

Parents, Teachers and the Pandemic – Lessons from the COVID experience in Wales for home-school partnerships

Prysor Mason Davies, Aberystwyth University
Jane Waters-Davies, University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Clive Underwood, Bangor University

ABSTRACT

The home-schooling of children during the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the familiar interactions of schools and parents into a new, online reality and forced a reconsideration of accepted and sometimes entrenched attitudes. This paper investigates the perspectives on the lived experiences of parents and teachers as they negotiated the home-learning period, drawing out themes that emphasise the factors necessary for effective home-school relationships and for stakeholder interactions. These messages provide valuable learning that is relevant for home-school relations in the post-COVID era. The necessity of clear knowledge and understanding, relational partnerships and effective communication are central to the outcomes and conclusions.

Keywords: home-school relationships; parental role; teachers' role; communication; curriculum knowledge and understanding.

Background and context

A new curriculum in Wales and the requirement for parental input

In 2015, Professor Graham Donaldson reviewed the curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales (Donaldson, 2015). In response, a new curriculum, the

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Curriculum for Wales (CfW, Welsh Government, 2022) was developed, which became statutory in schools from September 2022. It is a purpose-led curriculum, with the 'Four Purposes' as the starting point and aspiration for schools' curriculum design (Welsh Government, 2022). This replaces the previous curriculum which, since 1988, has been broadly similar to the National Curriculum in England (Department for Education, 2014) with localised variation relating to Welsh language and literature and an emphasis on Welsh context, culture and heritage by means of the 'Cwricwlwm Cymreig' (Davies et al., 2024). Foundation Learning, for three- to seven-year-old pupils in Wales, was also purpose-led, diverging from the more formal curriculum in England, and encouraged holistic learning through play and experiences, creativity and imagination to achieve developmental needs (Waters, 2016). Parents, as children's first educators, are partners within the educational process (Welsh Government, 2015).

The CfW and Foundation Learning therefore require stakeholder engagement, including consultation with parents and community representatives. Welsh Government repeatedly identify the concept of co-construction of the curriculum with relevant stakeholders (Welsh Government, 2020; Smith, 2024), particularly in the context of community and, especially, parents. The justification for this emphasis includes its necessity in meeting learner requirements, the need for authenticity and, through a clear understanding of the design of the curriculum, parents are better positioned to support their children's learning (Welsh Government, 2020). Originally, 'Successful Futures' (Donaldson, 2015) clearly identified the need for shared understanding and a clear perspective on the purposes and intentions of the new curriculum, to provide parents with confidence in the new curriculum's content and structure, avoiding negative experiences during implementation (Donaldson, 2015). However, after years of a centrally prescribed curriculum, enabling parent and stakeholder engagement in curricular development may not be as simple as it seems, with little prior experience of such methods within the Welsh education system (Priestley et al., 2025). This is perhaps further compounded by the major concurrent reforms to the Special Educational Needs (SEN) system to a new Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system from 2018 onwards, with wider ambitions for child-centric inclusive education in Wales (Knight and Crick, 2022).

The nature of the previously prescribed curriculum, along with its associated accountability, may have strengthened a perspective of teachers as the curricular

experts (Keogh, Fourie, Watson and Gay, 2010), and parents as those who should be involved in their children's schools but not necessarily engaged in their children's education (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Goodall et al., 2022). The authentic development and realisation of CfW, therefore, requires a significant shift in mind-set and ethos (Harris, et al., 2020), particularly since 'curriculum change is a multidimensional and multidisciplinary affair that involves a certain amount of associated chaos' (Alexander and Hjortsø, 2019, 302). This implies that the engagement of parents as stakeholders may require significant changes in relationships between schools and parents, even if only to illuminate and clearly communicate the process of curriculum change (Alexander and Hjortsø, 2019; Mpuangnan and Ntombela, 2023).

The OECD (2020) review of curricular developments in Wales that included consideration of the need for parental engagement, identified that a locally developed curriculum demands the engagement of stakeholders and highlighted the role of individual schools in facilitating that engagement for contextually relevant curricular content (OECD, 2020). Nevertheless, difficulties may still be faced due to a lack of historical experience of shared curricular development, a deficit in the training of teachers in parental engagement (Murray, Curran and Zellers, 2008) and the need for clear communication of methods and purpose, which may be differently understood by stakeholders, depending on their position and perspective (OECD, 2020). In this context, the 2020 OECD review of curricular developments in Wales suggested that, at the point of their investigation, 'the involvement of parents and local actors remained anecdotal' (OECD, 2020).

Literature review

Importance and value of parental role in childrens' learning

The case for parental involvement in their children's learning identifies a variety of positive impacts relating to its effects on attainment, behaviour, attendance, and engagement (for example: Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie and Moore, 2016; Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). However, a debate remains regarding the extent and type of parental involvement with an emphasis away from parents' involvement in their children's schooling but rather parents' involvement in their children's

