Examining alternative provision (AP) in two local authorities in Wales: Rationale, results, and resources

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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger ESRC project on the political economies of school exclusions in the UK, this research examines alternative provision (AP). AP is a term used to describe education outside of a mainstream classroom. Pupils can attend AP full-time as an alternative to mainstream education or on a supplementary basis in addition to mainstream education. It can be arranged by a local authority (LA) or a school. AP provides education to young people who do not attend mainstream school; this can be because of school exclusion, physical illness, behavioural issues, mental ill health or additional learning needs (ALN). Where pupils cannot attend school, whether for health reasons or because they have been excluded from school, it is important that they still receive an education. Research explains that the AP sector is a bewildering array of projects. Made up of public, private and third-sector organisations delivering interventions, including vocational, academic, life skills and therapeutic programmes. This research draws on findings from interviews with ten alternative providers with divergent rationales across two LAs in Wales. The three themes emerging from the data analysis undertaken were rationale, results, and resources. There were differences in rationale with educational and vocational providers focusing on qualifications and transition into employment, education, and training and therapeutic, sports and arts-based providers concentrating on building trust, relationships, and life skills. All the providers had challenges measuring the results of their interventions.

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Providers that worked in schools did not have young people's contact details to track post-programme transition. Others could track transition to further education, training or employment in the short term but could not capture the longitudinal outcomes.

The main finding of this research is that AP providers do not receive enough funding to cover costs, which could be exacerbated by a lack of evidence of effectiveness and clarity about rationales. The way AP programmes are resourced raises questions about the sustainability of provision, third-sector providers struggled to meet the core costs of programmes, private companies tended to be subsidised by more profitable parts of their organisations, and even public providers needed additional funding for activities.

Keywords: alternative provision, funding, measuring success, typology, exclusion.

Introduction

The term alternative provision (AP) describes the wide range of interventions delivered to young people with a range of needs including children and young people with an additional learning need (ALN) or disability; young people with a mental health difficulty; those who have had gaps in their education; those with school refusal or school phobia; those who have been unable to cope with the demands of mainstream education and young people who have been excluded or who are at risk of exclusion from school (Trotman et al., 2019). AP is an alternative and planned provision where children at risk of disengagement from education are removed from the mainstream classroom; this might be for an afternoon, a week or full-time. This study explores the diversity of alternative provision across two local authorities (LAs) in Wales, exploring AP provisions that offer a replacement for mainstream education for children excluded from school and part-time supplementary programmes delivered to children at risk of exclusion. This study forms part of the ESRC Excluded Lives project, which examines school exclusion across the four jurisdictions of the UK of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Focusing on qualitative data from ten semi-structured online interviews with AP providers. The objective of the research was to

explore the different interventions delivered by public, private and voluntary organisations offering specialist alternative provision for students who have been or are at risk of being excluded from school. A semi-structured interview schedule was formulated to understand the interventions they delivered, the outputs and outcomes for young people, quality assurance and how they measured success. Research explains that governments and community organisations have developed various alternative provision interventions to enable young people to remain in or return to education (te Riele, 2007). This 'bewildering array of projects' exacerbated by a lack of a shared framework can make researching AP challenging (te Riele, 2007: 54). McCluskey et al. (2015) found that although Wales is a small country with a small population, there was a high level of local variation of AP. Moreover, this could lead to a lack of scrutiny, poorly designed or inappropriate curricula, inadequate pastoral support and a lack of opportunity to reintegrate into mainstream education (McCluskey et al, 2015).

Literature Review

AP refers to the varied programmes delivered to young people at risk of disengagement from education (Pennacchia and Thomson, 2016). Research by Reimer and Pangrazio (2020) suggests that the landscape of AP is complex because diverse students can thrive in diverse settings. Therefore, programmes need to be different from one another. Children attending AP are the pupils who have struggled to cope in mainstream education; they are more likely to have an Additional Learning Need (ALN) or a disability, be in the child welfare system, have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, have school phobia and be at risk of exclusion or been permanently excluded from mainstream education (Trotman et al., 2018; Jalali and Morgan, 2018; Hart, 2013). Jalali and Morgan (2018) explain that research highlights pupils' negative experiences of mainstream education, including poor relationships, feelings of being mistreated and challenges with learning; conversely, students tend to report positive experiences in AP (Jalali and Morgan, 2018). It is widely acknowledged that AP students' outcomes are poorer than those of their counterparts in mainstream education (Jalali and Morgan, 2018). Jalali and Morgan (2018) suggest that this could be because pupils are already failing academically when they enter AP.

Conversely, Hart (2013) notes that AP can give pupils a second chance and a fresh start where they may fare better than in the mainstream.

