Vulnerable Learner Provision and Engagement in a post-pandemic world: preliminary evidence from a Welsh local authority

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Vulnerable Learners in a south Wales local authority, UK. The study looked at the changing nature of the vulnerable learner student profile and how their engagement has evolved because of the pandemic, which also involved assessing the nature and types of vulnerable learner provision. Using a case-study research design, two phases of data collection were employed. In phase one, individual semi-structured interviews took place online with those responsible for vulnerable learner provision (n=10). In phase two, face-to-face focus groups were conducted with learners from key stage 3, key stage 4 and Further Education (n=4). The findings discuss the changing nature and profile of vulnerable learners; the range of vulnerable learner provision; as well as, and perhaps most importantly, learner voice perspectives. This research is of use to policymakers, teachers, alternative education providers and all stakeholders with an interest in vulnerable learners.

Keywords: vulnerable learners, alternative curriculum, COVID-19

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Introduction

In 2020, the world was brought to a standstill by the COVID-19[1] pandemic. Indeed, in most civilised societies, governments imposed strict restrictions of movement, which at their worst, culminated in national lockdowns. Consequently, in the UK, many industries were forced to close immediately, which included compulsory education, especially in early lockdowns. This raised concerns for many involved in the UK education sector – and even before analysing the early research specifically for vulnerable learners (VLs hereafter), there is damning evidence that demonstrates effects for all learners. Fundamentally, attainment for all pupils has been negatively affected by COVID-19, but the gap has widened between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. Even though periodic evidence showed signs of recovery in the summer of 2021, on balance, pupil cohorts were not performing as well in maths and reading as they did before the pandemic (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022). Indeed, the same report also shines a light on teacher concerns over pupil wellbeing and how the pandemic has continued to negatively affect mental health.

To this end, the aim of this paper is to provide preliminary evidence from a study that has investigated the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable learners in one Welsh local authority. Consequently, this paper will address the following research objectives:

1. To understand the changing nature of the needs of vulnerable learners
2. To evaluate the range and types of vulnerable learner provision across the authority
3. To gather learner perspectives on current vulnerable learner provision.

The next section of the paper will operationalise VLs and examine the current evidence on VL provision and engagement. Then, a discussion of the evidence surrounding the emergence and development of the alternative curriculum will be provided. Following this, the study's methodology will be presented before the

1 The COVID-19 global pandemic meant that in the UK, many industries were either suspended or forced into operating remotely. There were also strict restrictions placed on the movement of people.

results and discussion. A summary and recommendations section will conclude the paper.

Vulnerable learners

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO, 1994) Salamanca Statement was a landmark development in legislation that sought to promote inclusion in global educational policy and practice. Nevertheless, local authorities in the UK have faced perennial problems trying to achieve inclusion for all in education, and evidence confirms that those pupils most likely to face exclusion from education are those with social, emotional and behavioural problems (DCSF, 2008). Underscoring this assertion is a sprinkling of empirical evidence that confirms that the root cause of this exclusion is the rigid and unappealing formation of the national curriculum, coupled with the pressures of those responsible for its delivery, as well as the continued complexity in the needs of young people (McNamara, 1998; Rustique-Forrester and Riley, 2001; and Stone, Cotton and Thomas, 2002).

Within the policy context, vulnerability in education is newer than other policy discourses, and as ever, it is difficult not to overlook the influence of political ideology. The first instances of its acknowledgement date back to the 1970s, when it became subsumed as part of social welfarist child protection agendas (Jopling and Vincent, 2016). Conversely, neo-liberal administrations such as Thatcher's in the 1990s, and since 2010, Coalition and Conservative governments, have dismantled the focus, instead viewing vulnerability as a deficit or weakness, and individuals as 'architects of their own disadvantage' (Potter and Brotherton, 2013). Moreover, attempting to pinpoint a universal definition of vulnerability is problematic and the literature confirms two general schools of thought. First, there are Campion's (1994) assertions that vulnerability should take a needs-based approach that distinguishes between those with developmental difficulties and those who live in poverty or damaging circumstances. Then there is Mantle et al.'s (2006) distinctions between conditions and effects, which again illuminates the interplay between structure and agency, which in simple terms translates to individual needs and socioeconomic circumstances (Pickett and Vanderbloemen, 2015).

