



**Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) (full-time pathway)**

**Introduction to Research Methods in Education**

ECDE7002

Assessment Component 1 – (45%)

**Critical Reflection Essay – 3,500 words**

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**“The promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales: A Mixed Methods Exploratory Study”**

## **Section 1 Introduction & Rationale**

To introduce, this proposed study is part of the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) course, attended at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) in Swansea, Wales. Therefore, the chosen topic is related to current education reforms happening in Wales under the government legislation umbrella known as Curriculum for Wales 2023, with a special focus on the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience agenda (HWBWG, 2020). This contemporary policy consists of a vast number of possible areas of focus. However, due to the personal, professional and academic interest of the student-author, the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing in professionals, this empirical research intends to: first, fill the gaps in current knowledge and practical interventions related to wellbeing promotion and support in education practice, second, contribute to current available academic literature, and third, enhance the current scientific qualitative and quantitative data related to the Health and Wellbeing agendas in Wales (WG, 2021; WG, 2023).

To continue, the Welsh Government (2021) published possible areas of interest for future research addressing the gaps in limited evidence and lack of scientific data related to the active increase of wellbeing levels in secondary teachers in Wales. There occurs a significant gap in the evaluation of specific interventions, opportunities and activities that might positively affect the increase of happiness levels and overall wellbeing among practitioners in secondary schools in Wales. Furthermore, the highlighted limitations in data evidence currently lack the evidence-based, experience-based and evidence-informed approach, that might provide more robust qualitative and quantitative data related to effective interventions positively affecting mental health and wellbeing in education practice in Wales (Long et al., 2023; Public Health Wales, 2021). According to Ball (2021) and Brown et al. (2023), the wellbeing phenomenon, recognised worldwide, calls for further scientific research and promotion, to improve the ‘Quality of Life’ experience (QOL) among education practitioners in Wales, as well as on international scale (Thomas et al., 2023; WG, 2021).

## Section 2 Literature Review

The current published literature, related to the proposed study, presented the discussion and debate between the Welsh Government, the Welsh Ministry for Education and the Welsh Schools Regulatory Body with a multidisciplinary sphere of activity in the Education and Healthcare sector (HWBWG, 2019; WG, 2023). The debate is related to the importance of promotion and support of individual mental health and wellbeing among education teaching practitioners in Wales, as well as globally. Thomas et al. (2023) stated that school settings in Wales, such as mainstream or whole school institutions, should support their professional staff to be in capacity and state to sufficiently support their individual wellbeing and satisfy and fulfil their needs, before providing care and support to students or colleagues. Brown et al. (2023) continued that this can be very difficult in real practice, especially in rural areas, as the vast number of school settings in Wales lack the means and tools that might enable further support and engagement between individual teaching practitioners and senior leaders.

Bakker and Bal (2010) and HWB Welsh Government (2021) agreed and highlighted three main challenges in possible interventions affecting the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing in education practice in Wales. First, the limited availability of accessible resources, second, the variety of functioning facilities, and third cost-effective and sustainable school infrastructure. There occurs a growing gap in education provision due to the challenges mentioned above, which might negatively affect the individual positions of education actors such as secondary teachers, senior leaders in education, or other teaching practitioners in school settings across Wales (Smith and Barr, 2008; WG, 2021). Thomas et al. (2023) explained, that in secondary education settings across Wales, can be observed limited access to outdoor, sports and leisure activities, restricted access to swimming pools, absence of sports gymnasium buildings, limited access to green grounds and parks, but also inadequate sizes of Science Labs, insufficient Information Technologies (IT) devices and Digital facilities, ineffective cybersecurity or cooking facilities.

The student-author of this proposed study, recognised from her professional practice, that if these provisional challenges occur in healthcare practice or education settings, the involved individuals such as teaching practitioners, senior leaders and students are facing additional issues related to unsatisfied needs. It means, that if the education setting does not provide and offer adequate and accessible resources, a variety of functioning facilities, and cost-effective and sustainable school infrastructure it might lead to further emotional and mental health frustrations affecting the wellbeing of individual people, no matter if these are the teachers, headmasters or students (Perryman and Calvert, 2019; Public Health Wales, 2021). The resources, facilities or infrastructure within the Education sector in Wales could be related to, for example, sufficient leisure and play activities, resting and regeneration time, social interactions, or sports events (Brown et al., 2023).