Moreover, the literature raises concerns about the quality of AP, with findings revealing behaviour management issues, insufficient resources, poor educational standards, and marginal qualifications (Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014; Jalali and Morgan, 2018). Jalali and Morgan (2018) suggest that the combination of pupils with complex support needs and poor-quality provision can result in pupils failing to achieve their full potential. Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) explain that there are few systematic criteria to determine if the AP available is effective or worthwhile. Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) identified a need for large-scale longitudinal outcomes of students who have attended AP across the four jurisdictions of the UK. They found that while AP providers had good information about the young people they worked with, there needed to be more benchmarking of the data, and large longitudinal data sets are needed to track young people who have attended AP (Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014). More recently Malcolm (2019) explains that there is very little research on the longer term outcomes of those who have attended AP and more research is needed to explore these longer term outcomes.

Mapping AP Programmes

There are some examples of research mapping AP. Thomson and Russell (2007) completed a mapping exercise of AP across two LAs in England. They found two overarching types: full-time provision for children unable to cope with mainstream education and part-time complementary provision to support children to remain in mainstream education (Thomson and Russell, 2007). Thomson and Russell (2007) found a complex landscape of provision, which they broke down into different categories to develop a typology to make sense of what was available to pupils. The categories were vocational, work skills, basic skills, life skills, activity-based, environmental, arts, therapeutic, work experience and academic (see Table 1 for more detail) (Thomson and Russell, 2007). Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) have developed a more up-to-date comprehensive nationwide typology based on AP programmes across the UK they categorised providers into three different modes: mode A being a traditional school or alternative school, mode B being alternative

Table 1: Example Typology of AP Programmes

Nature of programme	*Type of Activity*	*Examples*
Vocational	A programme specifically geared towards a particular occupation/ profession/career. Often offering a qualification to help a young person enter the ''world of work'.	Construction, motor vehicles, hair, and beauty
Work skills	Generic work skills, such as 'being able to follow instructions' are developed.	General experience on farms
Basic skills	English, maths, science, and IT are offered (not necessarily at GCSE level).	E-learning sites
Life skills	General skills needed to function in society, such as social skills, cooking, and talking without swearing, are developed.	Team-building exercises
Activity-based	The programme has an activity/ leisure focus	Fishing/cycling
Environmental	The focus is on teaching young people about nature and how to utilise materials in the outdoors and survive outside.	Work in forests
Arts	Has a focus on teaching and learning the arts.	Dance, media, music drawing and pottery
Therapeutic	Focuses on offering a remedial option	Anger management, family therapy
Work experience	Various work placements form part of a young person's educational package. Some are offered as part of actual programmes.	
Academic	Has a strong scholastic focus, emphasising known educational qualifications such as GCSEs.	One-to-one tuition

(Thomson and Russell 2007)

provision or full-time programme, and mode C being a part-time, reduced offer or 'complimentary' activities. Research by Power et al. (2022) suggests that while existing typologies help organise different interventions, they need more explanatory power. An example is Thomson and Russell's (2007) typology listed in Table 1 (for other examples, see Aron and Zweig, 2003; Valdebenito et al., 2018). At the same time, descriptions and classifications might be a useful starting point, especially as the literature acknowledges the complex landscape of provision (Thomson and Russell 2007, 2009; Thomson and Pennacchia 2014). Power et al. (2022) suggest that what is needed is a typology of what makes the difference that explains where the road to re-engagement lies.

Moreover, the literature suggests that there is scant evidence on the effectiveness of AP, and there is a need to increase the understanding of how it works in practice and which models best meet the 'complex' support needs of young people (Reimer and Pangrazio 2020, p. 479, Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014). Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) suggest that there is insufficient data on what happens to young people after they leave AP, and they argue that this is both a quality and an equity issue. Sandford et al. (2006) suggest that few programmes have demonstrated a sustainable impact on pupils' behaviour based on their activities. While Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) have developed a typology of AP in the UK, only one organisation in their study was from Wales, and there is a cogent argument for mapping the landscape of AP provision to ensure any typology developed would work in a Welsh context.

EOTAS and AP: The Policy Context in Wales

There are two overarching types of alternative education provision in Wales: Education Otherwise than at School (EOTAS) and alternative provision (AP). EOTAS is defined in Welsh law in the Education Act 1996. EOTAS is where LAs make arrangements for young people excluded from school. In addition to EOTAS, some schools commission AP, which was not the policy intention of the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2019). As schools commission some AP, LAs are unlikely to have a comprehensive list of AP providers operating in their area. It is challenging to capture the landscape of provision because there is not a

centralised list of alternative provisions in Wales. Where there is data, it has been compiled on a project basis and not been regularly updated (Thomson and Russell, 2009). Moreover, this research adopts a broad definition of alternative provision (AP), incorporating EOTAS and AP, not defined in Welsh law and commissioned by schools (Welsh Government, 2019). Estyn (2023) reports that most LAs do not monitor or oversee EOTAS provision robustly enough, with many only collecting data on qualifications gained and only a minority monitoring and evaluating the progress of pupils in EOTAS