learning (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). This emphasis focuses the parents' engagement away from the routine processes and procedures of school life – fundraising, staff employment, volunteering – but rather on the processes and activities supporting children's learning on an ongoing basis, including learning that is based within the home environment (Goodall, 2018). Such a relational partnership tends towards improved academic and cognitive impact and outcomes as well as wellbeing benefits (Murray, Curran and Zellers, 2008; Hirano and Rowe, 2016). It can also contribute towards a sense of community, a supportive environment with shared values and purpose (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie and Moore, 2016). Murray, Curran and Zellers (2008) emphasise that those relationships can give teachers and practitioners a greater insight into the lives of families and in understanding their day-to-day experiences, can develop more effective partnerships. Baxter and Kilderry (2022, 9) note how 'formal and informal learning could be commensurable and symbiotically reinforcing' and emphasise how practitioners can further develop curricular connections with parental stakeholders and strengthen their partnerships in learning. However, Hannon and O'Donnell (2021) note that teachers may stereotype parents for their differing engagement in learning experiences and thus misrepresent them as not interested in their children's learning. Sliwka and Istance (2006) raise a similar point where they question the extent to which parents want to exercise a role in their children's education, whilst Becher (2024) identifies the public mistrust of teachers and educators which may be partly due to a 'client approach' taken by some parents (Deslandes, Barma and Morin, 2015). Thus, whilst there is clear evidence that the Welsh Government's intention of engaging parental stakeholders in the design and embedding of CfW could have positive outcomes in terms of learning relationships and deepened mutual understandings which would ultimately benefit pupils' learning, this may not be a simple process.

What are the challenges of involving parents?

A dominating discourse in a number of educational establishments may position the school as the focal point for the involvement of parents, where all interactions can be dominated by the school as an organisation rather than by the pupil's learning process (Baxter and Kilderry, 2022). Leenders, de Jong, Monfrance and Haelermans (2019) note that the school becomes central to parental interactions and teachers

can reinforce the centrality of school creating an unbalanced relationship between themselves and parents, impacting the quality of parental involvement (Minke, Sheridan, Kim, Ryoo and Koziol, 2014). The professional status of teachers can contribute both to their dominance in controlling the parental involvement narrative whilst also potentially adopting a deficit-based approach to parents (Bond, Moore and Hawkins, 2024). This may be because of firmly established discourses within schools that confirm the subordinate status of 'non-dominant parents' and impacts the equality of education (Fennimore, 2017, 168). Whilst schools tend to control lines of communication, parents must negotiate their engagement in relation to that communication structure (Leenders et al., 2019). However, there is a perception of parents' decreasing need to be engaged in their teenagers' education, particularly in the latter stages of compulsory education (Hirano and Rowe, 2016). Ensuring parental contribution to curriculum development, beyond the scope of their children's attainment is an area for further attention.

Particular attention needs to be given to ensure the involvement of all parents and not just the vocal and confident few. Schools may, through structuring standardised educational experiences for all, tend to 'homogenise families' without accounting for the differences between them, their children and their expectation of the school (Baxter and Kilderry, 2022, 3; Anazia, Skinner and Woods, 2025). Teachers can view and desire experiences and engagement with and from families that is normalised and generic and confirms their school practices and expectations. This may be based on a presumption of 'ideologically neutral public schools that hold all parents in equal regard', but which may not be the case (Fennimore, 2017, 161). Many factors that influence parental involvement can also influence school and teacher perceptions of parents – such as poverty, social class, parental education and mental health (Deslandes, Barma, Morin, 2015; Sliwka and Istance, 2006). Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie and Moore (2016) suggest also that eligibility for free school meals, an indicator of relative poverty, along with single parenthood, may also be factors which influence trust and engagement between parents and teachers. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) note that these teachers' assumptions regarding parents are often unfounded but are rather based on differing overarching perspectives, different life experiences and social skills and expectations. Murray, Curran and Zellers (2008) emphasise this in their study of student teachers who shared clear sentiments that parents did not care about their children's education and that those who did were an anomaly. These student

teachers' perspectives were summarised in the finding that 'parental caring is equated with doing what the teacher says' (Murray, Curran and Zellers, 2008, 96). The impact of such perspectives can lead to parents, on the other hand, feeling that if they are invited to engage with teachers and schools, then it is for unimportant issues rather than matters which are central to their children's education (Sliwka and Istance, 2006; Goodall et al., 2022).

Requirements for parental engagement

Negative perceptions of parents by teachers may have implications for initial teacher education and continuous professional development since it may be a result of inadequate training in how to effectively engage with parents for children's benefit (Murray, Curran and Zellers, 2008; Hughes and Kwok, 2007). This also impacts partnerships in developing the CfW and suggests that training and guidance for schools and teachers could improve understanding of how best to engage with parents and involve them in curricular provision for children's benefit. This may require the overcoming of deeply held perspectives and assumptions and working towards shared values and perspectives, despite differences of position and perceptions (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). The view that parental engagement must consist of agreement with, and subordination to, the hierarchical school system may need adjusting (Murray, Curran and Zellers, 2008) and a context of trust must be established between them (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie and Moore, 2016). Central to that trust is clear articulation of objectives and expectations for any partnership or collaboration. This is not an easy task, with the need to communicate an awareness of any formal content and context, process and extent of control (Alexander and Hjortsø, 2019). Parents may not have the knowledge and familiarity of internal school or educational content and processes and thus much attention is needed to ensure the clarity of understanding (Sliwka and Istance, 2006).

Once parental familiarity with the content and context is established, parent-school collaboration requires clarity of roles – an awareness of each other's values and beliefs, their collaborative context and the expectation of each other (Walker and Bond, 2025; Keyes, 2000). This can lead to mutual trust between schools and parents which is a requirement for effective collaboration, whilst acknowledging that roles will change and adapt as projects and collaborations develop and will need re-evaluating and re-defining as time progresses (OECD, 2020).