For the purposes of this study, for the operationalisation of VLs we adopt the Welsh Government's (2020, p. 3) all-encompassing definition, which are learners that fall into one or more of the following groups:

- Learners with special educational needs (SEN)
- Learners from minority ethnic groups who have English or Welsh as an additional language (EAL/WAL)
- Care-experienced children, including looked after children
- Learners educated other than at school (EOTAS)
- Children of refugees and asylum seekers
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children
- Learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM)
- Young carers
- Children at risk of harm, abuse or neglect

The Welsh Government (2020) make clear that the list is non-exhaustive, and not all learners from these groups will face barriers to learning, or indeed be vulnerable to underachievement. Moreover, there is the important acknowledgement that the contextual and individualistic nature of provision means that the complexity of VL should not be underestimated. There is also the point that individualism may mean that children may align with more than one group or could move between groups. Then of course, there is the originality of this research, which could suggest that some young people may now be classed as vulnerable as a direct consequence of the pandemic.

The alternative curriculum

In the UK, in the 1990s alternative provision (AP) was formulated as a response to try and combat exclusion from mainstream education, largely for boys, children with additional learning needs and those from ethnic minority backgrounds (Rogers et al., 2009). As alternative education came to prominence, Cullen et al., (2000) formulated three different approaches to provision – satellite, extension and complementary. In simple terms, satellite provision is separate and bespoke and for an exclusively identified group of vulnerable young people and is normally delivered

outside of the traditional school environment. Complementary approaches are where provision eventually gets rolled out to all pupils in a school – which are normally delivered by an external provider and vocationally oriented in design. Finally, and juxtaposing these two approaches is extension provision, which differs in that its purpose is to ameliorate perceived weaknesses in the depth and breadth of existing provision and is provided by external organisations.

As Trotman et al. (2019) discuss, AP encompasses public, private and third sector organisations, and delivery examples can range from independent therapeutic schools for children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties; training and vocational programmes in further education colleges; support and training offered by charities; businesses, independent providers and the public sector. The complexion of AP activities is bespoke, and they are normatively tailored for identified groups of pupils with common needs and have remained largely unchanged since their genesis. Indeed, activity ranges from online platforms to technical skills and vocational activities – such as vehicle maintenance and hair and beauty – as well as other vocational education and work-based learning opportunities (Gutherson et al., 2011; Harper et al., 2011).

The evidence surrounding this provision is emergent and typically relates to satellite provision. Several studies have evaluated the effectiveness of Skill Force, who are a London-based alternative education provider (Hallam et al., 2007; Hallam, Rogers and Rhamie, 2010). From a pupil perspective the evidence is resoundingly positive, and disaffected pupils noted that the programme had met their needs. Indeed, they reported that their motivation to engage with education had significantly increased, along with marked development in self-efficacy, confidence and social skills (Hallam et al., 2007). Tangible benefits were also noted with Hallam et al. (2010) investigating staff perceptions. Both Skill Force and school staff lauded the programme in terms of re-engaging pupils with education, and the improvements specifically related to the programme, rather than the wider school context.

The empirical evidence also incorporates a corpus of case studies that have specifically focussed on complimentary provision. Indeed, Penacchia et al. (2016) conducted secondary analysis of seventeen case studies and found that on the whole positive relationships were established between schools and AP providers, regardless of where provision took place. One example relates to girls only provision that was housed on the school site where they attended and significant improvements in key indicators such as: attendance, attainment and behaviour. An off-site example related

to a one-week residential on a farm and it was reported that pupils grew in confidence, self-esteem, behaviour, as well as fostering stronger peer relationships. Moreover, complementary research also confirms similar findings and it is clear that AP works best when it is facilitated by independent providers, includes a range of non-traditional activities, and has the flexibility to cater to individual needs (see: Evans, 2010; Nicholson and Putwain, 2016; Putwain et al., 2016).

