

An Investigation into the Implementation of Wales' Digital Competence Framework (DCF): Teacher Perspectives in Media Literacy Education

1 introduction

1.1 Context for the research

In recent years, the education landscape in Wales has undergone significant reforms. Before the full implementation of the new Welsh Curriculum, the Welsh government commissioned Graham Donaldson to conduct an independent review of the curriculum as early as 2014. In his report, he pointed out that the current curriculum needed a "fundamental change" to ensure that the new generation could adapt more quickly to the ever-changing world (Donaldson, 2015). At the same time, he particularly emphasized that the curriculum at that time was "outdated" in terms of digital technology, and thus suggested establishing a new Digital Competence Framework (DCF) to be integrated across all educational stages to help learners develop transferable digital skills in a rapidly changing world. The fourth goal of the new Welsh curriculum, which was formed following Donaldson's suggestions to enhance digital fluency, adaptability, and positive citizenship, making Welsh education more in line with the needs of 21st-century learners, namely "ethical, informed citizens", is closely related to media literacy. Young people need critical thinking skills in a changing environment to evaluate the source and authenticity of information and be able to identify false and misleading information. Therefore, media literacy is not merely about digital skills but an important component integrated into Welsh citizenship education.

The DCF, one of the earliest important elements introduced in the Welsh curriculum. The Welsh Government (2018) defines it as "a set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that enable learners to use technologies and

systems confidently and creatively... and it cannot simply be equated with ICT". It is recognized as one of the three cross-curricular responsibilities alongside literacy and numeracy (Crick, 2021). This means that regardless of the subject or learning area, all teachers have the responsibility to integrate digital competence into their teaching. The framework not only emphasizes technical operation skills but also includes cooperation, creation, communication, and civic responsibilities in the digital environment. As a core dimension of digital citizenship, media literacy is thus at the core of the DCF. However, even though there is a high level of support and attention for media literacy in the policy area, there are still significant differences between the vision and the reality in the process of implementing it into specific educational practices, which is worthy of further exploration.

In addition, since the DCF positions digital competence as a cross-disciplinary responsibility, teachers in all subject areas are expected to integrate media literacy into their teaching practices. However, schools and teachers in Wales enjoy a high degree of autonomy, which means that the implementation may vary greatly depending on the environment, resources, and training. These differences further highlight the importance of conducting research from the perspective of teachers. As designers and implementers of the curriculum, teachers' understanding, strategies, and challenges directly determine the specific ways in which media literacy education is presented in the classroom. Therefore, this study aims to explore how secondary school teachers in southern Wales understand and implement media literacy education under the DCF. The study does not assume that media literacy naturally supports the "four core goals," but rather hopes to conduct an in-depth analysis of whether and how teachers believe that media literacy contributes to the achievement of these goals, especially its contribution to cultivating students to become "ethical and globally-minded informed citizens." By focusing on teachers' voices, this study aims to reveal the challenges and strategies involved in the implementation of the DCF, thereby deepening the understanding of the interaction among curriculum reform, digital competence, and citizenship education in the Welsh context.

1.2 Project overview

1.2.1 Research aim and objectives

Against this research backdrop, this study aims to explore how teachers interpret the goals of DCF, how they implement the various components of media literacy in their classroom practices, and the challenges or favorable factors they encounter in the process. By focusing on teachers' personal experiences and professional perspectives, this study aims to provide practical and policy-relevant insights for effectively conducting media literacy

education under the DCF framework. Additionally, this study fills a gap in the existing literature by paying limited attention to the implementation of DCF in actual teaching contexts, especially in fostering students' critical digital and media skills.

To achieve the overall goal of this research, several specific objectives have been determined:

1. To examine teachers' understanding of the media literacy elements embedded within the DCF through questionnaires that gather their perceptions and interpretations.
2. To explore how these elements are reflected in classroom practices as reported by teachers, using open-ended questionnaire responses to capture examples and descriptions.
3. To identify the key challenges and enabling factors teachers encounter when implementing media literacy through the DCF, based on thematic analysis of questionnaire data.

1.2.2 research questions

To address these aims, the study is guided by one overarching research question: How do in-service secondary teachers in South Wales perceive and implement the DCF in their classrooms, particularly in relation to media literacy education?