If parents are to play an important role in the Welsh curriculum, schools, teachers and parents must negotiate their roles carefully and deliberately to maximise contributions from all, enabling effective outcomes for pupils. One of the central tenets will be to ensure parental engagement and contribution, not just involvement (Baxter and Kilderry, 2022; Bond, Moore and Hawkins, 2024).

The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Parent-School Interactions

The COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the widespread closure of schools and educational settings from 2020 onwards, had a significant impact on the role of parents on teachers. The change was abrupt and shifted from in-school education to online platforms, engaged with from the home environment. This placed both pupils, teachers and parents in a dramatically new position (Marchant et al., 2021). Where parents may have once been regarded as playing a marginal role in their children's (primarily classroom-based) education (Spear, Parkin, van Steen and Goodall, 2023), this change altered their position to a supportive role where they were responsible for the children's engagement in work set by teachers (Daniels, 2020) or, in some cases, were the educators who ensured their children's effective learning (Knopik, Błaszczak, Maksymiuk and Oszwa, 2021; Spear et al., 2023). This changed the power dynamic between teachers and parents due to an increased expectation that parents were responsible for their children's engagement and education to a far greater extent (Ribeiro, Cunha, Silva, Carvalho and Vital, 2021). For this to work effectively, it demanded better communication about expectations and emphasised the necessity of effective relationships (Ribeiro et al., 2021; Spear et al., 2023)

The previous challenges where classrooms had been the focal points for education and where perceived professional power lay teachers' hands changed overnight. Parents now had greater control on the nature of the education which happened within the home (Ribeiro et al., 2021) and teachers' roles were partially marginalised to becoming organisers of online activities, which may or may not be undertaken by pupils (Knopik et al., 2021). Due to the necessity and speed of change, along with unfamiliarity with online pedagogy and associated technology, (Khan, 2022), teachers, particularly at initial stages, may have resorted to generic work, not differentiated according to pupils needs (Knopik et al., 2021). The previous inequalities impacting children's education such as poverty, family

circumstance, etc, became more pronounced due to the impact of the pandemic (Khan, 2022; Spear et al., 2023) and this, on one hand, provided some insight into pupils and families lives but on the other hand, may have masked issues within families due to the online nature of the provision (Bayrakdar and Guveli, 2022).

The impact on parents was significant, having to adapt to a new role, having never homeschooled before (Khan, 2022). Lockdowns restricted support from extended families (Spear et al., 2023) and where many continued their employment online, were subject to significant stresses and pressures, exacerbated by the demands of education (Ribeiro et al., 2021; Bayrakdar and Guveli, 2022). They may have adopted informal pedagogies (Daniels, 2020) but tried to maintain a teaching role, explaining concepts, motivating learning and promoting independence (Knopik et al., 2021; Spear et al., 2023). Whilst emotional stress and insecurity increased (Khan, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2021) they did gain greater insight into the processes around education and teaching and enabled them to become more active in their involvement (Ribeiro et al., 2021). These enforced changes in parent and school interactions and engagement in pupils' education may provide insights for further development in a post-pandemic context and our investigation into the perspectives of parents and teachers about learning during COVID lockdown periods in Wales can inform the nature of relationships, the perspectives of parents and teachers about each other and about the articulation of roles in schooling and education. In this paper we set out these findings in order to draw out lessons that can inform the engagement of parents as required by the Curriculum for Wales.

Methodology

The study reported here was instigated and funded by the Welsh Government to explore, across Welsh and English medium contexts and from the perspectives of stakeholders, the experiences of learners, especially those considered disadvantaged, during the COVID-19 school closures and phased re-opening of schools. The overarching RQ for the study was: 'From the perspectives of stakeholders, what have been the experiences of learners, especially those considered disadvantaged, during the COVID-19 school closures and phased re-opening of schools?' The full report has been published by the Welsh Government (Waters-Davies et al., 2022), and here data from that study is

considered providing insight into parents' and teachers' perspectives of each other and the curriculum.

The perspectives of teachers, senior school leaders and parents from twelve Welsh schools were gathered during Autumn 2020 to Spring 2021, at the height of the COVID pandemic in Wales and the associated closure of schools during periods described as 'lockdown'. The researchers reported that more specific outcomes could be identified within the data from the study than were discussed in the original report and that further analysis and consideration could be beneficial. It is in this context that the current paper is written.

The study adopted an embedded, qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives as they encountered COVID lockdowns and the impact on education and learning. These were snapshots of lived experiences during the time when schools had been closed to pupils, between the end of March 2020 and June 2020, with limited return in July 2020 before summer break in August. Most children were educated over live video sessions where possible, and via school set home studies and thus it was an intention of the research team to provide a platform for the voices of parents, carers, and school practitioners and leaders.

Sampling

Participants were drawn from a sample of twelve schools from across Wales, selected on the basis of a pre-agreed profile reflecting a variety of geographical locations, sizes of school and phases of education, as well as variations in instructional language of the schools. These were identified through a process of purposive sampling from schools already in partnership with the HEIs or schools beyond direct partnerships that ensured a more representative profile, including special schools. The initial data collection involved inviting schools to engage in the project, arranging interviews with school leaders, online surveys offered to all teachers and parents in the participating schools and further follow-up focus groups and interviews with consenting stakeholders (parents and teachers) who volunteered to participate further. In the original project a learner task was also conducted but the pupil data is excluded from this analysis to maintain focus on parent and practitioner perspectives. Table 1 indicates the sample details and volume of data generated.