While there is limited research on AP, particularly in Wales, Smith and Connolly (2019) examined the professional role of teachers within pupil referral units (PRUs). EOTAS provision includes, but is not limited to, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) (Welsh Government, 2019). PRUs are schools run by LAs for pupils who cannot cope with the demands of education and are one type of EOTAS (Welsh Government, 2018). While Smith and Connolly's (2019) paper is useful, it only looks at one type of AP. Furthermore, while some AP interventions will employ qualified teaching staff, others will employ youth workers, therapeutic engagement workers, behaviour and welfare officers, youth workers, sports coaches and vocational tutors (Putwain et al., 2016). Estyn (2023) found that pupil referral units (PRUs) were making progress towards delivering the Curriculum for Wales and that the majority were providing an effective curriculum while supporting pupils' emotional well-being. Welsh Government (2023) describes the role of regional Welsh education consortia in supporting the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales in EOTAS. Whilst this systematic collaboration between LAs is welcome with is evidence of systematic collaboration between LAs, with evidence and expertise being shared between key stakeholders to plan, design and implement the curriculum in EOTAS, AP seems to be out of the remit of the regional consortia (Welsh Government, 2019).

Methodology

As part of a larger ESRC project on the political economies of school exclusions in the UK, this research examines alternative provision (AP). The project explores the circumstances, the background and the institutional processes that lead to different types of formal and informal

school exclusion and the consequences for excluded young people, their families, schools, and other professionals across the UK. McCluskey et al. (2013), in an evaluation of the school exclusion process in Wales to get the complete picture of exclusion from school, also examined the education provided for pupils being educated outside of a school setting. Similar to the findings of previous research on AP, it was not known how many AP programmes were operating across LAs, there was no national data, and LAs held incomplete information (Thomson and Russell, 2007; Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014). The lack of a national database of AP providers might be because the Welsh Government (2019) acknowledges that while successive reports have suggested that they take a stronger role and establish national policies and procedures, they consider the organisations of EOTAS and PRUs to be the responsibility of LAs. Additionally, as schools commission some AP, LAs are unlikely to have a comprehensive list of AP providers operating in their area. Whilst there is evidence of collaboration in the adoption of the Curriculum for Wales supported by regional consortia in EOTAS AP settings that are not classified as EOTAS are not included in this work (Welsh Government, 2019).

Two case study local authorities (LAs) were selected in Wales as part of a project on school exclusion. One of the research objectives was to develop an inventory of AP in each of the two case study LA. These inventories were assembled based on desktop searches and interviews with LA officers. In each case study LA there were two core schools, one with higher-than-expected (HTE) and one with lower-than-expected (LTE) exclusions. As part of the school interviews, school staff and pupils were asked to name the AP providers that worked with the school. An inventory of AP was assembled for each LA (see Power et al., 2024 for more detail on the inventories of AP across the UK). From this inventory, a purposive sample of ten providers (see Table 2) was selected from a diverse selection of full-time and part-time providers with a mix of educational, vocational, sports, arts-based and therapeutic options. Thomson and Russell's (2007) typology was used to categorise providers rather than Thomson and Pennacchia's (2014) later typology because it was considered more useful initially to explore and categorise AP. The inclusion criteria were any programme or intervention that took pupils out of the classroom that the school did not run. School-based, internally-run AP was not included in this research.

The research questions were:

- 'What are the given rationales for different types of provision?'
- 'Which interventions, past and present, were/are regarded as successful and why?'

The research was undertaken by an education researcher with a background in AP. Greene (2014) notes that it is essential to consider bias when the researcher has a priori personal knowledge of the community. In order to minimise potential bias, peer debriefing was used; the researcher shared all elements of the research and findings with a colleague who read the transcripts and gave advice on coding (Greene, 2014). The ethics committee at Oxford University gave ethics approval for this research, reference ED-C1A-20-057.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the data collection method. Interviews were undertaken between December 2021 and July 2022. Semi-structured interviews were useful in collecting data because of the uncertain nature of AP, the interpretivist nature of the research and the lack of previous research on AP in Wales. The approach used respected participants' individual experiences of AP and enabled them to express their views on their own terms. Informed consent was obtained before interviews, and participants were given an overview of the whole project and the purpose of the interviews. Participants were asked how they worked with pupils, what their intervention involved, what they did differently than schools or PRUs, what the outcomes were for pupils and how they were funded.

The data was collected and analysed iteratively, and themes were explored further using thematic analysis. Semi-structured interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and were transcribed verbatim. There were several stages of data analysis. Firstly, to achieve immersion in the data, the data was repeatedly read to achieve a high level of familiarity; next, the data was thematically analysed to generate an initial list of codes/themes and see if any patterns related to the research questions. Then, it was examined how codes combined to form overarching themes. The semi-structured interviews were analysed to identify key themes for participants using thematic analysis following Clark and Braun (2017) and Patton (2014) and informed by the literature review to capture the diversity of provision, how they met the complex support needs of young people and how they measured success (Thomson

and Russell, 2007, 2009; Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014; Reimer and Pangrazio, 2020).