This central question is explored through three subsidiary questions, which examine different aspects of the issue. First, how do teachers understand the aims and significance of the DCF in the context of media literacy education? Second, in what ways do teachers reflect these elements in their classroom practices? Third, what kinds of challenges, constraints, and enabling factors do teachers encounter when applying the DCF to media literacy teaching?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Media Literacy: Concepts and Global Perspectives

In today's increasingly complex media ecosystem, media literacy has become a fundamental concept within the field of education. Livingstone (2004) famously defined media literacy as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms—a definition that remains influential across policy and practice. These four modes emphasise that media literacy concerns not merely the use of technology, but also the cultivation of critical thinking, interpretation, and creative abilities within a rapidly evolving and diverse information environment. Although the term is often confused with

digital literacy, scholars consistently emphasise that it extends far beyond technical skills in operating devices or using platforms.

Buckingham (2019) stresses that it is not a neutral competency; rather, media literacy education is deeply tied to fostering critical thinking, civic participation, and an awareness of power relations embedded within media systems. This critical orientation underscores why media literacy cannot be reduced to digital proficiency alone: while digital competence equips individuals to function in an ICT-driven society, media literacy enables them to question, critique, and contribute to the mediated culture in which they live (Spante et al., 2018). In this way, media literacy bridges functional skills with broader social responsibilities.

Media literacy education is closely related to the cultivation of critical thinking, civic participation, and the understanding of power relations embedded in media systems. This critical orientation highlights why media literacy cannot be simply reduced to digital skills: although digital capabilities enable individuals to function in a society driven by information and communication technologies, media literacy enables them to question, critique, and contribute to the media culture in which they are located (Spante et al., 2018). A growing body of international frameworks also recognizes the multidimensional character of media literacy. UNESCO (2011) frames Media and Information Literacy (MIL) as a composite of skills that allow citizens to “think critically, click wisely,” emphasizing evaluation of sources, ethical engagement, and the capacity for informed participation in democratic life. Similarly, the EU’s DigComp framework situates critical evaluation of media within its broader digital competence model, reinforcing the idea that technical skills are necessary but insufficient (Vuorikari et al., 2022). These policy discourses reflect a consensus: media literacy is essential for enabling citizens to filter information pollution, identify misinformation, and act responsibly online.

The urgency of strengthening media literacy has been amplified by the rise of disinformation. Scholars point out that the proliferation of “fake news,” deepfakes, and algorithmically amplified falsehoods has made it increasingly difficult for individuals—especially young people—to separate credible information from manipulation. Nygren et al. (2022) show that teachers across Europe recognize the importance of equipping students with resilience against misinformation, but also highlight the pedagogical challenges of translating professional fact-checking tools into classroom practice. These findings reinforce the importance of maintaining a broad view of media literacy that goes beyond detection of falsehoods to include ethical, cultural, and participatory dimensions.

Moreover, media literacy is increasingly recognized as a lifelong and cross-contextual competence. It develops not only in schools, but also through families, peer groups, and civic organizations (Riesmeyer et al., 2019). In practice, however, research shows persistent challenges. Teachers often struggle with limited training, lack of resources, and curriculum pressures that constrain their ability to integrate media literacy effectively (Nygren et al., 2022). These issues highlight why teacher perspectives are crucial for understanding the realities of implementation, and why empirical studies, including this one, are needed to bridge the gap between policy aspirations and classroom practice.

In summary, media literacy is best understood as a critical, multidimensional competence that encompasses but also transcends digital skills. It enables individuals not only to use technology effectively but also to analyze, critique, and produce media in ways that support democratic engagement and personal empowerment. This understanding is particularly important in Wales, where the DCF situates media literacies as cross-curricular responsibilities. Framing media literacy as integral to the development of “ethical, informed citizens” provides a direct bridge to the Welsh curriculum context and sets the foundation for exploring how teachers interpret and implement these aims in practice.