In relation to school-based provision, Trotman et al. (2019) undertook extensive evaluation research with collaborative provision across three local authorities in the Midlands area of England. The research was conducted at a time when the number of pupils being referred into these services was worryingly growing. The results found that pupils had negative experiences when transitioning between key stages, especially between 2–3 (when a pupil leaves primary and starts secondary education). Due to the temporal nature of the AP, pupils also had negative experiences of reintegration into mainstream education, or what the local authority termed as 'managed moves', arguing that these were detrimental because of the labelling by teachers and their lack of knowledge and understanding of dealing with pupils and AP more generally. The performative culture of the school is perceived as a real barrier for young people, and the push towards academic rather than vocational attainment, although perhaps the biggest positive to emanate from the research was when there was multi-agency involvement, thus reaffirming the gravitation towards satellite and extension provision (Cullen et al., 2007).

In sum, the quality of AP in the UK is variable and successful AP largely imbues satellite provision. Whilst the evidence is unequivocally positive for satellite provision, the House of Commons Education Committee (2018) has fervently recommended that both existing and trainee teachers have compulsory exposure to high quality staff development and training for AP, and that schools should move towards incorporating AP as a permanent and sustainable feature of school-based activity.

Methods

Research design

The philosophical assumptions of the study were guided by an interpretivist epistemology and a constructionist ontology. To this end, this research approach

has the intention of eliciting the everyday, subjective experiences of those responsible for the planning and delivery of VL provision in the local authority (Bryman, 2016). As such, a case-study research design was adopted that focussed on one local authority in Wales. Case-studies are important as they provide in depth investigations of particular contexts. This approach has sparked debate in academic circles, with the most common query relating to the (lack of) generalisability of the findings (Hamel, 1993). On the contrary, criticisms of generalisability are of little relevance in this study when particularisation was always our intention. Indeed, as Seawright and Gerring (2008) have remarked, the generalisability of case-studies can be enhanced by selecting cases strategically. To this end, representativeness is not important because the focus of one environment has the advantage of providing rich and holistic data, which can be compared and contrasted with other cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The research area

Hill Valley (pseudonym) is one of the former industrial powerhouses of Wales. Industrialisation became the catalyst for established and well-paid employment pathways, and the area was known for its iron and coal production and exportation. Post-industrialisation, the area's employment is dominated by jobs in the public sector, manufacturing, as well as the service sector. According to the latest available iteration of official data (Welsh Government, 2014), the area suffers with some of the UK's highest levels of social and economic disadvantage, and this is exemplified with lower-than-average life expectancies for both males and females. The population is largely homogenous – comprising mainly of white British, non-Welsh-speaking people. In relation to educational attainment, the area has a higher-than-average number of employees without qualifications and one of the lowest totals of graduate level employees in Wales.

Ethical considerations

Prior to the commencement of data collection, ethical clearance was gained through the authors' home institution ethics committee. The local authority lead for education acted as a gatekeeper and emailed all stakeholders with a responsibility for VL provision and delivery to consider taking part in the study.

All responded to the lead researcher favourably and as such, participant information sheets were circulated that documented the aim(s) of the research, as well as the nature of their involvement. Consent forms were completed by all participants which communicated voluntary participation and their right-to-withdraw at any stage of the research process without restrictions. It is worthy of note that conducting research with vulnerable learners requires further – and sometimes delicate – consideration. Indeed, alongside pupil and parental consent, all pupil participants had an assigned responsible adult to accompany them through the data collection process. These adults were either teachers, teaching assistants or specialist support workers. Their role was to support and protect the participants. In line with the Department for Education's (2024) guidance on researching with young people, prior to each visit, the research team familiarised themselves with the chosen school's safeguarding policy. As such the safeguarding officer for each school was identified, and all escalation routes were noted in case any reporting needed to take place. Lastly, all known identifiers have been removed from the presented data, with careful consideration of the pseudonym naming strategy playing an integral role in the final product of any research (McInch, 2020).

