether literacy policy is evidence-informed, but how different forms of evidence are selected, prioritised and organised to address different policy questions. Yet, literacy policy also requires evidence relating to curriculum design, bilingualism, professional learning, and implementation. The challenge for policymakers is therefore not simply to identify relevant evidence, but to determine the appropriate role of different forms of evidence within a coherent literacy strategy.

Wales provides a particularly interesting case through which to examine how policymakers organise different forms of research evidence when developing literacy policy. Since devolution in 1999, Welsh education policy has developed along a distinctive trajectory within the United Kingdom, shaped by commitments to bilingualism, equity in education, curriculum innovation and professional agency (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021). These priorities have implications not only for policy design but also for the types of evidence considered relevant to literacy reform. As a bilingual education system committed to the ambitions of Cymraeg 2050, Wales must engage with evidence concerning language acquisition, bilingualism and multilingual literacy development alongside research relating to reading instruction and literacy attainment.

The publication of *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015) and the subsequent development of *Curriculum for Wales* (Welsh Government, 2020) marked a significant shift in Welsh education policy. Curriculum reform sought to establish a purpose-led framework that positioned teachers as active curriculum makers, placing greater emphasis on professional judgement, curriculum design and locally responsive practice. This vision was subsequently reinforced through the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (Welsh Government, 2021), which sought to strengthen research engagement across the education system through initiatives such as the National Professional Enquiry Project (NPEP; Evans, Llewellyn, & Lewabe, 2022), Educational Research Environments for Schools (EREiS), school–university partnerships and other mechanisms designed to support professional enquiry and the mobilisation of research evidence in practice. Rather than viewing teachers primarily as recipients of externally generated evidence, Welsh policy increasingly positioned them as active users, interpreters and generators of research through enquiry, collaboration and professional learning. In contrast to the

more prescriptive literacy reforms emerging elsewhere during the same period, Welsh policy placed greater emphasis on professional agency, curriculum flexibility and enquiry-informed practice.

More recently, however, Welsh literacy policy has entered a new phase. Alongside the implementation of *Curriculum for Wales*, the Welsh Government has established a Literacy Expert Panel, developed the National Literacy Principles, and published evidence-informed guidance intended to strengthen literacy teaching across the system. These initiatives suggest growing engagement with evidence from the Science of Reading. At the same time, they have been explicitly framed as supporting the aims of *Curriculum for Wales*, rather than replacing its broader educational philosophy.

These developments raise important questions concerning how research evidence has been mobilised within Welsh literacy policy, the changing prominence of different forms of evidence across successive phases of reform, and what the Welsh experience contributes to wider international debates concerning evidence-informed policymaking. Drawing on major Welsh literacy policy documents published since devolution, this paper addresses three research questions:

1. How has research evidence been mobilised within successive phases of Welsh literacy policy since devolution?
2. What forms of evidence have been prioritised for different aspects of literacy policy across successive reforms?
3. What does the Welsh case contribute to wider international debates concerning evidence-informed literacy policy?

To address these questions, this paper undertakes a documentary analysis of national literacy policy in Wales since devolution. Table 1 presents the corpus of principal national policy documents through which successive Welsh Governments have articulated literacy policy, including the strategies and statutory frameworks of the first phase of devolution, the review and curriculum documents associated with *Curriculum for Wales*, and the ministerial statements, principles and guidance that constitute the current programme of literacy reform. Documents were included where they had national scope and addressed the teaching of reading and writing, or the research evidence underpinning literacy policy. For each document, we examined the sources cited, the forms of research evidence prioritised, and the role assigned to research within the policy argument, interpreting the documents through the conceptual lens of research use outlined below (e.g., Weiss, 1979; Ball, 1993). The analysis is interpretive rather than exhaustive; the aim is not to catalogue every reference to research, but to characterise how different forms of evidence have been selected, prioritised and mobilised across successive phases of Welsh literacy policy.

