The education response to Coronavirus: Implications for schools in Wales

Summary

The Coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated existing educational inequalities worldwide. It is estimated that years of progress made in improving education access and quality will be lost, and action taken to limit the impact must also try to create a fairer education system going forward (United Nations, 2020).

As well as targeted funding and resources for minimising attainment losses for all young people (Welsh Government, 2020), longer term education policies will benefit from a strong evidence base from which it is possible to:

i)   Develop and implement blended learning[1] and assessment that is inclusive of poorer children and those with additional learning or accessibility needs.

ii) Identify best practice in design and delivery of professional development for teachers and teaching assistants.

Planning and enabling new ways of working as a result of the pandemic places additional demands on schools. This will require additional investment to provide the extra capacity needed so that learning is not interrupted while teaching staff implement changes and undertake the necessary professional development.

This briefing note summarises findings drawn from an initial scan of the evidence on some of the main elements in the education response to the Coronavirus pandemic, drawing on international approaches which may have relevance for the Welsh education response. Evidence reviews synthesising the best available evidence on the following three topics will be published next year:

- Blended teaching and learning (inc. asynchronous provision);
- 'Catch up interventions'; and
- Professional learning and development models.

> **Education priorities in Wales must balance the social and emotional welfare of students and teachers with catching up on learning losses and minimising the widening of the attainment gap.**

The impact of Coronavirus on attainment in Welsh schools

In Wales, around 29% of children live in relative income poverty, and approximately 18% of young people aged 5-18 are entitled to free school meals (Welsh Government, 2019; Statistics for Wales, 2019). There is already an

[1] Blended learning typically combines online home-based education (remote learning) with traditional face-to-face classroom teaching and often also includes periods of independent study. Synchronous blended learning refers to situations where pupils go through the learning path together accompanied by their teacher whereas asynchronous blended learning occurs in different times and spaces particular to each pupil. In asynchronous learning, teachers usually set learning aims and tasks and students follow at their own pace.

educational attainment gap between children from richer and poorer backgrounds with an estimated 16% gap in attainment at age 11, which increases to 32% by GCSE level (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018). While the gap at age 11 has narrowed since 2004-05 when it was 26%, it is expected that the economic impact of Coronavirus will undo recent progress.

A rapid evidence assessment by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2020a) using studies of historical school holiday closures estimated that the recent Coronavirus-related closures are likely to widen the attainment gap between 11%-75% in England. The impact on the attainment gap in Wales is likely to be similar. While there is uncertainty about the extent of the impact, a recent Ofsted (2020) report suggests that since the pandemic began children have regressed in basic skills and experienced educational losses and increased mental distress. Estyn, the equivalent body in Wales, has suspended inspections during the pandemic, but it is likely that students in Wales have experienced similarly negative consequences of school closures.

Education priorities in Wales must balance the social and emotional welfare of students and teachers with catching up on learning losses and minimising the widening of the attainment gap.

Educational inequalities

School closures required rapid innovations in teaching in Wales; looking forward, we must ensure new modes of learning do not increase educational inequalities.

When schools closed in Wales in March 2020 for the majority of children, the switch to remote and blended learning happened quickly and in an uncertain environment. Most schools reopened in September 2020 for all students, however many students will continue to experience a blended model of learning due to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. Emerging evidence shows that children receiving free school meals, from single-parent households, with less-educated parents, and with Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage spent significantly less time on schoolwork at home than their peers during the Coronavirus school closures (Bayrakdar and Guveli, 2020). In addition, groups with additional needs, and pupils with difficult home environments have not always received adequate support (Daniels et al., 2020).

Reducing the existing education attainment gap was an area of focus for the Welsh Government before the Coronavirus pandemic (Welsh Government, 2017). The decision to continue provision of free school meals during school closures, holidays and where children are unable to attend school will help to lessen the financial burden on families and prevent children falling behind in their studies. In the winter months, fuel poverty will worsen and impact children's health and ability to learn (Community Housing Cymru, 2019). Keeping schools open for the most vulnerable children is likely to be the best way to protect both learning and wellbeing. The examples below may be helpful in developing ways to keep vulnerable children in Wales in school and to support them when schools are closed:

- In Argentina, in-person teaching was suspended during the peak of the pandemic. However, teachers worked in shifts to deliver teaching resources and food to the students most in need of support (OECD, 2020).