Sample and data collection

There were two phases of data collection. All phase one data were collected using online semi-structured interviews with those responsible for VL provision across the local authority (n=10). Using the virtual world to collect data has gained traction in recent years for its pragmatic utility (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). For example, it carries little-to-no financial cost, is mutually convenient for both participant(s) and researcher, as well as providing international data collection opportunities (Bryman, 2016). Nevertheless, we were cognisant to note that the approach can stifle the researcher's ability to build rapport and interpret the paralanguage of the participant (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). However, it is our view that one of the unintended (positive) consequences of the pandemic forced many professions to transition into working-from-home – meaning that individuals transitioned into working predominantly in the online rather than the traditional office space, aligning neatly with pandemic parlance that confirmed 'the new normal'. In this phase of data collection, interviews lasted for between 45–75 minutes and were recorded using Microsoft Teams. Both

the researcher and participant were in private spaces when these interviews took place to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

The second phase of data collection involved conducting focus groups with different groups of VLs. Focus groups are a valuable data collection tool as likeminded individuals can agree and disagree on a range of topics, as well as being more efficient that conducting individual interviews (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Denscombe (2014) discusses that focus groups consist of small groups of people brought together by a researcher (moderator) in order to explore thoughts, feelings and opinions about phenomena. For this phase of the research, they were deemed especially useful for several important reasons. As Morgan (1996) argues, with young people, especially those who are vulnerable (and other marginalised groups), it is important for them to feel comfortable in the research environment by being surrounded by their peers, which in turn should give them confidence to share their ideas on a particular topic. In this sense, the lead author (researcher) was able to then ask open-ended questions in order to facilitate interactions and discussions without having to manage power differentials due to the homogenous makeup of the group. Nevertheless, it is worthy of note that Bryman (2016) has cautioned against the potential of peer influence, which could especially arise with young people in educational settings.

Four face-to-face focus groups took place in different VL environments and were recorded using MS Teams with Just the audio function turned on and the camera turned off. Due to the commissioned nature of the research, participants were selected purposefully by each school's designated responsible adult. The first group took place in a secondary school's in-house PRU and comprised six Key Stage 3 pupils (three boys and three girls). The second focus group occurred in a neighbouring secondary school's PRU and comprised four Key Stage 4 pupils (two boys and two girls). The third focus group took place in a community centre where AP is provided by an external provider who operates as a social enterprise. There were five participants (three girls and two boys) and they were all Key Stage 4 pupils who had disengaged from mainstream education. The fourth and final focus group was conducted in a further education college and contained six post-16 learners – three boys and three girls. All pupils are in receipt of free school meals and are from backgrounds of social deprivation. None of the parents of the pupils were in employment (at the time of writing) and they often had experienced unsettling domestic situations (such as involvement with the Police). Out of the total of twenty-one pupil participants, six were classed as care experienced.

Data analysis

After the initial tidying up and re-reading of transcripts, the data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) helpful framework. This involved searching for initial codes, which in simple terms means that interesting ideas were grouped together in a meaningful way. Next, after a substantial list of codes were generated, the two authors met and generated a mind map which unearthed how the initial codes generated could be clustered to form actual themes. This is an especially important phase in a research project with more than one researcher, as different researchers may identify different themes, even though Braun and Clarke (2006) stipulate that it is more than permissible for an extensive list of codes at this stage. Nevertheless the research team then discussed the relevance of the identified themes and considered how the identified themes fitted together to form a coherent narrative of the data. The final stage of analysis (prior to the production of this paper) involved what Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 92) term as 'define and refine' whereby the essence of each theme was confirmed by the research team in relation to what they are and what they are not. The next section will present these themes.

In conclusion, we were cognisant of the trustworthiness of the data and so conforming to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria provided a clear blueprint. In particular relation to data confirmability (i.e. inter-rater reliability), employing two colleagues (and fellow researchers) not working on the project to conduct an external audit allowed for the two critical friends to challenge the researchers on the process and findings of the study. This then led into a phase of robust analyst triangulation which led to a check on selective interpretation – therefore illuminating any data blind spots. Indeed, our goal was not to manufacture consensus, but to appreciate different ways of seeing the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Results

The changing nature of vulnerable learners

To commence, all phase one participants (those with a responsibility for VL provision) concurred that the nature of VLs had evolved off the back of the

pandemic. It was noted by several participants that there had been an increase in VLs who are now exhibiting a prevalence of psychological traits (i.e. anxiety, eating disorders) alongside the more traditional (and structural) parameters that VLs normally align with (e.g. social and economic disadvantage, behavioural issues, etc.). An additional layer of complexity is added when there are gendered nuances to this too. Historically in Wales, VLs have been disproportionately over-represented by boys (Stats Wales, 2016), but there has been a marked increase in girls being identified as VLs. When asked about this, Dave (a manager of an alternative education provider) noted:

> My numbers are increasing all of the time, and the number of girls now walking through my door is noticeable … there has to be a link here with social media and the pressures that these young people are now under to look and act a certain way, and that's before they even sit down and start learning.