2.2 Development of the Digital Competence

Framework (DCF)

The Digital Competence Framework (DCF) in Wales emerged as a direct policy response to the challenges of a rapidly evolving digital society and education system. Calls for reform can be traced back to the ICT Steering Group Report (Arthur, Crick & Hayward, 2013), which argued for a statutory framework for digital competence aligned with the already existing Literacy and Numeracy Framework. The report stressed that digital competence should extend beyond functional ICT skills and encompass transferable skills that enable learners to critically and creatively engage with technology across disciplines. Estyn (2014) reinforced this concern, recommending that a statutory digital framework be introduced across all phases of education.

In 2014, the Welsh Government commissioned Professor Graham Donaldson’s “Successful Futures” review, which became a landmark for curriculum reform. Donaldson concluded that the existing curriculum was “out of date” in relation to digital technology and recommended radical changes. Central to his proposals were the Four Purposes of the new Curriculum for Wales—developing learners as: (1) ambitious, capable learners,

(2) enterprising, creative contributors, (3) healthy, confident individuals, and (4) ethical, informed citizens. Donaldson positioned digital competence as one of three cross-curricular responsibilities, alongside literacy and numeracy, that should be embedded across all Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs). Donaldson, G. (2015)

proposed the Four Purposes as the overarching vision for the new curriculum, which the Welsh Government later adopted. This represented a significant shift from ICT as a discrete subject to digital competence as a foundational capability integral to fulfilling the curriculum's wider aims .

Following the Welsh Government's acceptance of Donaldson's recommendations, the DCF was "fast-tracked" for implementation. A network of Digital Pioneer Schools was established in 2015 to co-develop and test the framework, supported by regional consortia, Estyn representatives, and international experts. After rounds of consultation and revision, the DCF was formally made available to schools in September 2016 as one of the first components of the reformed curriculum to be implemented . The framework was subsequently refined to align with the progression steps of the Curriculum for Wales (ages 3–16), ensuring continuity and progression in learners' digital development .

The DCF is structured around four key strands—citizenship, interacting and collaborating, producing, and data and computational thinking (Welsh Government, 2018). These strands link directly to the Four Purposes. For example, the citizenship strand aligns closely with the goal of nurturing "ethical, informed citizens" by requiring learners to critically evaluate digital content, understand online safety, and participate responsibly in digital communities. Interacting and collaborating emphasises communication and teamwork, supporting the development of "enterprising, creative contributors." Producing and computational thinking foster problem-solving, creativity, and critical analysis—skills that underpin both "ambitious, capable learners" and "healthy, confident individuals." Thus, the DCF operationalises the Four Purposes in a digital context, positioning competence not merely as a technical skill set but as an enabler of broader educational and civic outcomes .

Internationally, the DCF reflects wider European policy priorities, particularly the European Commission's DigComp framework (Ferrari, 2012), which defines digital competence as a key lifelong learning competence that integrates knowledge, skills, and attitudes for participation in a digital society. By embedding digital competence as a statutory cross-curricular responsibility, Wales became the first UK nation to establish such a framework at national level (Crick, 2021). Scholars such as Meace (2024) argue that this policy development reshaped the pedagogic landscape in

Wales, creating both opportunities and pressures for teachers to adapt their practice, often with limited resources and training support. Early implementation research revealed that while the rationale of the DCF was widely accepted, many teachers experienced the framework as a “tick-box exercise” due to a lack of clear pedagogical guidance .

In summary, the DCF originated as a policy-driven response to the perceived inadequacies of the previous curriculum in addressing digital and media challenges. It embodies the aspirations of the Curriculum for Wales by making digital competence a shared responsibility across subjects, designed to prepare learners for active, critical, and ethical participation in an increasingly digital world. Its integration with the Four Purposes ensures that digital competence is not seen as an isolated technical skill, but as a foundation for lifelong learning, creativity, wellbeing, and citizenship.

2.3 Media Literacy within the Welsh Curriculum

Context

The Curriculum for Wales provides the overarching vision for education reform, grounded in the Four Purposes that aim to develop ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; healthy, confident individuals; and ethical, informed citizens (Welsh Government, 2015). Among these, the fourth purpose—ethical, informed citizens—is most directly connected to media literacy. To become well-informed, learners must be able to evaluate information critically, interrogate sources, and navigate an increasingly complex media environment. Thus, media literacy is not presented simply as a functional digital skill, but as an essential competency for democratic participation and responsible citizenship.