From clinical healthcare practice is well known, that the wellbeing of individuals can be negatively affected by a variety of different factors and stimuli coming from the surrounding environment, workplace, family or local community (Public Health Wales, 2021). Long et al. (2023) highlighted four main factors that directly affect the wellbeing of professional practitioners in Education in Wales in 2023. First, the interpersonal relationships and communication at work, second, the work pace in the new digital era and Artificial Intelligence (AI) innovations, third, the access to stress management resources in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, last, the family and personal issues of individual teaching practitioners. The current authors that focus on this topic, which have been mentioned throughout this essay, collectively agree, that these factors could make the difference between a happy and healthy, or frustrated teacher in real life (Brown et al., 2023; HWBWG, 2019). That is why the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among education practitioners in 2023 is so important.

That is why the Welsh Government (2023) introduced new legislation related to Health and Wellbeing agendas to address the gap between the communication, collaboration and practical interventions necessary for further promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing in the Education sector in Wales. Such an approach related to changes in education curriculum might positively affect and possibly improve the work-life balance projected within the 'Quality of Working Life' theoretical concept and model. There has been a highlighted lack of evidence of available studies in Wales, related to this theoretical concept. However, the current scientific evidence agrees with a number of findings, that can be directly linked to the key factors measured within the 'Work-Related Quality of Life Scale' (WRQoL). The possible key factors highlighted by Public Health Wales (2021) and Long et al. (2023) are related to extreme workload, poor work-life balance, or target-driven organisation culture might have a negative effect on the wellbeing and mental health state of education practitioners in Wales (Ball, 2021; Perryman and Calvert, 2019).

### **Section 3 Theoretical Framework & Methodology**

To continue with the theoretical framework and the whole research process it is vital to incorporate and clarify the positionality and reflexive approach which help to determine and identify the possible views, values or constructs that might affect the final interpretation of the scientific data findings. Holmes (2020) highlighted that positionality navigates the further ongoing process and concept of reflexivity, which is vital for the whole acceptance and approach towards the proposed study and its whole design and scientific purpose. Therefore, to clarify the positionality, the student-author of the proposed study is a healthcare professional with 19 years of hands-on experience in a variety of nursing, healthcare and social care settings in the UK and Europe. For the past 10 years, the main professional and academic focus of the student-author has been on the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among professional practitioners in the Healthcare and Education sector in Wales. Due to the strong scientific approach, extended professional experience and subjective personal beliefs of the student-author, there occurred a dilemma during the process of recognising the suitable positionality towards the chosen topic.

Therefore, there has been carried out a systematic and precise critical appraisal examination, partially based on the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, known as CASP Checklist (Coolican, 2014). This helped to identify the main research characteristics of the chosen topic and address the possible further method, methodology and paradigm to correctly approach the proposed study. Such critical appraisal enables a clearer categorisation of the theoretical and philosophical position of this proposed research (Ogden, 2019). Hence, due to the nature of the person-centred nature of the chosen topic, based on the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing in Education practice in Wales, there has been selected the **Interpretivism** as the leading theoretical and philosophical framework of the proposed study. The correctly chosen research design of methods, methodology and paradigm, might satisfactorily address the main three aims of the proposed study, mentioned above within the Introduction section of this essay (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

To justify the decision-making process, the **Interpretivist** philosophy in Education and Social research in the UK is often closely connected to psychological and social theoretical frameworks and concepts that offer specific perspectives and explanations to contemporary phenomena recognised as real-life issues in professional practice (Holmes, 2020). The proposed study is related to the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing in Education practice in Wales in 2023. Therefore, the study topic could be categorised as a complex socio-educational wellbeing phenomenon, that examines the subjective professional experience, practical barriers, and individual challenges that might negatively affect the mental health and wellbeing of teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. Due to a strong possibility of biased views from both, the researcher and the participants, and possible subjective qualitative data related to feelings, health conditions and personal experience, positionality can play a crucial role in providing and interpreting reliable and representative data (Wellington, 2015). However, the **Interpretivist** theoretical framework might allow the student-researcher to position, integrate and incorporate herself into the research environment to be able to better understand and interpret the beliefs, views, values, experiences and choices provided by the participants, either during planned face-to-face interviews or via anonymous surveys (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

From the **Ontology** perspective, the socio-educational wellbeing phenomenon is based on strictly subjective reality and depends on the individual points of view of each educational actor, including headmasters and teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. The scientific data obtained from the education actors often provide a variety of different opinions, beliefs, and experiences where the ontology framework model might assist in examining and analysing individually, the data related to emotions, behaviours and behavioural changes, mental processing or feelings (Wellington, 2015). There has been identified possible methodology design suitable for qualitative research design using data collection tools such as face-to-face interviews, or case studies which can be further analysed for example via Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), or 'Work-Related Quality of Life Scale' (WRQoL). The ontology model related to health and wellbeing in professionals can be used for decision-making and predictions that are acquired in real-time and depend on the immediate and current experiences, emotions and health conditions of the participants (Bryman, 2008). This can be highlighted as subjective and also some ethical questions should be considered. However, from the **Epistemology** perspective, the research paradigm model related to the topic of the proposed study is closely linked to (social) constructivism, where knowledge depends on beliefs, values and lived experience (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