Table 1
Welsh national literacy policy documents as a function of phase

Phase	Document	Type	Forms of evidence
1999–2014	The Learning Country (National Assembly for Wales, 2001)	National education strategy	Educational reform and lifelong learning research
1999–2014	Teaching makes a difference (Andrews, 2011)	Ministerial address	International assessment and comparative education evidence
1999–2014	Skills Framework for 3–19 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008)	Statutory curriculum framework	Skills-based curriculum research and cross-curricular learning
1999–2014	National Literacy Programme (Welsh Government, 2012)	National strategy	Attainment data and school effectiveness research
1999–2014	National Literacy and Numeracy Framework and national tests (Welsh Government, 2013)	Statutory framework and assessment	Assessment and progression research
2015–2021	Improving Schools in Wales (OECD, 2014)	Commissioned system review	International comparative education evidence
2015–2021	Successful Futures (Donaldson, 2015)	Independent curriculum review	Curriculum scholarship and international curriculum research
2015–2021	Cymraeg 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017)	National language strategy	Language planning and bilingual education research
2015–2021	Curriculum for Wales guidance, including the Languages, Literacy and Communication Area guidance (Welsh Government, 2020)	Statutory curriculum guidance	Curriculum scholarship, teacher professionalism and curriculum implementation research
2024–present	Written statement: support for literacy (Welsh Government, 2024)	Ministerial statement	Attainment evidence and reading research
2024–present	Principles for teaching language and literacy in Wales (Welsh Government, 2026a)	National principles (Literacy Expert Panel)	Evidence syntheses, reading science and oral language research
2026–present	Statement of intent: teaching early reading (Welsh Government, 2026b)	National guidance	Reading science and evidence on systematic phonics instruction
2026–present	Written statement: Literacy Expert Panel and support for literacy attainment (Welsh Government, 2026c)	Ministerial statement	Implementation science and professional learning research

The analysis suggests that Welsh literacy policy cannot be understood through binary accounts in which jurisdictions either adopt or reject the Science of Reading. Rather, the Welsh case shows how different

forms of evidence have informed successive phases of reform in different ways. Whilst recent developments suggest growing recognition that evidence from the Science of Reading provides the strongest available foundation for decisions on how reading should be taught, the Welsh context also highlights the continued importance of evidence concerning bilingualism, curriculum design, professional learning and implementation in determining how the Science of Reading principles are used. The challenge is therefore not whether research should inform policy, but how literacy policy can be organised so that the strongest available evidence informs instructional decisions whilst complementary forms of evidence guide their implementation.

In what follows, we briefly review scholarship on research evidence and policy development. We then analyse the evolution of Welsh literacy policy from devolution to the present, examining how different forms of evidence have informed successive reforms. Finally, we consider what the Welsh case contributes to wider international debates concerning the use of research evidence in literacy policymaking and identify implications for future policy development.

Setting the scene: Research evidence and policy development

Although evidence-informed policymaking has become an influential principle in education reform internationally, it has also become an increasingly prominent feature of Welsh education policy, reflected in initiatives such as the *National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry* (Welsh Government, 2021). Nevertheless, research suggests that relationships between evidence and policy are rarely straightforward. Weiss (1979, 1995) argued that research is rarely applied directly to policymaking. Instead, policymakers use research in multiple ways, including informing decisions, shaping understandings of problems, legitimising reforms and supporting existing policy positions. Research therefore constitutes one influence among many in policy development.

Subsequent scholarship has similarly emphasised that evidence does not move directly from research into practice. Researchers have highlighted the role of organisations, professional networks and intermediaries in interpreting and translating research findings for policy and practice (Cooper, Levin & Campbell, 2009; Ward, House & Hamer, 2009). Consequently, research evidence is not transferred into policy but is selected, interpreted and adapted within particular political, institutional, and educational contexts.

These issues are especially relevant to literacy education because the field draws on multiple disciplinary traditions that address different policy questions. Research from cognitive psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience has generated a particularly robust evidence base concerning how children learn to read and the instructional practices most likely to support reading development (Castles et al., 2018). However, literacy policy also requires evidence concerning curriculum design, writing development, bilingualism, professional learning and classroom implementation (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). These bodies of research do not provide competing explanations of reading development. Rather, they inform different aspects of literacy policymaking, including how evidence-based instructional

principles are interpreted, implemented and adapted within particular educational contexts. Policymakers therefore face the challenge not simply of drawing upon multiple forms of evidence, but of ensuring that the strongest available evidence informs those aspects of policy to which it is most directly relevant, whilst complementary evidence informs curriculum design, implementation and educational context.