Indeed, when probed further the manager explained that lots of young females being referred are feeling the pressures of adolescence and there has been a noticeable amount with eating (and other anxiety) disorders. Somewhat prescient evidence by Richards, Caldwell and Co (2015) has presented a clear link between the use of social media and negative self-perceptions of body image, as well as lower self-esteem and wellbeing. The research also reported alarming levels of cyberbullying that young people face as well as getting caught up in what is now commonly known as Facebook Depression – which in simple terms is caused by the obsession with and overuse of social media.

Regardless of gender, all participants agreed that the disengagement process has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with many not attending structured activities at all. One Head Teacher raised that disengagement from education is now beginning earlier in the learner life cycle, in many instances occurring as early as KS2[2]. He discusses further:

> Since things have started to return to some semblance of normality, because we've seen drastic cuts to youth services etc, there's little/no provision in the area anymore. As a result, we're in constant dialogue with the local police over significant rises in anti-social behaviour,

2 Key Stages relate to different blocks of learning with the National Curriculum in England and Wales.

> of which lots of vulnerable learners are becoming involved with. There has been a rise in gang culture, even in a relatively small ex-mining town like this.

Clearly then, in the traditional school environment, consistent engagement and attendance of VLs is patchy, with mixed practice across the authority. On the one hand, some schools have regular attendance and engagement with the VL population, whereas for others, especially where VL provision is delivered 'in-house', there is a growing problem with attendance. One Head Teacher explains some of the ways the school is trying to combat this:

> We've tried to incentivise them coming into school. Akin to the primary school environment we've offered free breakfast and lunch to VLs in the hope they would turn up to learn and turn up to their exams. We know how poor some of these kids are and if we fill their tummies with good nutritious food, we'd hoped that this would get them back into school, which hasn't been the case.

Indeed, the incentivisation of attending VL provision also expanded to the Further Education (FE) sector too. The VL coordinator at the local college noted how influential poverty is on the learner. As such, college management decided to try and stimulate attendance and engagement through the distribution of free hooded jumpers and free toiletries. The VL coordinator at the college remarks further:

> We do have problems with attendance and engagement with certain VLs. We know how hard the pandemic has hit some families and so the idea behind the hoodies is to try and create a sense of cohort identity … you know, to feel part of something, and the toiletries are just basic human needs that hopefully make them think that they can rely on us and maybe they'll turn up a bit more.

The data revealed the harrowing economic impact of the pandemic upon VLs (and beyond). Alongside this, the effects of the pandemic have also exacerbated concerns around young people's mental health, which incidentally is not covered by the Welsh Government vulnerable learner inclusion criteria. Moreover, the common theme of problematic attendance and engagement seemed to be more prominent in the more traditional educational environments of the school and college. It is clear that satellite and extension provision work best outside of the traditional school environment.

Notwithstanding this, it was stipulated that re-engagement into VL provision post-pandemic has been challenging – especially for school-based activity. As one Head Teacher explained, there appears to be a proliferation of external variables:

> We're really worried at the moment as there has been a marked increase in anti-social behaviour. I liaise regularly with the Police and other support workers and the big thing around here is a rise in gang culture … Unfortunately our VLs are more susceptible to being lured in to earning money for drugs etc … it's something we're keeping a really close eye on.

Across the UK, evidence consistently demonstrates a concerning increase of young people being convicted for either physically assaulting another person or drugs offences (Youth Justice Board, 2023), and this is even before looking at the immediate area of Hill Valley.