## Section 4 Research Methods & Tools

Based on the proposed study nature, discussed above, the mixed methods research design, based on the qualitative and quantitative data collection approach will be adopted (Biggam, 2021). Such design might address the overall purpose of the study, to explore and understand the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. The main three aims of the proposed study were introduced and set: first, to fill the gaps in current knowledge and examine the limited practical interventions related to wellbeing promotion and support in education practice in Wales. This could be achieved via mixed methods design and further complex analysis and examination of collected qualitative and quantitative evidence-based and experience-based figures from participants, via face-to-face interviews, or online surveys.

Second, was the aim to provide a relevant and scientific contribution to current available academic literature, where findings, results and possible recommendations obtained and extracted from the proposed study, might provide some important, valid and valuable contemporary data. The findings from the proposed study will be further examined, analysed and compared with related relevant literature and empirical evidence, regarding the evidence-based (quantitative data), experience-based (qualitative data) and evidence-informed practice (mixed methods data). The suggested data collection tools and further analysis effective for qualitative data evidence could be the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) applied to the interview transcripts. The data collection tool regarding the quantitative data evidence could be the online survey/questionnaire related to the 'Work-Related Quality of Life Scale' (WRQoL) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Stamm, 2005).

The last aim of the proposed study, was to enhance the current scientific qualitative and quantitative data related to the Health and Wellbeing government agendas in Wales, due to the persistent lack of scientific evidence focusing on these contemporary issues. This can be achieved by a systematic literature review that compares, contrasts and critically analyses the empirical data findings collected through the proposed study, and further comparison with available relevant, reliable and valid qualitative and quantitative evidence from current literature (Biggam, 2021). Welsh Government (2023) highlighted with urgency that future, more robust scientific studies are welcomed to support the current scientific findings.

To continue with the mixed methods design in education research, such methods have been identified as an enhancing and useful approach in relation to the main purpose and focus of the proposed study. This is due to a number of possible benefits and strengths that might emerge from the combination of qualitative findings and quantitative data (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017; Swindell et al., 2023). First, the mixed methods design is based on acquiring qualitative and quantitative data from the participants, and further detailed analysis comparison and contrast might provide stronger evidence and diverse findings related to the chosen topic. This can be crucial for the final correct and valid interpretation of the collected data, which might result in the presentation of more consistent and reliable scientific findings and innovative recommendations.

Second, the mixed methods design can be useful during the elimination, balancing and matching process of the limitations related to both, qualitative and quantitative data. This can be important during the data analysis phase while combining and integrating qualitative research and quantitative data findings. Third, the mixed methods design can be useful due to providing a wider perspective which might help to provide a more complex understanding of what further promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing in Education practice is needed, required and proposed by the teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales.

Regarding Swindell et al. (2023) the qualitative approach might provide strong evidence of current factors, for example: psychological, social, environmental or health factors, that affect the mental health, wellbeing and Quality of Working life among teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. This can provide crucial qualitative experience-based findings and quantitative evidence-based scientific data, that might affect future interventions and improvements related to the promotion and support of wellbeing in education practice in Wales, and possibly worldwide as well (Coolican, 2014; Wellington, 2015). However, there can be highlighted a number of possible limitations and weaknesses related to the mixed methods design. The main limitation regarding qualitative findings might be the subjectivity, such data cannot be generalised and could be biased due to the targeted purposive sample of population and geographical area. It means, that targeted teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales, cannot provide a broad picture that can be generalised across the whole UK, or worldwide. Therefore, the additional methods of the Quantitative approach might provide some further strong evidence related to relationships between factors, statistically significant results, or objective data enhancing the understanding of social interactions and psychological processes affecting decision-making or feelings in professional practice (Biggam, 2021).

Nevertheless, the proposed study might provide good insight into specific needs, and identify individual requirements or issues reported by the participants. This can ensure specific and detailed recommendations for further improvements and innovations related to the currently available promotion and support of the wellbeing of the teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. The possible actions taken regarding the recommendations provided via the proposed study might be then acknowledged, further researched and examined whether the recommendations and innovations can be adapted and adopted across a variety of education settings in Wales, the UK and possibly worldwide as well (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017; Swindell et al., 2023; Wellington, 2015).