Table 1: Overview of the sample of case study schools with response numbers

School:	Geography:	Size:	Medium of education provision: (English; Welsh; Bilingual)	Type of school: (Special; with specialist teaching facility (STF); Primary 3–11; Secondary 11–16/18; Through-school 3–19 / 4–18)	Data collection tools:					Focus group
					Senior leadership interview	Parent survey	Teacher survey	Parent interview		
School A	Urban	<500	EM	Primary 3–11	1	51	33	3		N/A
School B	Urban	>500	EM	Primary 3–11 with STF	2	74	54	5		N/A
School C	Urban	>500	WM	Through-school 3–19	1	N/A	N/A	N/A		N/A
School D	Rural	>100	Bilingual	Special/ALN	1	10	22	5		6 Teachers
School E	Rural	>100	Bilingual	Special/ALN	1	12	11	4		4
School F	Urban	>100	Bilingual	Special/ALN	1	N/A	N/A	N/A		N/A
School G	Rural	>100	Bilingual	Special/ALN	1	11	25	5		2 Teachers
School H	Rural	>500	Bilingual	Through-school 4–18	1	39	16	4		4 Teachers
School I	Rural	<500	EM	Primary 3–11	1	6	2	1		4 Teachers
School J	Rural	>500	Bilingual	Secondary 11–16	1	16	10	4		Teacher (x4)
School K	Rural	>500	Bilingual	Through-school 4–18	1	76	26	3		5 Teachers
School L	Rural	<500	WM	Primary 3–11	1	11	5	2		3 Teachers

Research tools

Qualitative research tools were developed to capture participant perspectives and experiences to ensure rich narrative data. A question bank was developed by the project team and a process of discussion and testing occurred to ensure that the data would be pertinent to the overarching research question and relevant to all participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all senior school leaders over Teams, recorded and transcribed in the original language. Online surveys, based on the question bank and distributed by school communication platforms, captured the views of teachers and parents through closed demographic questions and open-ended qualitative prompts which were transferred onto spreadsheets for analysis. Where parents from the range of schools and characteristics had opted to provide further consent and contact details, follow-up individual interviews explored changes in learning experiences over different lockdown periods, whilst follow-up group discussions were arranged for teachers who indicated their willingness to participate further following their survey. All data collection was conducted remotely, facilitated through Microsoft Teams or online surveys, without the need for face-to-face engagement, and were recorded and transcribed in the original language.

Ethics

Since the project was a collaboration between three universities, each university approved the ethics of research design, tools and methods separately prior to data collection. School leaders were used as gatekeepers to facilitate access to participants and participant information sheets enabled voluntary informed consent within the online surveys and were directly shared for interviews. These were sent through the schools to teachers' professional email accounts and via schools' usual methods of communicating with parents. The right to withdraw at any time was reiterated with interview and focus group participants.

All data generated were securely held on password protected and encrypted cloud-based storage associated with each university. Any identifying features within the data were removed prior to secure storage.

Analysis

For the original project, the research team adopted thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) across the entire dataset. Early inductive coding took place from which over-arching themes were agreed. Further sub-themes were iteratively developed, encompassing the early coding from the data, and exemplified from the dataset. This process and the themes generated as a result are reported in the project report (Waters-Davies et al., 2022). For the purposes of this paper, further and more nuanced thematic analysis of parental and practitioner responses was undertaken to respond to the research question: *what does stakeholder perspectives of learning during the pandemic tell us about parent-school relationships?* This secondary coding similarly adopted an inductive open coding approach, reflecting the revised focus. Codes were iteratively developed before being grouped under overarching themes. The main themes broadly align with Walker and Bond's (2025) key characteristics of effective educational home-school relationships – 'building foundational relationships', 'providing structures and systems to facilitate communication' and "developing individual and systemic knowledge'.

Findings

The experiences of parents and teachers over the lockdown periods offer insights that have a significant bearing on enabling co-construction, co-operation and the parental engagement required for the effective application of the CfW. These insights generate understanding about the continued interaction and engagement between school and home that is necessary to support optimal learner progress. Following thematic analysis of the data that pertained to parental engagement, three main themes were constructed: knowledge and understanding; relational partnerships and effective communication which are set out below.

Knowledge and Understanding

Both parents' and teachers' comments about their pandemic lockdown experiences provided insight into their lived experiences which suggested issues around

knowledge and understanding of curriculum and pedagogy, shared expectations and each other's contexts.

Teachers noted how the change to online learning necessitated them to consider a broader audience beyond their own pupils. They were aware, due to learning occurring in the home rather than the classroom, of the need to explain content and procedures not only to the children but also, to a certain extent, to the parents facilitating the learning. This was a new experience, and parents' confidence and desire to support was varied, as will be noted below, but parents appreciated the greater insight into the curricular content that was gained, particularly when that was via a virtual learning environment (VLE) which allowed for consistent knowledge and shared understandings.