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that this research has limitations. Firstly, it took place in just two LAs, impacting wider generalisability. While Thomson and Russell's (2009) mapping of AP in England also took place in two LAs in phase one, they mapped provision, and in phase two, they completed six ethnographic case studies. This research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that most interviews were conducted online. Whilst when the fieldwork was conducted, education was available to students, it was not appropriate for an external researcher to be on-site; this meant it was not possible to observe the layout of space, student behaviour, student-staff relations, and staff behaviour as Thomson and Russell (2009) had. Another limitation of this study is that because of the burden placed on AP providers during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to check transcripts with participants. Instead, member checking was undertaken in interviews by summarising what had been said and clarifying interpretations (Jalali and Morgan, 2018).

The Rationales of AP Providers: Part-time Providers

The findings of this study show that there are two broad types of AP provision. Firstly, part-time supplementary provision is delivered to young people attending school or a pupil referral unit (PRU) to prevent exclusion. Secondly, full-time provision for young people who had been excluded as a replacement for school. The rationales of the part-time supplementary providers were diverse, although there were similarities among the programmes that used sports to engage young people. Participant 10, who worked for the therapeutic rugby provider and participant 1, who worked for the non-contact boxing provider, delivered therapeutic and life skills programmes. Participant 10 spent one day a week in each school, working with three groups of learners. They were with each group of young people for two hours a week for up to three years. Participant 10 described it as a 'real long-term intervention'. In the two hours that they were with young people, they

Table 2: The Sample

Participant	*Provision*	*Sector*	*Programme(s) Intervention Delivered*	*Location*	*Duration*	*Staff-to-learner ratio*	*EOTAS/ AP*	*Funder*	*Type*
1	Non-contact boxing	Third-sector (Charity)	Non-contact boxing activities. Followed by: Personal development programme (developed by psychologists) including: Learning from mistakes, having positive reactions, etc. They also run careers advice, entrepreneurship and financial capability programmes.	On school site	A set period, usually ten weeks or a term. The exercise session lasts an hour.	One member of staff to six to ten learners	AP	Trusts and foundations	Life skills
2	Community rugby	Private	Touch rugby, communication, and teamwork.	On school site	Two hours every fortnight or engagement activities.	Differs per school, but each school will have a core staff member to build relationships.	AP	Self-funded by the commercial rugby team	Life skills
3	Construction trainer	Private	Groundworks training on a site being developed for the local community	On a community site.	A mix can be full-time or one to two days a week. It lasts all school year.	Three members of staff for up to ten learners	AP	Funded by PRU	Vocational

Participant	*Provision*	*Sector*	*Programme(s) Intervention Delivered*	*Location*	*Duration*	*Staff-to-leamer ratio*	*EOTAS/ AP*	*Funder*	*Type*
4	Environmental Organisation	Private	Plumbing, cookery, carpentry art and photography Agored Cymru accredited courses with literacy and numeracy embedded into courses.	Off the school site in the organisation's purpose-built classrooms	A mix can be full-time or one to two days a week, and some learners attend on a six-week contract.	Maximum of one member of staff to six pupils.	AP	LA and schools buy places.	Vocational/ life skills
5	Housing maintenance	Third-sector (not-for-profit)	Practical construction workshops, including plumbing, electrical, pipefitting, painting, and decorating. Delivered from an industry toolkit.	On school site	Workshops last 60 – 90 minutes	At least three members of staff for five to ten pupils.	AP	Part of the company's social value commitment	Work skills/ life skills
6	Youth work inclusion project	Public	Youth work led alternative vocational, experiential opportunities for those marginalised and disengaged from mainstream education.	Off-school site in LA building	One day a week for some pupils to do vocational learning. Five days a week for KS4 pupils	Four members of staff for twelve young people	EOTAS	Core funded by the Welsh Government and LA.	Arts/ therapeutic
7	Military training provider	Third-sector (Charity)	Key stage 3 and 4 programmes with 14–16-year-olds delivering up to four GCSEs. They have a military, sports pathway, and an ESQ suite of essential skills training.	Off school site	From three months to two years based on young people's support needs	One to twenty in some classes. One to six for entry-level maths and English.	EOTAS	Welsh Government	Vocational/ academic/ life skills

