

Editorial — Envisioning the Post-COVID “New Normal” for Education in Wales

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This issue comes at a significant time for education in Wales. Following a period of large-scale — and ongoing — education reform (Evans, 2022; Welsh Government, 2023), we have seen the first roll-out of the new Curriculum for Wales across the primary phases, which will undoubtedly lead to many initial reflections on its success (for example, see: Chapman et al., 2023; Roberts, 2023; Jones, 2021; Knight & Crick, 2022; Gatley, 2020). We have also seen the development, delivery and tuning of the pan-Wales National MA Education professional learning programme (Welsh Government, 2021), which aims to support professionals to navigate the rapidly changing educational landscape in Wales. This collaborative venture, involving seven universities in Wales, helps build the foundation for a world-class teaching workforce that have the skills and knowledge to inform and evaluate professional practice, and to share their knowledge through scholarly activities and research dissemination (including via our *Focus on Practice* series). We are also starting to see the longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system in Wales, and on a wide variety of psychological, sociological and educational matters affecting teachers, pupils, and the wider school community (Marchant et al., 2022; Hulme et al., 2023). Taking a holistic view of schools as both ‘learning organisations’ and as communities of practice allows for a collective ‘voice’ that can help address some of the challenges to effective education at different levels and ensure equal access to education for all (Harris et al., 2022; Power et al., 2020). This is particularly pertinent in light of global issues such as large-scale economic disruption, migration and climate impact, which brings about new challenges to effective integration and learning. And all increasingly viewed through the interdisciplinary policy lenses of the Well-being of

Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, as well as the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The four articles in this issue address various aspects of these wider concerns in different ways. We begin with an article by Knight et al., exploring the perceptions of early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners regarding effective strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of the closure of ECEC settings for the under-fives during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The first stage of the study employed a three-stage Delphi study, whereby a panel of experts, both nationally and internationally recognised, responded, independently, to three survey opportunities. The first survey sought the expert panel's suggestions regarding potential strategies, methods or practical steps that could be adopted in order to address or mitigate some of the adverse effects of the pandemic on children under the age of five years. The second survey collated the studies presented in the first survey, and asked the experts to rate which of the strategies they would prioritise within the sector. The final survey presented a list of the top third of strategies experts judged as most effective in mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic on a range of areas of development, including cognitive, social, emotional, speech and language, and physical development, as noted in their response to the second survey. Within each area of development, experts were asked to rank which strategies would be most effective in addressing the adverse effects of the pandemic. Responses were then analysed in terms of the strength of consensus across the panel and the dispersion of ranking for each strategy. The priority list of strategies, as presented to the experts in the final survey, was also disseminated among 378 ECEC practitioners currently working in the sector in Wales, who were also asked to rank the perceived effectiveness of each strategy within each of the areas of development. These results were also analysed for levels of consensus and dispersion of rankings across strategies within the sample.

The findings suggest that, overall, there was a higher level of dispersion associated with various areas of development among the expert panel than among the general practitioner sample. Whilst in the majority of cases the expert panel and the practitioners did not differ in mean rankings for individual strategies, there were significant differences on four strategies. Interestingly, whilst the majority of informants clearly favoured universal access to provision, the expert panel were stronger in their opinion about the importance of not closing ECEC settings than

other practitioners, highlighting the need to have a balanced opinion around the logistics and practicalities of closure and the importance of continued high-quality play experiences for all.

One overarching set of strategies identified by the practitioners was the need for poverty reduction. Whilst tackling poverty is high on any political agenda, understanding the experiences of various stakeholders who deal with the outcomes of poverty is under-researched. One such stakeholder group is school parent governors. Using an explanatory sequential-type mixed-methods design, our second paper by Meredith used questionnaire data to frame subsequent interview data pitched at 10 parent-governors serving primary 'Communities First' schools in south Wales. The study involved exploring parent-governors' expectations of the role, the realities of the role, and the skills set expected/obtained in order to execute their duties during the process. Whilst the data set is small, and represents the experiences of parent-governors serving in communities in a specific region of Wales, a number of interesting patterns emerge that may resonate with similar regions elsewhere in Wales, and warrant further exploration as outlined in the study. In particular, despite serving as parent-governors in schools with high percentages of children in receipt of free school meals (an oft-quoted proxy measure of deprivation), by and large, the parent-governor sample in this study represented middle-class, employed and/or educated individuals. Whilst this challenges the generalisability of the findings to other parent-governors in low socio-economic contexts, it does raise concerns as to how likely parents who are unemployed/in receipt of benefits are to self-nominate or be elected for the role, which questions schools' ability to provide an equal voice for all. From a research perspective, how likely certain types of parent-governors are to partake in independent research is also of concern. However, added to the lack of parity of voice in school governance, parent-governors felt largely limited in their own voice and experienced a lack of autonomy in their role. This meant that many had not played a part in any decision-making processes, which distanced them from any accountability for governing body decisions, devaluing stakeholder governance in the process. Much of this apathy was due to the dominance of school leaders, particularly headteachers in the chair position. The authors argue for a structures programme of reform in order to address the parent-governor concern raised in the study.