I think having Moodle allows you to see the work they've been set, and you can see the topics they're doing. So therefore, if your child is not understanding something or struggling with something, you're more aware of it, so therefore, you can help them and support them more at home. (Secondary Parent)

Both secondary and primary teachers commented that whilst parents were not necessarily aware previously of pedagogy implemented by the schools, the period of home schooling highlighted that lack of awareness. Teachers from secondary and primary contexts reported that parents did not understand how to support pupils' learning; at times they appeared to complete work for their children and at others sought the reassurance of written outcomes when experiential learning was required.

It was exceptionally good for that class. Is the graph that I received had the axes all labelled and it was unusual? I don't want to say that pupil couldn't have achieved that, but it was so clear that they have had that sort of extra support. But how would we assess that pupil? (Secondary Teacher)

And I think a lot of parents struggled with that concept, especially during the first lockdown, and were desperate for worksheets. Not seeing how valuable role play is, how important learning through play is, you know. Not seeing – if there isn't a pencil in hand, then they think learning isn't happening. (Early Years Teacher)

Whilst the homeschooling experience was an exceptional circumstance, it suggests that the prior knowledge and understanding of some parents about how the school supported children's learning was limited, focusing on outcomes rather than

process. This perspective, however, gave teachers a unique opportunity to inform and advise parents about pedagogy.

But I also think there'll be a positive side, because I think that parents – based on my previous experience – didn't quite understand the learning process. And I think because they've been more involved in the learning process with the children, I believe they've seen how they're developing and what's needed, and the benefit of them supporting us in the learning too.
(Primary Teacher)

Another factor of knowledge and understanding illuminated by this study was around shared expectations where it was highlighted that expectations had not necessarily been articulated, shared and understood. Parents noted their uncertainty about what was expected of them and what schools wished them to do. Some felt that they needed to complete every piece of work set by the school, involving pupils working in the evenings and weekends, whereas others may not have engaged at all.

I think their parents are perhaps, or rather probably all parents, including myself, are struggling to support their children fully at home because I think they're not aware of what the standards or the expectations are as parents, and of what the school would like. (Primary Parent and Practitioner)

I said to my husband, we both work full time, and neither of us want to sit there and home-school all day, but if I can't sit by the younger one and if he doesn't do his work, then I feel a responsibility in the evening after tea to say, okay, show me what you did today and let's make sure all the work is completed. I think other parents have just said we're not doing it. (Secondary Parent)

Parents responded positively where there was clear instruction and guidance from the school, but lack of clear expectation was problematic and caused difficulties for parents. The isolation of teaching the children at home without a reference point or comparison with other children and families was also noted as a difficulty, not knowing what the expected standard was.

Okay, I don't have any idea how other pupils are doing. I only see what my child is doing, and I've struggled with that. (Secondary and Primary Parent)

The positive parental experience, on the other hand, was that they began to understand their child's particular needs, which may not have been clear to them prior to this experience.

I guess the one good thing that's come out of this is that I've been able to see where my eldest daughter needed help. (Secondary Parent)

One of the more striking findings from parents and teachers' observations was that they both became more aware of each other's particular context, having an insight into each other's lives, possibly for the first time. Some teachers became more aware of home circumstances due to the engagement or lack of it, with online learning. The awareness that children had no basic resources at home to engage with learning became apparent, leading to teachers creating support packs and even food packs, and delivering them to homes. It became also clear that issues around technology – the lack of devices and connectivity – were evident for some families; contextual information where the extremity of the situations were not known by teachers prior to the lockdowns.

Maybe we wouldn't have known that half of them at home didn't have a device or any internet connection. There's that side of things, the technical side, and I think what's also been a bit of an eye-opener is that some families, perhaps because of COVID too, have been struggling with food and other things. Personally, I've had to contact the food bank ... a couple of times and have also taken food to the doorstep of two families during this period. (All Through Teacher)

Just putting together a really basic pack ... one or two families, just no paper, pencil, crayons – just sending things like that over to them from the school: scissors, glue, a ruler, just the kind of things you'd probably assume a six-year-old child would have. (All Through Teacher)

This awareness of context was not always shared by parents who sometimes felt that schools were unaware of pupils needs, family needs and home limitations and demanded work and outcomes regardless of circumstance. Where parents were aware of school support, they appreciated the input of the school, providing online parents evenings for secondary pupils and being sympathetic in their expectation of the work produced.

The exceptional lockdown period forced education to be transferred to the home environment via online provision, but the findings and experiences highlight the need for clarity in sharing content and expectation, and identify that in some cases, that sharing of knowledge about the curriculum content, the methodologies used to teach and the expectation of pupils had not been necessarily clearly understood by parents prior to the lockdown. This may be due to schools' communication methods or to a previous lack of parental

engagement, but when lockdown forced home schooling, these issues were highlighted.

Relationships and Attitudes

Data from this study outlined how home-schooling during lockdown identified the value and importance of relational interaction between parents and teachers, engendering mutual benefits for both parties when positively present. Sub-themes identified within this main theme where empathy, appreciation, support and confidence.

There was a mutual feeling that lockdown experiences engendered a closer relationship between home and school and that this was positively received. Related to the knowledge and understanding of contexts previously noted, some teachers understood the difficulties experienced by families in the home environment and empathised with parents who had to maintain full-time jobs online whilst ensuring that their children engaged in the online schoolwork. This could be exacerbated by illness, stresses of pandemic living and the effects on children whose needs may have impacted their ability to engage with schoolwork.