Nature and types of provision

The landscape of provision has become convoluted in recent years with all sectors now having a stake in delivery of VL provision. Naturally, the most comprehensive provision comes from the public sector, with the most prominent mechanism of delivery being through the Inspire to Achieve Initiative (I2A). This European Social Fund (ESF) project operates in high schools, the FE College, and Careers Wales and their assigned youth workers offer a range of training and development opportunities. Whether it be personal development and life skills, or more formal qualifications I2A offer one-to-one support. It is worth noting that this initiative was due to end in March 2023 and is in a precarious financial position, which endangers the extensive work and progress that I2A has clearly achieved to date.

The I2A partnership is also a prominent feature in the FE sector, and they work extensively in the FE College, offering enhanced employer engagement strategies, work preparation, seasonal summer activities, as well as outdoor and adventurous activities. The VL coordinator at the college lauded the success of the partnership by remarking:

> I2A has been fantastic for the young people in this area. I suppose its main strength is getting young people working together, developing social and emotional skills. Of course, there are qualifications on offer and extensive careers advice too which has the aim of giving them confidence enough to realise their worth and place in the world.

This positive commentary surrounding provision does not detract from some of the perils of too many providers with competing interests. As such, a leading local authority strategy manager discussed the scope of provision

> On the surface it looks great that we have so many providers, but in effect we've created a bit of a quasi-market and as such, different organisations have different objectives. It's been very difficult trying to knit all of it together and whilst we know what each provider does, I think as an area we can do a lot better with maximising partnerships and getting everyone working together, rather than siloed working.

There is some, albeit limited provision in the commercial sector, and as expected this is targeted at post-16 learners. In the main this mirrors the traditional apprenticeship (and traineeship) schemes available, with a main focus on established industries such as construction, mechanics and childcare. Nevertheless, there has been a recognition, and subsequent growth of opportunities in other industries such as business and administration, retail, hospitality, warehousing, and project management.

It is worthy of note that there is also market share for the third sector. The main provider is a social enterprise that provides one-to-one and group tuition to VLs, as well as hard-to-reach and challenging learners, and it has very much gained traction in the authority due to the surge in demand. Their delivery model is fluid, and they offer in-house and community-based delivery as well as tailored support to established services such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and offer a suite of formal qualifications and auxiliary skills that are tailored to the individual need of the VL.

It was found that whilst all this good work is going on, moving forward the authority have emphasised that their strategy will be focussing on early intervention from the early years right the way through to post-16 education. This is best exemplified through the inception and growth of community focussed schools. This whole-Wales focus is part of the Welsh Government's (2020) Children and Young People's plan, which is a whole systems approach where the school becomes the epicentre of the community in collaboration with partnership working with families and effective collaboration with other services. A senior council figure argued that:

> The big drive for us in Hill Valley is to move towards community focussed schools. Our area especially will benefit from the multi-agency approach to providing the best packages of

> support for our learners. Of course, you're asking me about vulnerable learners, but we have a duty of care to all of our young people. There will be lots of young people not officially classed as vulnerable who clearly will be, especially after the financial impact of the pandemic.

The senior figure was a clear advocate of the Welsh Government's push towards community focussed schools, but there was clear concern noted over the Welsh Government's official criteria of VLs. Whilst still relatively unknown, the impact of the pandemic is in the thinking of senior voices within national and local government.

Learner voice perspectives

Overall, the consensus amongst all VLs who took part in this study really place value on their current provision through the requisite delivery mechanisms. This populist view is best exemplified through one of the female KS4 VL pupils who currently receive an alternative curriculum in school which forms part of extension provision:

> I love what we're doing at the moment … for example, instead of doing the maths I don't understand like trigonometry, we're learning about banking and managing money, I've never done anything like that before and I think that will help me when I have to look after myself. I wish we could do so much more stuff like this. [P1]

Interestingly, even though evidence points out that VLs generally do not perform as well as other pupils, there are still connections being made between current learning and how that can be used in future trajectories. The fitting nature of the alternative curriculum stimulates thinking between content and its practical utility, whereby VLs are cognisant of their current circumstances and the knowledge and skills needed to navigate into adulthood as smoothly as possible. This learning is also simulating personal growth and gains in self-confidence.