The DCF was one of the earliest components of the new curriculum to be rolled out. It was designed as a cross-curricular responsibility, alongside literacy and numeracy, to ensure that all teachers embed digital competence across subjects (Welsh Government, 2018). The framework is organised into four strands—citizenship, interacting and collaborating, producing, and data and computational thinking. Of these, the citizenship strand is most directly aligned with media literacy, requiring learners to critically evaluate digital content, recognise issues of online safety and privacy, and participate responsibly in digital communities. Estyn (2019) emphasised that the effective development of pupils’ digital competence is essential for their lifelong learning, wellbeing, and employability, while also supporting the broader aims of the Curriculum for Wales. In this way, the DCF operationalises the Four Purposes in a digital context, situating media literacy as integral to the curriculum’s broader educational vision.

However, while policy documents present media literacy as central to citizenship education, empirical evidence suggests challenges in translating these ambitions into classroom practice. Ofcom's Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes report (2021) highlighted that children and young people in the UK, including Wales, frequently struggle to assess the reliability of online sources, despite being confident digital users. Similarly, the OECD (2020) noted that the Welsh curriculum reform was innovative in embedding digital competence, but cautioned that its success depended on sustained investment in teacher professional development. Estyn (2019) also observed that digital learning provision remained uneven across schools, with variations in resources, expertise, and confidence in teaching media-related skills.

A recurring theme in the literature is the blurred line between digital competence and media literacy in practice. Although policies distinguish the technical skills of digital competence from the critical and evaluative dimensions of media literacy, research shows that teachers often conflate the two. Meace (2024) found that secondary school teachers in Wales often describe their application of the DCF as integrating technology into the curriculum rather than fostering critical engagement with media. Nygren, Brounéus & Svensson (2022) also reported that teachers recognize the importance of media literacy but often equate it with ICT or basic digital skills in practice. The text points out that teachers lack confidence in differentiating between "information literacy/media literacy" and "digital skills". The authors argue that this leads to a greater emphasis on "technology use" rather than "critical analysis" in teaching. This ambiguity indicates a gap between policy expectations and classroom reality, highlighting the decisive role of teachers' interpretations in the implementation of media literacy.

In summary, the Welsh curriculum situates media literacy as a fundamental element of the Four Purposes, particularly in relation to developing ethical, informed citizens, and embeds it structurally through the DCF's citizenship strand. Nevertheless, evidence from Ofcom, OECD, Estyn, and recent academic studies indicates that significant gaps remain between policy ambitions and classroom realities. In particular, the lack of conceptual clarity between digital competence and media literacy highlights the importance of exploring teachers' perspectives. This issue will be revisited in the Discussion chapter, where it connects directly with the questionnaire findings of the present study.

2.4 Teachers' Perspectives on Media Literacy and DCF Implementation

In the Welsh context, teachers occupy a pivotal role in translating policy into practice. The Curriculum for Wales and its DCF are deliberately designed to be non-prescriptive, granting schools and teachers considerable autonomy. This means that rather than being

delivered through a standardised model, implementation relies heavily on teachers' interpretations and classroom practices. As Crick (2021) observes, the DCF is not a discrete subject but a cross-curricular responsibility, requiring teachers across all Areas of Learning and Experience to embed digital competence—including media literacy—into their teaching. Consequently, teachers' perspectives are central to understanding how media literacy is enacted in classrooms, how policy intentions are interpreted, and why outcomes may vary across schools.

Research on technology integration consistently shows that teacher beliefs, attitudes, and self-efficacy play decisive roles in shaping classroom practices. These factors are often described as “second-order barriers,” in contrast to “first-order barriers” such as time, access, and technical support (Ertmer, 1999; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). While first-order barriers are structural and external, second-order barriers are internal and concern teachers' pedagogical orientations, value beliefs, and willingness to change. Pajares (1992) famously characterised beliefs as a “messy construct,” distinct from knowledge, as they are formed through experience, emotion, and personal values rather than empirical fact.