Some of these parents are working, and they're working over Teams for five hours a day. And some of these children, to be fair, aren't able to get the attention they perhaps should be getting – but it's not their fault, and it's not the parents' fault either. They're trying to hold down a job, working from home. (Primary teacher)

I think parents are under pressure. I think there's a parental pressure that parents are at home, but they're working, or they're out of work, or they're stressed, or there's illness and the added rise of the corona virus in the community. (Primary teacher)

This empathy was reciprocal with parents showing an understanding of the position and status of teachers, the nature of their work and commitment from day to day which may not have been so obvious when schools and homes rarely came into direct contact in pre-pandemic times. Some parents realised that teaching was far more than lesson delivery and that there was a cost to teachers' commitment and engagement in the teaching and learning process.

I've got a lot more empathy for teaching kids. Obviously with teaching you think you just teach, but it's so much more. I think a lot of people feel that there's a lot more to it than that. (Secondary Parent)

I feel as well that, when I've had conversations with them on the phone, they've come to appreciate a bit more what our job is day in, day out – after trying to teach their children at home, and that's maybe just one child, whereas we're sometimes dealing with a class of 30, even 40. It's like they've realised how much work it is. I think they've come to appreciate, definitely, how much we do for their children. (Secondary Teacher)

This appreciation of the teachers' role and the increased demands of teaching was appreciated but the flexibility of teachers and their concern for pupils' and families' wellbeing was also noted positively. Whilst this was a particular pandemic-related context, the principles of care and understanding was a clear message.

They [pupils] were allowed to kind of express themselves however they wanted, and that was really encouraged by his class teacher. And so, they felt rewarded no matter what they did, whether it was what they were specifically asked to do or if they kind of went off-piste and did something different. They got praised for that, which I thought I was very good. (Primary Parent)

As to the school, the school themselves had been fantastically supportive and caring during the period. (Secondary Parent)

The concept of a relationship of support was noted by both parents and teachers which seems to have been a powerful connection, with teachers acknowledging their need for parental support, especially since they had little to no direct engagement with the pupils, being dependent on the parents to encourage, explain and enable them to succeed. This was not an automatic connection but one that needed development and support, ensuring that parents developed confidence to undertake unfamiliar duties. When this worked well, parents and teachers were positive, but the lack of such supportive connections also highlighted how essential it could be for effective learning.

I think, obviously, they're not in school so we need that parental support. I think children do struggle if it's not there, or if it's just, kind of that's what you need to do and get on with it. (Primary Teacher)

So, then we chase up and catch up with any parents of children who haven't accessed any of the tasks. (Primary Teacher)

The sudden onset of the pandemic lockdowns meant that there was little time for preparing relationships of support for families or developing parental confidence in teaching and learning which brought emphasis to the parental difficulties in providing that support. Whilst these are examples drawn out during the unique

context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implications continue to be true in more normal times. Parental confidence and particular learning needs, the realities of health difficulties, household stresses and the feelings of guilt were all noted as factors that were being negotiated during this period.

But obviously trying to balance everything: your mental state, panic attack, any medical problems that you struggle with day to day, along with being a parent and education was a lot. (Secondary Parent)

And then you obviously get the frustration that you can't help your child. And are you a bad parent for not doing the education at home? And then it just spirals, which doesn't help your mental state, and then you just feel useless. (Secondary Parent)

Effective relationships between home and school have always been considered as valuable for effective teaching and learning. The transfer to online schooling and the handover of responsibility for learner engagement to parents at home during this unique time highlighted some strengths and weaknesses of home school relationships and identified some elements that could be built upon for education in general – the reciprocal empathy from understanding each other's needs, demands and contexts and the mutual appreciation of the intertwined nature of teaching, learning, home and school. Support and guidance can be seen to be extremely valuable in meeting the needs of parents.

Effective Communication

Communication between home and school came into sharp focus over the pandemic period and technology was at the forefront since the face-to-face communication that was possible before that period became impossible. The findings have identified the need for clear and accessible communication which is both responsive to both parties needs and is reciprocal in nature.

Clear and accessible communication may seem an obvious and indisputable requirement but in reality this may be difficult to implement. Unexpected factors can influence the clarity of what is being shared and the pandemic context, with its suddenness and lack of preparation meant that communication between school and home was not always of the quality or nature expected. Parents commented on the changing methods of communication over the different lockdown periods which initially did not always ensure clarity of messaging. Systems tended to

improve over the period of time as options and methods became more familiar but inconsistency in methods was considered problematic. It appeared that some schools and homes utilised a virtual learning environment to communicate and share teaching methods, plans and resources and this 'one stop shop' was found to be helpful.

But I think having Moodle allows you to see the work they've been set, and you can see the topics they're doing. So therefore, if your child is not understanding something or struggling with something, you're more aware of it, so therefore, you can help them and support them more at home. I've found that really quite important. ... So, definitely from a parent perspective, it's nice to know what and they are doing in school so that you can support them. And keeping that sort of parent-school communication going is important. (Secondary Parent)

I think if we were to do home learning again, I think it would definitely be worth parents knowing more. And maybe having a situation where there is a proper routine, and you can go online and have a virtual classroom. (Secondary Parent)

Other communication methods, such as social media were also used by schools and parents; these were appreciated since they offered reciprocal support networks which were not available in the absence of face-to-face conversations and interactions. Schools also engaged in direct phone calls to pupils' homes to confirm wellbeing and to discuss difficulties and issues. These often became conversations regarding parents' wellbeing and ability to cope in the unique context of the pandemic and also concerning individual pupil circumstance and this was beneficial to all parties.