Within the traditional school environment, the dissatisfaction around current levels of provision also places a huge question mark over the learning environment. All of the VLs at KS3 and KS4 especially noted that since returning to some semblance of normality following the pandemic, teachers were overly rigid in the policing of rules and regulations (e.g., constantly monitoring one-way movement systems). In turn, this was having a negative impact upon

teacher-pupil relationships, as well as pupil attitudes to learning. As Year 9 VL Tom explains:

> They [teachers] just don't get us, always saying don't do this and don't do that. It's like all they do is tell us off, so when it comes to lessons I can't be arsed then. They forget how long we were at home for. [P3]

Such a consensus view aligns with the corpus of research that has discussed the importance of the relationship between learner identities and the learning environment. McInch (2022) remarks that regardless of the type of pupil within schools (e.g., eFSM, More Able and Talented), if there is a disconnect between teacher and pupil expectations, then disruption will occur, which in this case is disengagement. Reay (2017) explains that this is further compounded by teachers' distinct lack of awareness of Equality Diversity and Inclusion in mainstream school environments – simply put, treating every pupil the same does not equate to an equitable learning experience.

These issues also spilled over into peer-to-peer relationships at KS4. The common view amongst pupils was a dissatisfaction and discomfort with what they saw as the traditional school environment. Several reasons were cited, but the two most prevalent related to being in large and what they saw as heterogenous groups. As one KS4 satellite provision pupil noted:

> I would hate to be back in school now like … I much prefer coming here. We have a small group, and everyone gets on like … I feel like I can join in without the fear of like getting bullied which is what happened every day I was in school. [P7]

The performative nature of the school environment is problematic for (vulnerable) pupils, and the fear of verbal and physical reprisals for not conforming for accepted social and behavioural norms was a constant prior to being removed from the environment. To a large extent, VLs are acutely aware of their own positioning within the school hierarchy, however, relations appear to significantly improve when VL pupils progress into FE. Student responses were very favourable of the supportive and inclusive environment fostered by the local FE college. It was as if they had compartmentalised their learning journeys into discreet and very separate epochs – further embracing the new and inclusive pastures of FE. As one female Year 12 respondent noted:

> It just feels like a fresh start for me here. I have made friends who have come from other schools like … The tutors are really helpful here and it's totally different to school as they treat you like an adult and it's as if they understand what it's like for us. [P11]

This positive sentiment shone through when asked about the various types of learning opportunities on offer. Regardless of level/environment of learning, vocationalist approaches to learning were deemed as the most beneficial to their development and future prospects. The following quotations are from a Key Stage female school based VL and an FE based male VL respectively:

> Recently we learned about banks and money and it made much sense to me than like traditional maths topics. Learning about how to budget and manage money is going to really important for me as I have never had money. [P8]

> Like I'm loving doing mechanics. I was never interested in school, I was always interested in cars and I think I know a lot about them … like, that's what I want to do when I leave college. [P7]

Clearly then, pupils are able to internalise and evaluate the learning activities undertaken, and the clear value and utility of vocational education is a motivator for engagement and progression through the education system. Even though pupils espouse frustrations at the traditional curriculum and environment, it is not to the extent of full disengagement and what Sugarman (1970) would term as instant gratification, whereby school is discarded in favour of employment and earning money. Moreover, for those VL pupils who are engaged, there are not (at least not overt) anti-school attitudes, because unlike the very influential (but temporal) work of Willis (1979), technical occupations require a level of certification, even if vocational in nature.

Discussion

Traditional views of VLs are somewhat changing, and in areas like Hill Valley, which is widely known for significantly higher levels of social and economic disadvantage in the UK, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated existing educational inequalities. At the time of writing, there are two important

(interlinked) points to consider. The first relates to eFSM pupils who may not have originally been classed as vulnerable but may now be, due to the financial precarity that many families were plunged into as a result of national lockdowns, furlough schemes and job losses. The second point linked to the first is that many young people who are not eFSM are in the same position which has only worsened due to the recent cost of living crisis. The Wales Centre for Public Policy (2022) warned that households are struggling to pay household bills and food costs, which includes items like mobile telephones and internet provision. This unfortunately had the unintended consequence of contributing to digital exclusion and access to education regardless of the individual status of the pupil.