- In Japan, since June students have attended class in person on alternating days so that schools are at 50% capacity. Lunches are silent and socially distanced,

and students undergo daily temperature checks (Spires, 2020).

- In Uruguay, students who were struggling to access online learning and high school seniors were brought back into classrooms in the summer of 2020. School returns for all students were then staggered, beginning with non-urban areas (Unicef, 2020).

Blended learning

Blended learning is likely to continue for some time and a balance between home and in-person learning may be the safest and most effective way for schools to operate, although the evidence for blended learning effectiveness in schools is mixed and is likely dependent on the quality of teaching and access to technology (EEF, 2020b).

> **A large proportion of safeguarding referrals to social services come from schools, and with less frequent contact teachers will have fewer opportunities to identify vulnerable students.**

A recent international review of blended learning in the school context found largely positive impacts of digital learning (Topping, Douglas and Robertson, 2020). This was found for students of all ages and notably findings were also positive for poorer students and those with additional needs once they were provided with the necessary resources. As blended learning was not the norm in Wales before 2020, it may simply take time to embed the necessary infrastructure and support. For example:

- Virtual learning and assessment has been widely used for some time in several

countries including Estonia and Finland (NCEE, 2020; The World Bank, 2020). For example, the Finnish National Agency for Education guides schools to deliver blended learning, and online platforms are established to enable communication between homes and schools. It is feasible that over time, virtual learning and assessment will also become the norm in the Welsh education system.

- Collaboration is important in blended learning (Regional School Improvement Consortia, 2020). This includes schools sharing resources, frequent communication with parents/caregivers and opportunities for students and teachers to form online communities similar to those in classroom-based learning (Borup et al., 2020).

- There are many international networks which provide collaboration opportunities[2] as well as resources for understanding how technology can be used to facilitate learning.

Digital inclusion

Blended learning generally requires high-speed broadband and a tablet or computer for home-based learning. To address digital exclusion during the Coronavirus pandemic, the Welsh Government allocated funds to provide pupils with access to online learning materials and classes. Without a suitable home learning environment, digital access will not be enough to prevent a widening in inequalities, however access to learning materials is an important step to achieving a fairer education system (Hampton, 2020). There are some international examples of maximising digital inclusion in education which Wales could incorporate in the medium to long-term.

- In Estonia internet access has been classed as a human right since 2001. Digital skills, high speed internet and widespread IT infrastructure have been

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[2] See: **https://www.globaledguide.org/resources**

prioritised in recent decades. Like Finland, digital learning and school management systems were well established and able to adapt quickly to school closures. During Coronavirus-related closures, a team of educational technologists worked with schools to support teachers in using digital resources where needed. In collaboration with seven other European countries, Estonia made all digital education tools free and internationally accessible (E-Estonia, 2020).

- A host of countries including Colombia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Austria have comprehensive TV and radio broadcasting of educational material (The World Bank, 2020). Such a resource means there is less reliance on digital resources and classes are broadcast at set times which allows a structure similar to in-person learning to be maintained. Educational broadcasting in Wales could be further developed to cater to those without internet access.

Safeguarding and mental health

A large proportion of safeguarding referrals to social services come from schools, and with less frequent contact teachers will have fewer opportunities to identify vulnerable students.

Even the most sophisticated online learning platforms and inclusive digital access cannot replace the support school environments provide.

Reduced face-to-face contact is a huge problem at a time when risk factors such as poverty, domestic abuse and loss of familial support networks are increased (Usher et al., 2020). A Young Minds (2020) survey has also highlighted the negative impact on young people with existing mental health problems, and separation from support networks will have impacted both those with and without existing mental health issues, which was also noted in an October Ofsted briefing (Ofsted, 2020). Below are some potential ways to support students, although safeguarding issues are not easily addressed:

- Schools in the UK have been checking in with vulnerable young people and those not engaging with online learning (e.g. Elmhurst Primary, 2020), although capacity issues mean the amount of support will differ between schools. Allocating financial resources to schools to provide the necessary safeguarding, learning and mental health support would help fill the gap left by reduced time in the classroom.

- In Pakistan, teachers are trained to recognise and manage emotional and behavioural problems in children attending primary and secondary schools through a specially developed online training programme integrated into the teachers' ongoing education platforms (The World Bank, 2020).

- Reviewing policies on exclusions and alternative provision may be needed in some schools to ensure young people with additional learning and behavioural needs are not left behind.