The first time I phoned parents ... they were all so glad to have a chat with you, to share the problems they were facing, to talk about what they were enjoying doing with the children as well, and to ask how things were going ... you know, a lot of parents needed quite a bit of support, I'd say. (All Through Teacher)

Keeping the communication open with parents has been, it's been really, really helpful for us and allows us an understanding of where they're coming from and what the situation is. (Primary Teacher)

These online methods, whilst usefully utilised, did not address all needs, and were not always used to their full potential. While teachers noted that there was further information and communication, they could only glean from being in direct contact with the pupils, parents were disappointed in some instances where there was a lack of communication from the school.

But I think with these kinds of kids that physical contact is paramount because a lot of their worries are expressed nonverbally. I mean, you know from the state to the clothes that they wear when they come in, what's going on at home. (Secondary Teacher)

I contacted the school a few times, as you can imagine, trying to get stuff out of them, and wanting to see what's going on, and, basically, there was no contact from the school towards the pupils at all. And the work, well, I mean, her work just hasn't ever been looked at. (Secondary Parent)

Some parents, identifying the need for reciprocal communication, noted that in some instances, they had to contact the school, ask questions, and stimulate a response from the school. This may well be individual responses to specific circumstances but does highlight the difficulties faced when parents do not feel that communication and information is shared in a beneficial way or when parents lack the ability, confidence or concern to initiate contact with the school.

As I mentioned, my younger daughter was quite upset and fed up with not being able to see friends, and I had to actually contact the school, and yes, now that I kicked off about it, we do get weekly calls to check that she's all right, but it does feel that it's only because I've kicked off about it that they're doing something otherwise they wouldn't have done it. And I think about other pupils whose parents wouldn't have said anything. (Secondary Parent)

The pandemic lockdown period offered opportunities for the use of new technologies and methods of communication – elements that had been previously possible but relatively unexplored in educational contexts. This was enforced during the pandemic restrictions, but findings identified the strengths of effective, reciprocal, clear communication between home and school, and the weaknesses evident within impersonal methods or where methods were underutilised or inaccessible.

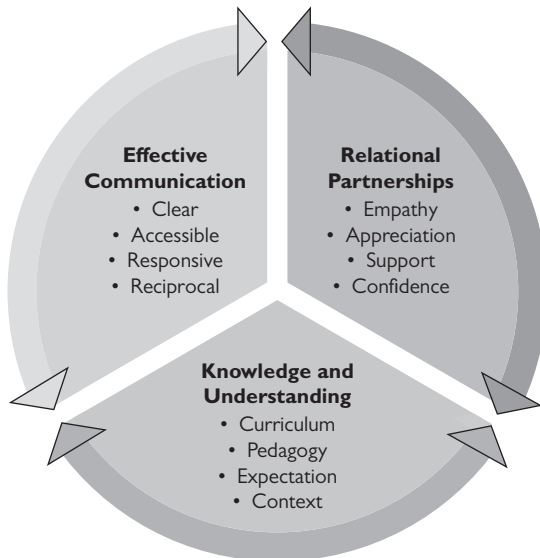
Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of the data led to a consideration of how lockdown experiences could inform effective home-school and parent-teacher relationships. Three important strands are suggested as essential for effective relationships between home and school and can contribute to effective, collaborative, curricular co-operation and application. These are in alignment with Walker and Bond's (2025) systematic review of the main characteristics of effective educational home-school

relationships – ‘building foundational relationships’, ‘providing structures and systems to facilitate communication’ and ‘developing individual and systemic knowledge’. The three strands are: knowledge and understanding, relational partnerships, and the importance of effective communication (Figure 1). Without these intertwined elements, it is suggested that effective parental engagement with school cannot be established.

The parent and teacher perspectives reported here are from a very specific and unique period which enforced an unusual and unfamiliar interaction between schools and homes but one which highlighted the nature of interactions (Spear et al., 2023). Whilst it may be argued that these findings are not drawn from the usual exchanges between homes and schools, it is contended that the very unusual nature of the data does identify clear principles of engagement between these educational partners which should be considered by schools and parents. The significant of this lies in the focus, which was not on the organisational routines of schooling but rather more specifically on pupil learning and the requirements of

Figure 1: Interconnected elements of effective home-school partnerships



support and guidance for home-schooling parents. This is a transformational change, and the benefits and value gained from such emphasis (Goodall, 2018) must not be lost in the return to 'normal' schooling.