Clearly, one of the virtues of having multiple providers of alternative education is the numerous options available for the end-user, but this does not come without its disadvantages. For example, the competing interests of multiple stakeholders often means that there is no constructive alignment in relation to outcomes. For example, some noted that it is about VLs achieving the requisite level of attainment in literacy and numeracy, whereas others noted that their work has the aim of overcoming poverty and adversity through social inclusion activity and life skill education. Having such wide-ranging provision may lead to VLs having competing interests and alignment with what is not necessarily the best package of support. Chauhan (2007) reminds us that whilst partnership working is about appreciating individual expertise, it is also about open communication where knowledge and experience can be shared in the hope of generating new ideas and directions, whilst still retaining individual core aims and objectives – something that does not happen overtly in Hill Valley. Ironically, the squeeze on public spending has meant that gaps in provision have provided opportunities for (predominantly) third sector organisations to enter the market. This is turn creates a culture of siloed working, competing aims and an overall lack of accountability (Huxham, 1996).

The data in the study revealed that the vast majority of provision was clearly satellite in nature. However, in extending Cullen et al.'s (2000) scholarship on types of provision, the boundaries between satellite and extension provision are somewhat blurred in this study. Organisations who provide alternative curricula have realised that their work is more effective by designing schemes of learning that are far removed from the national curriculum, which is then delivered outside of the stifling institutional environment of the school. That is not to say that complementary VL activities designed and delivered in schools by practitioners would never be effective,

but teacher knowledge, attitudes and their unrealistic expectations are clearly acting as blocker to full engagement, and so in its current format, complementary provision is redundant. Education is a multidimensional concept, and the way in which it is consumed varies significantly in different social environments. Undoubtedly, external forces and one's social circumstances impact upon how one learns and achieves (McInch, 2022). As a subsidiary of this, the importance of the role of the teacher encompasses much more than knowledge transfer and scholars such as Carr (2001) and Reay (2017) in particular have voiced identical concerns that the programmes of Initial Teacher Training are myopic in the respect that important societal (social inequality) and domain specific (VLs) are often overlooked, therefore leaving prospective teachers ill-equipped when they enter the classroom.

Lastly, the findings in this research have confirmed that regardless of who is providing alternative education, demand for it has never been stronger. This demand has created a quasi-market of supply which is ever-expanding. Whilst Exley (2014) has debated the utility of quasi-markets within (largely mainstream) secondary education, the evidence in this study has found that schools have not been able to keep up with growing numbers (and changing profiles) of VLs and as such, different specialist providers have entered the AC space. This can only be viewed as positive, as providers have the technical expertise, skills and abilities needed to provide both quality and efficiency, and this has been reported elsewhere by Curtice and Heath (2009), who argue that providers of education should move away from a 'one size fits all' approach to one where distinctive characteristics are given a greater share of the space.

Conclusion

This study has provided much needed insight into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic upon VLs in a deprived area of Wales, UK. This research has provided valuable evidence for those responsible for VL provision at the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, the WG has started the process by recognising and clarifying that VL characteristics are growing, the meso (LAs) and micro (schools) levels are taking a reactive stance to provision, which has created a space for alternative providers who sit in the commercial/third sectors. This creates a dilemma when official school metrics are concerned with the traditional attainment

markers of literacy and numeracy, therefore leaving the alternative curriculum disconnected from the traditional school paradigm. Policy makers can use the evidence in this study to make meaningful change to current provision which appears to have been overtaken by other strategic educational priorities in Wales (neurodiversity, community focussed schools).

We are mindful that the findings generated in this case-study research apply to one local authority in Wales, and cannot be generalised. Therefore, measuring the impact of the pandemic is going to be fertile ground for researchers in the coming years. Thus, future research could longitudinally track cohorts of VLs within a cycle of provision in other local authorities in Wales (and UK). Furthermore, research could also focus on those with parental/caring responsibilities for VLs as these voices were not covered in this study. Pragmatically, these two research strands could be coalesced into a larger body of scholarship that could evaluate the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's strategic push on commencing community focussed schools.

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