Participant	*Provision*	*Sector*	*Programme(s) Intervention Delivered*	*Location*	*Duration*	*Staff-to-learner ratio*	*EOTAS/ AP*	*Funder*	*Type*
8	Music technology provider	Third-sector (CIC)	Most of the coursework in music technology is practical, with functional skills built in when reporting on the practical work.	Off school site	One day a week as part of the LA vocational programme.	A minimum of two members of staff per eight learners.	EOTAS	LA.	Art/ life skills
9	Training provider	Private	On the full-time course, English, maths, health and social care, art, PSE, and food hygiene are compulsory modules with options for sport, media, hair and beauty construction, motor vehicle and animal care.	Independent school	Full-time PRU provision and part-time vocational options	Seven / eight learners to two members of staff	EOTAS.	Schools and LAs	Academic
10	Therapeutic rugby	Third-sector (Charity)	Each group of learners becomes a rugby team in an exercise session, working together using different skill sets to achieve agreed goals. Followed by workshops developed by the charity's psychology team on the issues that young people present with, e.g., body confidence, consent, healthy relationships, drugs, grooming, healthy routine, and healthy use of mobile phones and social media.	On school site	They work in each school one day a week, seeing three groups of learners.	Four staff members for typically 10 learners, and the maximum would be twenty learners.	AP	Schools and LAs.	Life skills/ therapeutic

did a physical training session first to make the young people's brains 'nice and malleable'; next, they delivered a personal development workshop where they covered subjects like consent, healthy relationships, drugs, grooming, healthy routine, healthy use of mobile phones, social media. Participant 10 explained that they aimed to find out why young people were presenting with challenging behaviour and prevent exclusion:

> Our job is to understand (and) build trust with the young person, so they feel they can tell us why they are withdrawn, why they are presenting with challenging behaviour, why they are not engaging with school, why they are not reaching their potential. All that kind of stuff. And if they trust us, which they do after a while, enough to disclose, then we will work with them very closely to help the school understand what's going on as well because that's important.

Participant 1 described how, after non-contact boxing, young people's 'guard came down'. Furthermore, they were more open to conversations about their well-being and health.

In addition to non-contact boxing, participant 1 delivered therapeutic anger management workshops developed by psychologists *to* help students 'think of different ways that they can react to really common situations … just to help get back on the right track and help them have more positive reactions'. Participant 2, the community rugby provider, supported young people in developing life skills through team-building exercises. They explained they 'develop rugby skills, but (they) also develop life skills, focusing on communication skills, teamwork, and the discipline that comes with sport.'

The remaining providers of part-time AP delivered housing maintenance, music, and youth work programmes. Participant 5 delivered hands-on and 'messy' practical housing maintenance workshops in secondary schools. These programmes provided young people with work skills and the ability to follow instructions. Participant 5 explained that they delivered practical workshops including 'tiling, wallpapering, plumbing, electrical or painting', and students 'were quite happy to get hands-on and get messy with the grout, paints', describing that it gave students 'a bit of confidence that they can do something and see the results of what (they) had just done'.

Participant 6 explained that the youth work inclusion project offered 'alternative vocational, experiential opportunities for those marginalised

and disengaged from mainstream education', and the project 'straddled youth work and education'.

> Because it's education, but we still present a youth work offer that is solution-focused, an empowered offer. What would you like to do? What are your interests? How about we do this? No, don't like that. OK, so we'll try this. So, it's a very evaluative reflective process as well. So that whatever we offer meets the (support) needs of the young people and at the same time, we understand that young people have very spiky behaviours and performance profiles.

Participant 8 explained that they were contracted to deliver a music technology qualification, but the most important thing they did was use music to re-engage students in education:

> Music is just an engagement tool … the most important thing is … the student, their well-being, their self-esteem and what's happening to them. Are they safe? Most of the young people that come to us have either been abused, they're experiencing homelessness issues, they've got mental health issues, or they're neurodivergent.

The rationales of full-time AP providers

Full-time providers tended to have a more academic focus, although there was a more limited curriculum than in mainstream schools. Participant 9 worked for a training provider that provided a full-time programme for students; they delivered core subjects of English, maths, health and social care, art, personal and social education, and food hygiene. Students then had a choice of additional vocational options, including sport, media, hair and beauty, construction, motor vehicles and animal care. Their rationale was for students to leave with qualifications and progress into something meaningful:

> Our aim is … if we get a learner in plenty of time, they will leave with somewhere between five to nine GCSEs or equivalents, and they would progress into something they're interested in.

Of the two other full-time AP providers, participant 4 explained that during the environmental intervention, they focused on vocational skills and life skills; they delivered a set programme of accredited

modules that provided practical hands-on learning, including 'plumbing, cookery, carpentry, bicycle maintenance, art and photography … outside a formal classroom setting'. Participant 4 explained that 'young people (go to) them if they are having difficulties in school for whatever reason' and (here) 'they're not a bunch of school kids. Each one is an individual.'