Parental engagement is fundamental to effective home-school partnerships and the findings from this study have indicated that the responsibility for such engagement lies between both parent and school and that these partnerships require a shared knowledge and understanding of curricular content, pedagogic methods, expectations and an understanding of individual contexts. The pandemic removed the exclusivity of the teachers' role as educators (Bond, Moore and Hawkins, 2024), having to share duties with parents and hand over responsibility to parents (Ribeiro et al., 2021). This was unfamiliar territory for both parents and schools, but highlighted that, with appropriate guidance and support, parents could play a significant role in their children's learning and that such partnerships could be mutually beneficial (Baxter and Kilderry, 2022). Appropriate support requires clarity regarding the content of the curriculum, which should be contributed to by parents (Welsh Government, 2020) along with shared understanding of the methods of teaching and how success in learning is to be assessed and understood (Smith and Sheridan, 2019; Goodall et al., 2022). This is a 'boundary' issue to be addressed (Leat and Thomas, 2018, 203). What became evident during the lockdown period was the increased knowledge and understanding of home and school contexts which influenced practice and attitudes in the more positive scenarios. Walker and Bond (2025) note the value of clarity of context and the findings here showed that teachers responded to individual and family needs because they were aware of them whilst parents developed a much stronger understanding of the role, demands and difficulties of teaching, which, in some instances, lead to greater trust and empathy (Roberts, 2017). It is proposed that such shared knowledge and understandings would enable a more valuable and trusting relationship that could inform and facilitate effective collaboration and co-operation.

The second essential principle identified in this work for effective home school interactions was relational partnerships which builds on Walker and Bond's (2025) foundational partnerships in emphasising an ongoing and progressive personal relationship where empathy, appreciation, support and confidence is central and developmental. It is clear once again that the specific context in which this research took place profoundly influenced the responses of parents and schools but useful and essential principles of action are identified. The circumstances enabled an insight

into the lives of others, with teachers, through communication methods and online teaching software, being given a view of children's home circumstances, and parents having an insight to teacher's lives, profession and practice. It is proposed that this reciprocal insight enabled an empathetic appreciation of each other's circumstances which led to more effective partnership in the work of teaching and learning. Despite the unique circumstances, the principle of openness and mutual understanding is an important one, which seeks to undermine the power structure where schools become the focal point of interactions (Leenders et al., 2019), where perceptions of families and parents are stereotyped and homogenised (Baxter and Kilderry, 2022, Deslandes et al., 2015). A true and honest relationship can engender stronger working relationships and enable teachers and parents to provide more focused integration of learning and teaching experiences for pupils which can ensure the home engages in the learning process rather than just in schooling (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Hannon and O'Donnell, 2022; Goodall et al., 2022). The additional benefit of such strong relational partnerships is that such openness and real understanding of contexts allows for greater support for parents and enables the development of their confidence in their engagement in the learning process. This study shows that where there is an understanding of the home or school context, of the strain and stresses felt by each other, then it was possible to extend support, provide flexible responses and appreciate what is needed to ensure greater engagement with learning. Such a relational partnership, since teaching and learning is a relational activity (Hannon and O'Donnell, 2022), allows each party to understand the difficulties and frustrations of supporting learning and enables effective and individual support to be put in place. It is suggested that schools and families ought to develop structures and frameworks to allow for this relational partnership to be developed and to create ethos and mindsets where honesty, empathy and mutual appreciation and support could be the norm.

The final essential principle identified within this work is effective communication, a factor that has been known within educational contexts for many years (Alexander and Hjortso, 2019). This data exemplifies the need for communication between school and home to be clear, accessible and reciprocal. Whilst the unforeseen global context here prevented prior communication planning or preparation, the perceptions of both teachers and parents indicate that the effectiveness of communication has a significant impact on the nature of partnership and collaboration (Broomhead, 2018). This element is central in the application of both other principles,

in the sharing of knowledge and understanding and the development of relational partnerships (Griffiths, Alsip, Kennedy, Diamond, Palma, Abdou, Weigand and Brady, 2022). The absence of clear guidance and direction created difficulty, concern and stress for parents, whereas the ability to understand teaching content, the expectations of learning and the freedom to ask for guidance and support was clearly identified as a strength. Methods of communication are important and the development of online platforms – both social media and virtual learning environments – enabled positive and longer lasting communication. It is suggested that these methodologies could be considered as longer-term communication tools, particularly where VLEs may offer greater parental insight to curricular content, guidance and expectations and provide a long-term resource that can be shared between home and school as long as appropriate guidance and safeguards are put in place (Francot, Broekhuizen and Leseman, 2019). The pandemic enforced personalised communication between teachers and parents which, from a logistical perspective, may not be replicable in the long term, but the accessibility of that type of communication, with a regular connection between home and school, was noted as a strength by some (aligning with Hutchison, Paatsch and Cloonan, 2020), enabling two way conversations which often focused on learning and teaching and the barriers preventing effective learning. Schools could benefit from a consideration of how such two-way, responsive and reciprocal communication could be enhanced between home and school, to avoid the tendency of occasional, one-way contact or time-limited communication in parents' evenings and pre-empt difficulties which may occur when lines of communication are limited or restricted over time.

It is thus suggested that these findings provide a framework of principles that should be considered by schools and parents to develop effective and useful structures and mind-sets enabling effective teaching and learning and avoiding unconscious barriers (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). The unique context of the pandemic lockdowns and the transfer of teaching and learning activities to the home have brought these principles to light and enabled further understanding of the nature and possibilities of home school partnerships, with the potential to create more 'family-like schools' and more 'school-like families' (Epstein, 2018, 391). Initial teacher education partnerships and CPD structures may incorporate these lessons into the fabric of the teaching profession. As the CfW implementation continues, these lessons on the nature and transformation of home-school relations during the COVID-19 lockdowns should be integral in the effective co-realisation of

the curriculum, especially as we see the longer-term impact of the post-COVID 'new normal' (Thomas et al., 2023) for education in Wales, maximising its potential to successfully achieve its four purposes.

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