Policy studies further suggest that policymaking is fundamentally a process of selection and interpretation. Ball (1993, 2012) argues that policy should be understood as an ongoing process through which particular ideas and forms of knowledge become legitimised. Rather than applying research evidence directly, policymakers determine which evidence is given prominence, how it is interpreted, and how it is translated into policy. Consequently, the same body of research can support different policy approaches in different jurisdictions as governments adapt evidence to their own educational priorities and contexts (Phillips & Ochs, 2004).

This perspective informs the following analysis. Rather than asking whether Welsh literacy policy is evidence-informed, the paper examines how different forms of research evidence have been selected, prioritised and organised across successive phases of reform. Particular attention is paid to the extent to which evidence from the Science of Reading has informed decisions concerning reading instruction, and how evidence relating to bilingualism, curriculum design, professional learning and implementation has been used to shape the interpretation of those principles within the Welsh context. The analysis therefore focuses not only on which evidence is cited within policy documents, but also on the role assigned to different forms of evidence within literacy policymaking.

The Welsh sociolinguistic and educational landscape

Wales is a bilingual nation of approximately 3.1 million people in which Welsh and English hold official status. At the 2021 Census, 538,300 residents aged three or older (17.8%) reported being able to speak Welsh, whilst household surveys suggest a substantially higher figure (Welsh Government, 2022). Through Cymraeg 2050, the Welsh Government has committed to reaching one million Welsh speakers by the middle of the century, a target in which the education system is assigned the central role of creating new speakers (Welsh Government, 2017).

These commitments give the education system a distinctive institutional shape. Maintained schools are categorised by language medium as Welsh-medium, dual language, or English-medium. In January 2025, around 20% of pupils attended Welsh-medium schools, with a further five per cent in dual language settings, and the majority of learners studying Welsh within an otherwise English-medium education (Welsh Government, 2025). All learners study Welsh to age sixteen, and under Curriculum for Wales, Welsh, English, and international languages sit together within the Languages, Literacy, and Communication Area of Learning and Experience. National personalised assessments in reading are taken in both Welsh and English (although these data are not collected nationally). Policy is set nationally by the Welsh Government, schools are inspected by Estyn, the education and training

inspectorate for Wales, and local authorities and regional arrangements support school improvement making Wales a compact system in which national initiatives can reach schools comparatively directly.

Children in Welsh-medium and dual language settings learn to read and write in two orthographies of contrasting transparency. Welsh has comparatively consistent letter-sound correspondences, whilst the English orthography is highly inconsistent, and decoding therefore develops on different trajectories across the two languages (Ellis & Hooper, 2001; Spencer & Hanley, 2003; Jones et al., 2026). Many learners in Welsh-medium education come from homes in which Welsh is not spoken and acquire the language principally through school. Biliteracy, cross-language transfer, and immersion pedagogy are important components for national literacy policy. Yet much of the international evidence base on reading instruction has been generated in predominantly monolingual English-speaking contexts, raising questions concerning applicability and adaptation that Welsh policymakers cannot avoid. The sections that follow trace how successive governments have navigated this.

The evolution of literacy policy in Wales

Literacy policy after devolution: raising standards and accountability (1999–2014)

The first decade of devolution was characterised by growing concern about educational standards and the performance of Welsh learners in national and international assessments. Although successive Welsh governments sought to differentiate their education policies from those pursued in England, literacy increasingly emerged as a national priority, particularly following disappointing performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; OECD, 2010).

This period saw the introduction of national initiatives designed to strengthen literacy outcomes, including the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework and national reading and numeracy tests. Policy documents frequently drew upon attainment data, international comparisons and evidence from school effectiveness research to justify reform (see Table 1). Literacy was primarily framed as a measurable educational outcome requiring systematic monitoring, accountability and improvement.