- Recent research from Manchester University investigated a flexible in-school therapy approach and found promising reductions in students' stress and increased empowerment (Churchman, Mansell and Tai, 2020). These types of services may provide an alternative to general mental health services for some students at a time when NHS services do not have the

capacity to see all students seeking mental health support.

Assessments

Exams were cancelled in Wales in the summer of 2020 and replaced with teacher assessments. This followed an earlier decision to use an algorithm to award grades which led to many students being downgraded relative to their predicted grades. Exams have been cancelled in 2021 in Wales and replaced with classroom assessments which will be externally set and marked. This proposed approach aims to reduce subjectivity, and with it the risk of students being downgraded due to conscious or unconscious biases (Taylor, 2020). Still, learning experiences in 2020 will impact performance in next year's assessments, and this must be taken into consideration in designing and grading classroom assessments.

> ## New modes of learning must be carefully designed and evaluated to ensure they do not increase educational inequalities.

It is likely that the attainment gap in school and further education will widen if allowances are not made for differential access to learning during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Around the world countries are considering how to adapt examinations (The World Bank, 2020) – for example:

- In Egypt, research projects replaced traditional exams, and in some schools, exams could be taken online via a video conferencing platform. While the latter does not bridge the digital divide, it could be used alongside in-person exams to facilitate social distancing if such measures were needed in future in Wales.

- In Finland, electronic exams such as the Digital Matriculation Examination[3] or the joint electronic entrance exam to Universities of Applied Sciences are used and could be adapted for use in Wales.

- In Indonesia a blended approach to examinations was used. For example, final exams for junior classes were replaced by online tests, home assignments and/or decided based on the student's portfolio and previous school performance.

Professional development and support

Teachers have had to adapt rapidly to deliver remote or blended learning alongside managing safeguarding and wellbeing issues exacerbated by Coronavirus. Professional development has generally moved online or been disseminated via telephone and video applications (The World Bank, 2020), but there may be engagement barriers for some due to high workloads and the stress of delivering teaching in new ways while also supporting students' non-academic needs. Education professionals, as well as students, will need wellbeing support due to the challenges they have been facing since March 2020 (Education Support, 2020).

With blended models of learning becoming the norm, continuing professional development (CPD) for teaching staff must continue, as teachers and teaching assistants will need training to acquire the skills and confidence to deliver the curriculum in new ways. High quality CPD can have positive impacts on student outcomes and may be a cost-effective way to improve attainment (Fletcher-Wood and Zuccollo, 2020).

- An OECD report highlighted the need for ICT skill training for teachers (OECD, 2020). In Korea, the Ministry for Education responded to this need by creating a network of teachers with

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[3] See: **https://www.ylioppilastutkinto.fi/en/matriculation-examination/digital-matriculation-examination**

- digital skills to support and educate peers.

- CPD may also now need to focus more on equipping teachers with the skills to appropriately manage issues arising more frequently due to the Coronavirus pandemic, such as helping students and colleagues experiencing mental health problems (Alliance for Learning, 2020).

- Finally, as with in-person CPD, online CPD should be a sustained programme, rather than one-off sessions without follow up (EEF, 2019).

Policy implications

Implementing new ways of teaching and learning which are effective and fair to all students will require additional capacity, and therefore investment, in terms of staffing. While those with experience as education professionals are best placed to inform the design of new ways of working, support from those with technological and health training will also be needed.

New modes of learning must be carefully designed and evaluated to ensure they do not increase educational inequalities. Prioritising face-to-face teaching for vulnerable young people is likely the most effective way to reduce the attainment gap. This will help to overcome issues such as digital exclusion, to safeguard young people and monitor their welfare. Where this is not possible, ensuring students are supported with the necessary resources so that they do not fall behind is key. Resources may include tablets with MiFi (devices which tap into mobile phone networks to create a WiFi hotspot), food and regular contact with teachers which will again require further investment in education.

Online CPD programmes which focus on training teachers to deliver blended learning effectively are needed to maximise the positive impact on pupils' learning. Training should also ensure teachers have the necessary ICT skills

and ability to support students' wellbeing. There is likely to be increased demand for counselling and mental health support, at a time when the NHS is having to prioritise those in greatest need. School services which can be accessed flexibly by staff and students may help to lessen attainment losses and retain education professionals.

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