Encouraging strong parental engagement within a community of support is crucial in improving school attainment. However, at the heart of this community of support is the pupil. Understanding pupil preferences, behaviours and needs is crucial in ensuring access to, and fulfilment of, the principles underpinning the new Curriculum for Wales. Given the large-scale education reforms that have been underway in Wales, it is now more important than ever to understand the factors that facilitate or hinder pupil enjoyment, engagement and skills. Ensuring easy access to their desired subjects when choosing GCSE options is one aspect of this challenge. In our third article, Jones investigates the factors that influence pupils when making their subject choices, particularly around choosing a Modern Foreign Language (MFL). Framed within the Welsh Government's *Global Futures* agenda, the multi- and plurilingual approached advocated through the new Curriculum for Wales, and the urgent need to increase the number of pupils studying MFLs and gaining statutory qualifications in those languages, the paper explores the current challenges to the uptake of MFLs among secondary school pupils across Wales. Using an online questionnaire methodology, Jones solicited the views of 860 pupils across 10 secondary schools (including predominantly Welsh-medium, specified Welsh-medium, bilingual, English-medium, rural, urban, small and large secondary, and all-age schools) to five questions, exploring the following concepts: pupils' home language context in order to explore patterns across MFL selection and home language experiences; whether they opted to follow a MFL as part of their GCSE choices; reasons for not choosing a MFL or not; and whether they felt that a MFL would be useful to them in the future. Two main factors emerged as possible deterrents that warrant further exploration — the perceived difficulty of MFLs as subjects, and the limitations inherent in option lists. These require a systemic approach, both nationally in terms of reducing the perceptions that learning languages are difficult, and institutionally, in terms of ensuring MFLs are not pitched against other popular subjects, thus limiting the likelihood of uptake.

A noteworthy finding in Jones' paper was that whilst only 18% of the pupils opted to study a MFL at GCSE, 59% felt that a MFL was important for the future. The importance of languages and multi- and plurilingual competences has become all the more pressing as the world has become increasingly more accessible. Mutual intelligibility is a key to social and economic wellbeing, and ensuring equitable access to services for all

requires ensuring certain levels of proficiency in specific languages. Our final paper by Agbaso and Roberts focuses on one specific group of individuals for whom learning English is an important component of integration, community cohesion and a condition of citizenship, namely forced migrants into Wales. However, forced migrants who become English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) learners are not the same as regular ESOL learners. Forced migrants are not only tasked with the challenges of learning a new language; they are learning a new language whilst carrying the psychological trauma of their circumstance. The diverse and unique nature of forced migrants makes them a complex group of ESOL learners. Exploring the factors that hinder their progression in English, and the extent to which various strategies implemented in the ESOL language classroom may mitigate some of these factors, can go a long way to support progress in this area. Using a semi-structured interviews (four participants) and a survey (62 participants) the authors gained the views of ESOL teachers on trauma-informed practices in order to identify what teachers know about working with forced migrants, what they believe their role to be when working with forced migrants, and how they might apply the principles of Bloom's Sanctuary Model (1995) as a basis for a trauma-responsive teaching model. The findings of the study demonstrated quite clearly the pervasiveness of trauma in the ESOL classroom, although the majority of ESOL teachers noted some difficulty in identify signs of trauma and its impact on the learner. The authors argue for the need to ensure greater awareness around the effects of trauma on individuals' behaviours. Nevertheless, many ESOL teachers demonstrated good practices that are underpinned by the principles of the Sanctuary Model, although the authors conclude that more is needed to increase teachers' (and learners') understanding of emotional literacy as it pertains to this specific group of learners.

Together, these papers provide a wealth of insights across different sectors (ECEC, primary schools, secondary schools, adult education), populations (ECEC practitioners, parent-governors, pupils and ESOL teachers) and issues (pedagogy, school governance, poverty, facilitating access to the MFL curriculum, mitigating trauma in the adult language classroom), attesting to the wealth of research currently underway in Wales. We hope you enjoy the papers in the current volume. In closing, it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge the emerging disruptive impact of artificial intelligence (AI) in education (Luckin et al., 2016), and especially generative AI tools such as ChatGPT (Dwivedi et al.,

2023). With the increased prominence of digital competence and computer science in the new Curriculum for Wales (Crick, 2021), we would welcome submissions in this area — as well as to other educational research areas — to both the academic and practitioner strands for future issues, from within Wales and internationally. As always, please contact the editors if you would like to discuss your work, submitting to Janeway (our online submission system) in Welsh or English, our double-blind peer review process, or getting published in the *Wales Journal of Education/Cylchgrawn Addysg Cymru*.

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