Research evidence was therefore used largely in an instrumental manner. International assessment data were presented as indicators of system performance, whilst policy interventions were designed to address perceived shortcomings in pupil attainment. The dominant evidence sources were quantitative measures of educational performance and research associated with school improvement and accountability. Less attention was given to research concerning the cognitive processes underpinning reading development and the instructional approaches most likely to improve literacy outcomes. Although an increasingly robust international evidence base concerning reading development and effective reading instruction was emerging during this period (c.f., National Reading Panel, 2000), including evidence relating to systematic phonics instruction, it did not yet become an explicit reference

point within Welsh literacy policy. Instead, policy attention remained focused primarily on standards, attainment, and system performance.

At the same time, Welsh policy did not wholly adopt the more prescriptive approaches being used elsewhere. Whilst standards and accountability were prominent concerns, policy documents continued to emphasise broader educational purposes and the importance of adapting reform to Welsh contexts, including bilingual education. Consequently, literacy policy during this period reflected a combination of performance-driven accountability and wider educational priorities. Although international evidence concerning reading development and effective reading instruction was becoming increasingly influential in several jurisdictions, it had not yet become an explicit organising principle of Welsh literacy policy. Instead, research evidence was used primarily to identify problems of attainment and justify system-level reform rather than to shape a coherent evidence-informed approach to reading instruction.

Curriculum reform and professional agency (2015–2021)

A significant shift occurred following the publication of *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015), which laid the foundations for Curriculum for Wales. Rather than focusing primarily on accountability and attainment measures, curriculum reform sought to create a purpose-led framework centred on the Four Purposes, curriculum innovation, and greater professional autonomy.

This reform agenda was informed by a broader range of evidence than had characterised earlier literacy initiatives. Alongside international evidence and assessment data, policymakers drew upon curriculum research, teacher professionalism, school improvement literature, and emerging work on practitioner enquiry. Literacy was positioned not simply as a set of discrete skills but as a central component of the Languages, Literacy, and Communication Area of Learning and Experience, closely connected to communication, identity and participation.

The curriculum's claim to be evidence-informed nonetheless merits scrutiny. Successful Futures drew principally upon curriculum scholarship, international curriculum comparison, and system-level reviews, including the OECD's assessment of Welsh education (Donaldson, 2015; OECD, 2014). It engaged far less with the experimental and cognitive literature concerning reading acquisition. Subsequent analyses questioned the specificity of the framework and the demands its openness placed on schools' curriculum capacity and on equity (Power et al., 2020; Sinnema et al., 2020). In relation to literacy specifically, the 2020 guidance offered descriptions of progression whilst leaving schools considerable latitude in determining approaches to reading and writing instruction. The evidence base underpinning Curriculum for Wales was therefore strongest in relation to curriculum design and weakest in relation to reading instruction .

The Welsh context also introduced policy questions that have been comparatively less prominent in many international literacy reforms. As a bilingual education system committed to the ambitions of *Cymraeg 2050*, Wales was required to consider not only how children learn to read but also how literacy develops across two languages and how literacy policy contributes to wider goals of language

revitalisation. Importantly, these additional questions should not be understood as alternatives to the evidence generated by the Science of Reading and cognitive science. Decades of interdisciplinary research have produced a robust evidence base concerning the cognitive processes involved in learning to read and the instructional practices most likely to support successful reading development. However, it does not, by itself, determine how literacy policy should be organised within a bilingual education system or how those instructional principles should be enacted across different linguistic and educational contexts.

Policymakers in Wales therefore also drew upon findings from research on bilingualism, bilingual language acquisition, biliteracy development, cross-language transfer and Welsh-medium education. These bodies of research extend rather than challenge the insights provided by the Science of Reading. They help explain how reading develops across two languages, how literacy skills transfer between languages, how instructional approaches may need to be adapted within bilingual settings, and how literacy policy can contribute to wider educational and cultural objectives associated with language revitalisation.