The remaining full-time provision was a construction training provider delivering vocational groundworks training. Participant 3 explained that the purpose of this intervention was to provide professional vocational training to young people facing barriers to accessing opportunities within the construction industry, an industry with skills shortages. 'The young people learn how to drive the machines correctly … so I teach them the dumper (truck), the do's and the dont's … how to operate a 360 (excavator). So, when they are 16, they have their tickets and CSCS Card.'[1]

Results: The challenges of measuring success

Inconsistent referral information

Participants reported challenges measuring the success of the interventions they delivered. The first challenge of measuring success for part-time and full-time AP providers was inconsistent referral information, making it difficult to establish a baseline to report on the progress of pupils. Participant 10 explained that at the start of programmes, they 'ask for as much information as possible on the young person', but the information they received was a 'mixed bag' and 'varied from school to school'. Participant 8 explained:

> There are often gaps (in referral information), and often young people just show up. We've got no background whatsoever. The information does exist somewhere. It's just not very good at being transferred to us. We get reports about young people, but then we also don't a lot of the time.

1 A CSCS card demonstrates that people working on a construction site have the appropriate training and qualifications to do their job on a construction site (Construction Skills Certification Scheme, 2023).

Participant 1 explained that sometimes they do not get referral information from schools, and students disclose information such as additional learning needs (ALN). It was unclear whether this was as a result of school policies on disclosure or inadequate referral information

> Information sometimes gets given to us by the school, sometimes it doesn't, or the young person discloses it. I've been in a few schools where a young person has disclosed to me that they have, some level (of ALN or support need) they've been diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, or Dyslexia, or, you know, all sorts of things, so it's not easy to tell unless they disclose sometimes.

Participant 7 explained that they could wait four or five weeks for referral information, which could be 'too late' if students had high support needs. They had developed internal systems for capturing as much information as possible as a means to mitigate the lack of vital information. This letter writing activity was also used as a form of formative assessment to determine pupils' level of literacy:

> We find out as much as we can through our initial assessment. We have done something called 'tell me about yourself'; it is very much a soft interview, and they do a piece of writing about themselves. They write a letter to themselves in two years (we ask them to); picture yourself in two years; you are writing to yourself today and giving yourself as many plaudits as possible. That's a soft way of learning about the young person; they can start visualising and affirming their achievements. That is how we get to know the young person and their barriers.

The challenges for part-time providers in measuring results

Most of the AP providers in the sample faced challenges measuring the success of their interventions, with part-time supplementary providers being unable to track learners' transition into education, employment or training and full-time providers needing help to capture longitudinal outcomes. Part-time providers in the sample used diverse tools and methods to capture the distance travelled by young people. Mainly, but not exclusively, where providers did not deliver accreditations or qualifications, they needed to measure progress differently. In some instances, funders told providers what they should measure. For example, participant 4 measured the number of students who gained practical

skills, improved attendance and increased confidence. Whilst other participants had developed internal measures as evidence of effectiveness to secure funding in the future, participant 10 explained that they used an internal measurement tool to measure an increase in confidence, commitment and control.

It was particularly challenging for part-time providers that did not deliver accreditations or qualifications to demonstrate the results of their interventions. Instead, they captured the distance travelled by students. Participant 10, 'purposely' did not deliver any accreditations or qualifications because the programme aimed to 'keep (pupils) in school and (they do) their schoolwork there'. Participant 10 used the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale to measure 'any increase in mental well-being on a termly basis with young people'. Providers used a variety of methods to capture outputs and outcomes. Participant 6 worked on the youth work inclusion project; they used various methods to capture outputs, outcomes, and students' views. Despite acknowledging the 'challenges capturing soft outcomes' participant 6 used an Outcomes Star to measure distance travelled in soft skills, particularly 'confidence, self-esteem and where (students) see themselves', which helped them 'celebrate progress, no matter how small'. As well as offering a variety of accreditations, participant 6 explained they were good at capturing youth voice, explaining that they record everything on a management information system:

> It's all self-assessment, stuff that we measure with young people, but essentially, we're trying to give them an emotional language, so they can feel that they can express themselves and make sense of what's going on. And we also try to give them practical tools that they can implement so that they can translate that emotion better sometimes in a healthier way.

Part-time supplementary providers generally struggled with capturing longer-term outcomes, including transition into employment, education, or training. Evidence of pupils' successful transition meant that alternative providers knew that their interventions had been effective in the short term and they had evidence of effectiveness to apply for funding in the future. Participants 1, 2, 5 and 10 worked with children in their schools. These providers found that schools were 'rightly' protective of pupils' contact details, but this made it difficult for them to track the progress and transition into employment, education, or training of young

people. This meant they relied on schools to provide post intervention feedback on young people's progress and transition into employment, education, and training, which could be inconsistent and ad-hoc. Participant 10 explained:

> We do the best while we've got them and (we hope) that with the right long-term support that sustained behaviour change (will last) over a sustained period, and we've given them the best tools possible to go out and thrive. Sometimes the (young people) contact us, or we'll see them in (town) or (their) teachers will tell us.