## Section 5 Research Questions

### 5.1 Evidence-based paradigm

Moving to the chosen research questions and providing brief justification for each, the first question of the proposed study is based on the Evidence-based paradigm approach. The question has been formulated as follows: *‘How does the promotion and support of wellbeing in education practice in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales affect the individual teachers in practice’?* Based on the suggestions by Easton and Van Laar (2018) to capture the evidence-based quantitative measure in mixed methods in education research, the Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) scale could be the appropriate framework. The Quantitative approach might provide valid key information related to workforce experience, organisational stress management, or current interventions and monitoring concepts. Such theoretical concepts can provide and deliver reliable and valid Quantitative data, based on measures of individual psychometric properties among the participants who will complete an anonymous online survey. Based on Biggam (2021) the scientific data obtained through the Quantitative questions might provide statistical significance of individual variables, data sets, or measures related to psychosocial needs affecting the wellbeing and mental health of the teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales.

To justify, the WRQoL scale construction consists of a variety of models and locus, that consider and target different measures and aspects of mental health and wellbeing within professional practice. For example, the subscales related to job and career satisfaction, general wellbeing, stress at work, work locus of control, job-related anxiety-contentment or work condition scale. These quantitative measures might support the practical suggestions of the belief that psychosocial needs, individual wellbeing and mental health conditions in professional practice might affect both the teaching practitioners and students as well. The acquired quantitative findings from the evidence-based question might help to address two of the three main aims of the proposed study. First, fill the gaps in current knowledge and practical interventions related to wellbeing promotion and support in education practice, and second, contribute to current available academic literature (Coolican, 2014; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

## 5.2 Experience-based paradigm

To continue, the second question of the proposed study is based on the Experience-based paradigm approach. The question has been formulated as follows: *‘What do the terms wellbeing and mental health mean to teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales’?* Based on the suggestion by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) to capture the experience-based measure in mixed methods in education research, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) could be the appropriate framework when focusing on mental health and wellbeing issues in education practice. The Qualitative data collection approach might provide valuable, relevant yet subjective findings acquired during face-to-face interviews with the individual participants. Each interview transcript will be analysed in detail, and the clusters of possible themes will be identified, recorded, coded and analysed against available theoretical frameworks or models focusing on qualitative findings in education, social or psychological science.

It has been stated that the experience-based paradigm does not provide objective findings, on the other hand, the provided individual and subjective experience of each participant of the study can help to explore and understand the individual factors, psychological processes, and wellbeing conditions. The acquired qualitative findings from the experience-based question, related to factors, processes or conditions can help to address two of the three main aims of the proposed study. First, fill the gaps in current knowledge and practical interventions related to wellbeing promotion and support in education practice, second, contribute to current available academic literature (Coolican, 2014; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

### **5.3 Evidence-informed practice paradigm**

And lastly, the third question of the proposed study is based on the Evidence-informed practice paradigm approach. The question has been formulated as follows: *‘What do the teaching practitioners in Swansea, Wales propose and suggest that make a difference for their mental health and wellbeing support in education practice’?* The Evidence-informed practice considers the relationship between research, practice and legislation as a complex approach affecting individuals, organisations, practitioners and users (Biggam, 2021; Coolican, 2014). The close and direct relationship between research-practice evidence and evidence-informed practice highlights the boundaries, factors, development, and understanding related to school context, professional practice and organisational structures affecting the education actors on different levels and from different perspectives. There have been highlighted the importance of process, development and progress regarding the awareness, engagement and support towards mental health and wellbeing promotion in education practice.

The evidence-informed practice considers the qualitative and quantitative data and via mixed methods provides further recommendations for further improvement or future research. Usually, this can be done via comparison and contrast of current scientific evidence and available literature to explore and critically analyse current knowledge and understanding of the chosen topic. The acquired qualitative and quantitative findings and data from the evidence-informed question might help to partially address and contribute to all three main aims of the proposed study. The three aims of the proposed study were: first, to fill the gaps in current knowledge and practical interventions related to wellbeing promotion and support in education practice, second, to contribute to current available academic literature and third, to enhance the current scientific qualitative and quantitative data related to the Health and Wellbeing agendas in Wales (Biggam, 2021; Coolican, 2014; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017; WG, 2023).

## **Section 6 Conclusion**

To conclude, this essay intended to explore and critically reflect on possible research paradigms allowing the conduction of empirical research in education via a mixed methods approach. The considerations, critical approach and justification regarding the design and methods enabled the reflection on possible strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of the study was to explore and understand the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. To address the aims of the research the mixed methods design might deliver qualitative and quantitative data enhancing and contributing to gaps in academic literature and government agendas.

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