Consequently, literacy policy during this period addressed a broader range of policy questions than literacy reforms framed primarily around reading attainment alone. Rather than representing competing research traditions, evidence from the Science of Reading and research on bilingualism addressed different policy questions, and therefore occupied complementary roles within Welsh literacy reform.

The emphasis on professional agency also shaped how research evidence was expected to influence classroom practice. Initiatives such as the National Professional Enquiry Project (NPEP), the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE), Educational Research Environments for Schools (EREiS), and the National Network for Educational Research and Enquiry (NatER) encouraged schools and teachers to engage critically with research, undertake professional enquiry and strengthen partnerships between schools, universities and regional improvement services. These developments reflected an understanding of evidence-informed practice that extended beyond the dissemination of research findings. Rather than positioning teachers simply as recipients of externally generated evidence, Welsh reforms emphasised teachers as active users, interpreters and generators of research through enquiry, collaboration and professional learning.

The evaluative evidence concerning these research-practice initiatives nonetheless remains limited. The NPEP operated as a partnership between the Welsh Government, the regional consortia, universities and a national network of lead enquiry schools, and sat within the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry's wider ambition that policy and practice be informed both by the best available research evidence and by disciplined professional enquiry (Welsh Government, 2021). By the Welsh Government's own account, around a third of schools have engaged in the project since 2018, generating several hundred enquiries. The form of evidence these initiatives prioritised was close-to-practice enquiry and co-construction, and enquiry themes tracked curriculum realisation broadly rather than reading and writing instruction specifically. Published independent evaluation of their effects on teaching quality or

learner outcomes remains scarce. As mechanisms for strengthening research-practice relationships, they therefore embodied the pluralist, practitioner-centred conception of evidence that characterised this phase, whilst generating little of the outcome-focused evidence that the current phase of reform now seeks.

However, the expansion of the policy agenda also created challenges for establishing a coherent evidential foundation for literacy instruction. During the same period that *Curriculum for Wales* was being designed and implemented, international interest in the Science of Reading was accelerating. Across a number of jurisdictions, policymakers were placing increasing emphasis on evidence from cognitive science, systematic reviews and experimental research concerning reading development and instructional effectiveness, reflected in influential reviews such as the National Reading Panel (2000), the Rose Review (Rose, 2006), and subsequent evidence syntheses (Castles et al., 2018; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022; Hruby, 2025). In Wales, by contrast, curriculum reform, professional agency and practitioner enquiry occupied a more prominent position within policy discourse. Evidence concerning reading development and instructional effectiveness was certainly present within Welsh policy during this period, but it was typically situated within a broader curriculum narrative rather than serving as the principal organising framework for decisions concerning reading instruction.

As Curriculum for Wales moved from design to implementation, questions increasingly emerged regarding consistency of practice, curriculum coherence and literacy attainment across the system (OECD, 2024; Estyn, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024). The success of the reform depended not only on the availability of research evidence but also on schools' capacity to interpret and use that evidence within diverse local contexts. These concerns did not necessarily challenge the underlying principles of the reform, but they highlighted the complexity of translating a very flexible curriculum framework into classroom practice at scale. They also highlighted the importance of greater coherence in the relationship between curriculum philosophy, professional learning, and the evidence informing classroom reading instruction.

Towards a more coherent literacy strategy? (2022–present)

The implementation of Curriculum for Wales has coincided with renewed concern regarding literacy attainment and educational outcomes, including continued scrutiny of Wales' performance in international assessments (OECD, 2023). Within this context, policymakers have increasingly sought greater clarity and coherence regarding literacy teaching whilst maintaining the broader philosophy of Curriculum for Wales.

In response, the Welsh Government established a Literacy Expert Panel, developed National Literacy Principles and produced new guidance intended to strengthen literacy teaching across schools. These developments signal a more explicit recognition of evidence relating to reading development, cognitive science, and effective literacy instruction as providing the strongest empirical foundation for decisions concerning reading instruction. They also suggest growing recognition of the contribution that Science

of Reading research can make to literacy policy and classroom practice. Compared with earlier phases of reform, evidence syntheses, reading research, and findings associated with the Science of Reading have become substantially more visible within national policy discourse.