Full-time providers: Reporting Results

Full-time providers had more sophisticated methods of tracking outputs, outcomes and transition into employment, education, and training. For example, participant 7 worked for a national charity, and they used a customer relationship management (CRM) system to capture student development. They had linked the CRM system to a monitoring database:

> So, anything from pre-enrolment from the website, all that goes into our database, everything is tagged into that so if the learner is in the care system … if the learner comes from a PRU, has a statement of (additional learning needs) it is tagged. That system then talks to (a computerised monitoring system). Then, that system breaks down qualifications and achievements (by demographic), and then we evaluate it. (The schools' inspectorate) cited it as best practice in evaluating how we monitor and evaluate learners' performance.

The Challenges for full-time providers: capturing longitudinal outcomes.

Where full-time AP providers struggled was capturing young people's longitudinal outcomes. For example, participant 9 had monitoring and evaluation in place, they had key performance indicators, they captured GCSEs gained or equivalents, and they captured learners' post-16 destinations. The training provider was confident that learners would achieve GCSEs or equivalents if they got them in time and that learners would progress into something that interested them. However, participant 9 felt there needed to be more longitudinal research to track young people who had attended their provision:

> The reality is, I don't think there is a study … looking at where these young people are now and following them for 10/15 years post being in alternative provision and having been excluded. Am I confident I can develop them in the short term to be confident to go into post-16? Yes. Have I changed their lives long-term? I don't know.

Findings: Resources

Another finding of this research is that providers in the third and private sectors do not receive enough funding from schools or local authorities to cover the total cost of interventions. AP private and third-sector providers reported receiving insufficient funding from schools or LAs to cover core activities. In this research AP providers defined core costs as the staffing costs, running costs of buildings, materials, if applicable accreditations and qualifications and additional costs were defined as additional activities and experiences for young people. In the third-sector, participants 10 and 8 identified high staffing costs as the main reason they had to secure additional funding from trusts and foundations. Participant 10 explained that their therapeutic rugby intervention was expensive to run. Every group of young people has four staff members, including a 'behaviour specialist who is a psychologist or something else relevant, e.g., adolescent mental health' and a rugby coach. They explained that their intervention was 'cost-intensive and people-intensive', but with the 'level of support needed' and the 'trauma of COVID-19', they could not go into a school with less than a core team:

> The schools or the LAs pay. They don't cover 100% of our costs. Then the rest we make up in grant funding, corporate funding, trusts and foundations, events you name it as a charity, we've probably got about ten different income streams, which is chaotic, but great, as well.

Participant 8 delivered music technology courses. They explained that they were paid per student, and as they got more students, they needed more teachers. They explained that they got to a point where they had to 'subsidise the AP project from other unreserved funds because it just wasn't covering itself', and It was particularly challenging to employ qualified teachers because they needed to 'consider the student-to-teacher ratio' and realistically they needed to 'pay a minimum of £20.00 per hour cause they're qualified teachers'. Explaining that during the

pandemic, they had used the time to apply for funding bids to subsidise programme delivery:

> So, what I've done over the pandemic. I had a lot of time in the house, so I took it upon myself to write a load of funding bids. So, we've put in a large (funding) bid, which I've been working on for over three years. It's in the final stages of being approved now, and I've got a bunch of wages and salaries for the pre-16 project.

Similarly, private companies delivering AP interventions explained that they would likely run at a loss. Two private companies, the environmental organisation and the training provider, ran at a deficit, and other parts of their organisations subsidised their provision. Like the music provider, the environmental organisation was funded per student; participant 4 explained:

> They pay us (the LA or school) a daily rate for each pupil. Our budget is based on around 12 children a day per school term, and then we would break even. We haven't achieved that for eight years. We're going to run at a loss, but we also know other parts of the company will make a profit and pay money into it.

Participant 9 explained that they had a contract with local authorities to deliver training. However, they did not price it, and while they 'forecast as best (they) can financially in terms of planning and resourcing', they cannot 'help getting carried away and want to do the best for the learners'. They had recently booked a residential trip to a working farm because they saw that as a real opportunity for personal development, 'but it costs money, and you get to the point where they have to go cap in hand to the company and say, "Look, I didn't put it in my budget, what do you reckon? our young people would benefit from this."' They explained that it was helpful to be part of a larger organisation.

> It's incredibly expensive … a benefit of being a bolt-on under (a large) training company (is that they) foot the bill; we've got the contract with the LAs, we don't price it, we try and break even. What happens even though we forecast as best we can. It is far more likely for us to run at a deficit. You can't help but get carried away and want to do the best for these learners.