This shift is significant because it suggests increasing recognition that some areas of literacy research have generated particularly robust evidence for informing instructional decisions. Findings relating to phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension have informed literacy reforms internationally and are widely regarded as among the most robust findings within literacy research (National Reading Panel, 2000; Castles, 2018). Recent Welsh initiatives indicate a greater willingness to engage directly with this evidence base and to ensure that it is reflected more clearly within national guidance, professional learning and classroom practice. In this respect, recent developments bring Welsh literacy policy into closer alignment with international trends whilst remaining attentive to national priorities and contexts.

However, these developments should not be interpreted as a wholesale adoption of a narrow Science of Reading agenda. Recent policy documents continue to situate literacy within the broader educational philosophy of Curriculum for Wales, emphasising bilingualism, professional judgement, curriculum coherence, language development, and teacher learning alongside evidence relating to reading instruction. Rather than replacing one evidence base with another, recent policy suggests an increasing recognition that different forms of research evidence make different contributions to literacy policy. Evidence from the Science of Reading provides the strongest empirical foundation for decisions concerning reading instruction, whilst evidence relating to bilingualism, curriculum design, professional learning and professional judgement informs how those instructional principles are interpreted and enacted within the distinctive Welsh context. This is particularly important in Wales, where literacy policy must continue to address the realities of Welsh- and English-medium education and the wider goals of language revitalisation.

The importance of writing in Wales' literacy policy

Although this paper, like the policy documents it examines, has focused predominantly on reading, writing within Welsh literacy policy deserves separate attention. The Literacy and Numeracy Framework treated literacy as encompassing oracy, reading, and writing across the curriculum, and expectations for writing were embedded in statutory cross-curricular requirements (Welsh Government, 2013). The national tests introduced alongside the Framework, however, assessed reading and numeracy only, creating a lack of accountability in which reading generated national data whilst writing depended upon teacher assessment. Under Curriculum for Wales, writing was integrated within the Languages, Literacy, and Communication Area and connected to purpose, audience and meaning-making, consistent with the curriculum's broader philosophy. The current phase continues this integrative framing: the National Literacy Principles present connections between listening, speaking, reading and writing as vital, and the accompanying guidance situates writing alongside early reading (Welsh Government, 2026a). Across all three phases, however, the research base informing writing policy has remained far less visible than that

informing reading. The substantial international evidence concerning effective writing instruction including meta-analyses of writing interventions and practice guidance on strategy instruction, transcription and composition (Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham et al., 2012) has no clear counterpart within Welsh policy documents to the position now occupied by reading science. Writing therefore represents the clearest example within the Welsh case of relevant research that has not yet been systematically used, and a priority for the next phase of evidence-informed reform.

Recent developments therefore suggest a search for greater coherence rather than a fundamental change in direction. If earlier reforms emphasised curriculum innovation and professional agency, current reforms appear increasingly concerned with ensuring that robust findings from reading science are more clearly reflected within classroom practice. The result is not a rejection of Curriculum for Wales, but an attempt to integrate insights from the Science of Reading within a broader bilingual, purpose-led, and professionally engaged educational framework. The central challenge is therefore not whether research should inform literacy policy, but how literacy policy can be organised so that evidence from the Science of Reading provides the foundation for decisions concerning reading instruction, whilst complementary evidence relating to bilingualism, curriculum design and professional learning shapes how those principles are implemented within Wales' distinctive educational and linguistic context.

Discussion

This paper examined how research evidence has informed literacy policy in Wales since devolution. The analysis demonstrates that the relationship between evidence and policy has evolved alongside changing educational priorities. Rather than revealing a straightforward movement towards or away from a particular research tradition, successive phases of reform drew upon different forms of evidence to address different policy concerns. The Welsh case therefore illustrates that evidence-informed policymaking is a process of selecting, interpreting and organising research evidence rather than simply applying research findings to policy.

The first research question concerned how research evidence has been used within literacy policy. The findings suggest that research has fulfilled multiple policy functions over time. Evidence has been used to diagnose problems, justify reform, support curriculum change, strengthen professional learning and, more recently, inform approaches to teaching of reading. This changing pattern reflects shifts in the aims of Welsh education policy and shows that research evidence is used in response to evolving policy rather than applied in a uniform manner.

The second research question concerned the forms of evidence that have been prioritised within literacy policy. The findings suggest that Welsh literacy policy has drawn upon multiple research traditions because literacy policy itself encompasses multiple policy questions. Decisions concerning reading instruction, bilingual education, curriculum design, professional learning, and implementation each require different, though complementary, forms of evidence. The challenge for policymakers is therefore

not simply to draw upon multiple forms of evidence, but to determine the role that different forms of evidence should play within a coherent literacy strategy.

As a bilingual education system committed to the ambitions of Cymraeg 2050, Wales has needed to engage with research concerning language acquisition, bilingualism, and multilingual literacy development alongside research relating to reading instruction. Literacy policy has therefore been required to address questions extending beyond early word reading and decoding, including issues of language, identity, communication and participation. The Welsh case illustrates how local linguistic and cultural priorities shape the selection and interpretation of research evidence.

However, the analysis also indicates that different forms of evidence should not be expected to contribute equally to all policy decisions. The strongest available empirical evidence concerning how children learn to read and how reading should be taught derives from the Science of Reading. Whilst this evidence became increasingly explicit within Welsh policy only in recent years, it provides the foundation for instructional decisions. Other bodies of research, including bilingualism, curriculum studies, and professional learning remain essential because they inform different aspects of literacy policy rather than providing alternative accounts of reading development.

The Welsh case also highlights the importance of knowledge mobilisation. Throughout the period examined, policymakers were concerned not only with identifying relevant research evidence but also with creating ways in which evidence could influence practice. Initiatives such as the NPEP, university-school partnerships and extensive professional learning programmes reflected an understanding that evidence does not automatically translate into classroom improvement. Research use depends on the relationships and professional cultures through which knowledge is interpreted, shared, and used. Consequently, evidence-informed reform depends not only on identifying the most appropriate evidence for particular policy decisions, but also on investing in the professional capacity required to interpret and use that evidence effectively.

The third research question concerned what the Welsh experience contributes to wider international debates. The findings suggest that evidence-informed literacy policy is best understood as a process of selecting, interpreting and organising research evidence rather than the direct application of research findings. Contemporary debates are often framed as a choice between competing paradigms. The Welsh case suggests a different interpretation. Literacy policy encompasses multiple policy questions, and these require different, though complementary, forms of evidence. Evidence from the Science of Reading provides the strongest available empirical foundation for decisions concerning reading instruction, whilst evidence relating to bilingualism, curriculum design, professional learning and implementation informs how those instructional principles are interpreted and used within particular educational contexts.

Viewed in this way, recent developments in Wales should not be interpreted as a move towards or away from the Science of Reading. Instead, they can be understood as an attempt to establish a more coherent evidential foundation for literacy policy in which evidence relating to reading instruction is becoming more explicitly reflected within national guidance, whilst evidence concerning bilingualism,

professional agency and Curriculum for Wales continues to shape how those instructional principles are implemented within the Welsh context.

More generally, the Welsh case highlights a challenge that is increasingly visible internationally. Evidence-informed literacy reform is not simply a matter of identifying the strongest available evidence. It also depends upon the institutional mechanisms through which evidence is translated into policy, the professional capacity available to interpret and enact that evidence, and the extent to which coherence can be maintained across an education system. Literacy reform is therefore shaped not only by the quality of available evidence, but also by how that evidence is organised within policy, translated through professional learning and enacted within particular linguistic, cultural and institutional contexts.

Conclusions and future policy directions

This paper has argued that the relationship between research evidence and literacy policy is better understood as a process of selecting, interpreting and organising different forms of evidence than as a choice between competing research traditions. The Welsh case demonstrates that literacy policy encompasses multiple policy questions, requiring different, though complementary, forms of evidence. Recent developments suggest increasing recognition that evidence from the Science of Reading provides the strongest available empirical foundation for decisions concerning reading instruction, whilst evidence relating to bilingualism, curriculum design and professional learning shapes how those instructional principles are implemented within Wales' distinctive educational context.