The youth work engagement project was publicly funded and run by the local authority. Participant 6 explained that they had enough funding to

cover core activities but needed additional funding for additional activities and experiences for students. They explained that they were constantly looking for funding, and that was just the 'nature of the beast' for AP providers:

> There's never enough money to do what the young people want to do or need to do … we apply for anything that allows us to do stuff that we wouldn't necessarily be able to do because I get around £2.00 per day to spend on a young person if you take out all my staffing costs and running costs of the centre. What I have left for resources, activities, and experiences is £2.00 per young person.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the rationales of different types of AP operating across two LAs in Wales. It was initially challenging to select organisations because there was not an up-to-date list that included all the AP providers that schools used. This reflects previous research on AP, which found a 'bewildering array of projects' rather than an integrated transitional pathway and support system, and where there has been any mapping of AP, it has been compiled on a project basis and not regularly updated (te Riele, 2007, p. 54; Thomson and Russell, 2009). When mapping of providers had been completed for this project, a purposive sample of ten alternative providers with divergent rationales was selected. Research question one explores the given rationales of different types of provision. Within the diversity of provision, there were two main categories of AP with different rationales. Full-time provision offered as an alternative to mainstream education, and part-time supplementary provision seeking to re-engage pupils in mainstream education. There was more complexity within this, with full-time and part-time providers from the third-sector/private and the public sector providing a range of sporting, educational, vocational, and therapeutic interventions. Thomson and Russell's (2007) typology was a useful starting point for organising the different interventions into categories of vocational, work skills, basic skills, life skills, activity-based, environmental, arts, therapeutic, work experience and academic. However, while existing typologies are useful in organising interventions, Power et al. (2022) suggest that what is needed is a typology that explains what makes a difference and where the road to

re-engagement lies. However, as discussed below, the findings of this research suggest AP organisations have precarious funding, which could impact sustainability. In addition to having challenges measuring success. This would make creating a typology that captured what makes a difference in AP challenging.

The second research question examined which interventions, past and present, were regarded as successful and why. AP providers reported significant challenges demonstrating the effectiveness of their interventions. The first issue that AP providers had was inadequate referral information; this made it difficult to establish a baseline to report on the distance travelled of students. Measuring results was even more challenging for part-time providers who worked with young people at risk of exclusion that aimed to re-engage them in education. This might be in part because they are still continuing with some form of mainstream education they are still being taken out of mainstream lessons. However, it was also because part-time providers tended to 'purposely' not deliver accreditations or qualifications, meaning they had to find other ways to measure success. Each AP provider used a different system, including Outcomes Stars and internal measurement systems, despite all reporting on similar things, including improved well-being and increased confidence. Part-time providers explained that it was challenging to track young people's progress because schools would not share pupils contact details; this raises questions about the relationship between schools and AP providers, as schools trust AP providers to deliver an intervention to pupils but not with their contact details. Although this could also be because of schools policies on sharing their pupil's data. While measuring success was necessary to secure funding, the time needed to secure resources could also be a barrier to measuring success.

In contrast, full-time providers could capture outputs and transition into employment, education, and training more easily. The full-time providers tended to have monitoring and evaluation in place, capturing GCSEs or equivalents gained and learners' post-16 destinations. Even with good data on qualifications and transition into employment, education and training, the full-time providers identified the need for more longitudinal research; they wanted to know if young people had been developed in the long term. The findings of this research suggest that AP providers can struggle to provide evidence success. The findings of this research also suggest that there is a cogent argument for research

evaluating the effectiveness of AP and the longitudinal outcomes of young people who have attended AP.

This research found issues around resources that could impact the sustainability of provision. AP providers in the private and third-sectors, which schools or LAs funded, needed more funding to cover the costs of their core activities. Third-sector organisations explained that although they were funded by schools or LAs they did not always cover the full cost of programmes. For example, participant 10 explained that while they are funded by schools and LAs this funding does not cover their core costs. This meant they had to rely on a 'chaotic' mix of ten different income streams including grant funding, corporate funding and trusts and foundations. Providers in the private sector struggled with funding but were subsidised by more profitable parts of their organisations. For example, participant 4 explained that because they were funded on a place-by-place basis, they needed 12 students to break even, and they had not achieved that for eight years. These findings reflect previous research which has found that the way AP is funded on fixed-term contracts can result in provision being unstable and often commissioned on a place-by-place basis (te Riele, 2007; Malcolm, 2019; Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014). This need to depend heavily on fundraising could impact programme delivery and explain why there is such a complex landscape of AP, as programmes can be funded on a short-term basis. Funding precarity could be linked to the issues providers have measuring success, as it can be challenging to secure funding if there is no evidence of success. Perhaps what is required is for academics to work with practitioners to increase the capacity of the sector to measure the success of provision. To develop and establish universal and widely understood ways of measuring success to understand which models work best for children and young people. This should include longitudinal research to understand which interventions make a difference in the long term.

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