Viewed over time, however, the trajectory of reform also suggests increasing recognition that some areas of literacy research have generated particularly robust findings with important implications for policy and practice. Recent developments, including the establishment of the Literacy Expert Panel and the development of National Literacy Principles, indicate a growing commitment to ensuring that evidence relating to reading development, language comprehension and effective literacy instruction is more clearly reflected within national guidance and classroom practice. At the same time, these developments continue to be situated within a broader educational framework that emphasises bilingualism, curriculum coherence and professional agency.

The present review therefore points towards five priorities for the future development of literacy policy. First, policymakers should continue to strengthen engagement with robust evidence relating to literacy development and instruction. Evidence from Science of Reading has made an important contribution to understanding reading development and effective teaching, particularly in relation to phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, and language comprehension. However, literacy policy must also be informed by evidence relating to writing, oral language, disciplinary literacy, and implementation. Future policy should therefore ensure that evidence from the Science of Reading continues to provide the strongest empirical foundation for decisions concerning reading instruction, whilst complementary evidence relating to writing, curriculum design, bilingualism, and implementation informs other aspects of literacy policy.

Second, greater attention should be given to research evidence relating specifically to bilingualism and biliteracy. As a bilingual education system committed to the ambitions of Cymraeg 2050, Wales faces challenges and opportunities that are not fully addressed within research conducted in predominantly monolingual contexts. Continued investment in research examining literacy development across Welsh and English, cross-language transfer, biliteracy development, and effective literacy instruction in bilingual settings would strengthen the evidence base available to policymakers and practitioners. In this respect, Wales is well placed to contribute not only to national improvement efforts but also to international debates concerning literacy education in multilingual societies.

Third, future reform should prioritise coherence across policy, curriculum, professional learning and classroom practice. One of the clearest themes emerging from the analysis is that tensions have often arisen not from the absence of evidence, but from difficulties in establishing coherence between evidence, policy, and practice. Recent developments suggest a growing recognition of the importance of coherence. Maintaining alignment between curriculum expectations, literacy guidance, assessment, professional learning and classroom implementation will be critical if research evidence is to have a sustained impact on learner outcomes.

Fourth, recent strategic investment should be matched by an explicit evaluation framework and continued development of research capacity. The current reform phase involves substantial national investment, including a nationally funded programme establishing a centre of excellence for literacy teaching with bilingual professional learning and resources (Welsh Government, 2026c). Realising the value of this investment requires nationally agreed measures of reading and writing progress in both Welsh and English, independent evaluation of professional learning and classroom interventions, including experimental designs (where feasible), and longitudinal monitoring across Welsh-medium, dual language, and English-medium settings. It equally requires sustained investment in research capacity within Wales, through partnerships between government, schools and universities, so that evidence concerning bilingual literacy development is generated within, and not only imported into, the Welsh context.

Finally, evidence-informed reform requires not only high-quality evidence but also sufficient policy stability to allow that evidence to be embedded in practice. Jurisdictions that sustain literacy reforms over extended periods arguably provide schools with greater opportunities to develop professional expertise, refine implementation and evaluate impact over time (Viennet & Pont, 2017). Frequent shifts in policy direction can make it difficult for schools to establish coherent approaches and realise the benefits of evidence-informed practice. Recent developments therefore present an opportunity not only to strengthen the evidence base underpinning literacy policy but also to establish a more stable and sustainable framework capable of supporting long-term improvement.

The challenge for policymakers is therefore not to choose between reading science, bilingual education, curriculum innovation and professional agency, but to ensure that each informs the aspects of literacy policy to which it is most directly relevant. The Welsh experience suggests that successful literacy

reform depends not only on the quality of the available evidence, but also on the coherence, stability and contextual responsiveness with which different forms of evidence are organised within policy and translated into classroom practice.

Declarations

Author Contribution

MJ and CD wrote the main manuscript text and CH provided comments and edits.

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