Teacher attitudes and self-efficacy are similarly important. Attitudes represent predispositions to respond positively or negatively to particular innovations (Ajzen, 2005; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013), and they are shaped by prior experiences with technology. Positive experiences are linked to higher confidence and greater willingness to use technology (Paraskeva et al., 2008; Sahin et al., 2016), whereas negative experiences can reinforce reluctance. Self-efficacy, defined as teachers' belief in their ability to carry out technology-enhanced teaching (Bandura, 1997), has repeatedly been found to predict adoption more strongly than skill levels alone (Hatlevik & Hatlevik, 2018). Teachers with high ICT self-efficacy tend to integrate digital tools more effectively and confidently, while those with lower self-efficacy may avoid change even when training is provided. These insights highlight why examining teachers' perspectives is vital: implementation is not only about resources but also about the internal beliefs and dispositions that mediate practice.

Against this backdrop, the present study positions teacher perspectives at the centre of its inquiry. Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and interpretations shape not only how the DCF is implemented but also how media literacy is positioned within everyday pedagogy. Exploring these perspectives offers a way to capture the interplay of first- and second-order barriers, and to understand why the boundaries between digital competence and media literacy often appear blurred in practice. This issue will be revisited in the Discussion chapter, where the questionnaire findings of this study are examined in relation to the themes identified in the literature.

3 Research Design and Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted for this study and explains the rationale behind each decision. Its purpose is to present a research design that aligns with the research objectives and questions, which focus on how in-service secondary school teachers in South Wales perceive and implement the media literacy component of the DCF. Therefore, in this section, I will draw on the "research onion" model proposed by Saunders et al. (2019) to construct a systematic research methodology framework. This will enable the study to be elaborated layer by layer, from broad philosophical stances to specific data collection and analysis methods.

3.1 Research Philosophy

To establish a coherent research design, it is necessary to identify the beliefs, assumptions and principles that underpin the approach to this study. These assumptions pertain to ontology, which relates to the nature of being, and epistemology, which focus on how knowledge is formed (Cohen et al., 2018). Clarifying these positions ensures that the adopted methodology remains consistent with the study's overall purpose and the type of knowledge it seeks to generate.

The type of knowledge that researchers prioritise is inevitably underpinned by their assumptions about the nature of the human world. It is therefore crucial for social researchers to make their ontological stance explicit, as this shapes how reality is defined and directly influences the overall research design (Bryman, 2021). Moreover, ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions are interrelated, such that answering one question will almost certainly affect how the others are addressed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.1.1 Ontological position: relativism/constructionism

Ontology concerns the nature of reality and the assumptions researchers make about what exists in the social world. Traditionally, ontological beliefs have often been associated with scientific research, where the validity of findings is determined by the testing of hypotheses. Ontology, in this sense, refers to "our beliefs about the nature of reality" (Richards, 2003, p.33). This objectivist perspective assumes that reality exists independently of human perception, and research is expected to provide the clearest possible representation of facts or knowledge (Cohen et al., 2018). From this viewpoint, the task of social research would be to identify universal truths and to confirm or refute existing theories.

By contrast, this study adopts a constructionist or relativist orientation. From this viewpoint, social reality is not a fixed entity but something that is created

and reshaped through interaction, interpretation and cultural practice (Bryman, 2021; Cohen et al., 2018). As Hammersley (2013) suggests, researchers who adopt constructionism are interested in how people make sense of their world and how meanings emerge in particular contexts. This implies that there may be multiple, equally valid realities rather than one universal truth.

Such a position is particularly appropriate for the present research. Teachers' perspectives on the DCF, and especially on its media literacy strand, are unlikely to be uniform. Their views are influenced by their professional background, the institutional settings of their schools and the wider educational and cultural environment in which they work. Recognising this plurality of realities enables the study to explore how teachers construct meaning around the DCF, and how these meanings shape the way media literacy is enacted in practice.

3.1.2 Epistemological position: Interpretivism

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and the processes through which it is generated. It asks what counts as valid knowledge and how such knowledge can be obtained. In contrast to ontology, which addresses the nature of reality, epistemology focuses on the relationship between the researcher and what is known, and is often more closely aligned with research in the social sciences (Cohen et al., 2018). When conducting research projects, clarifying the philosophical stance is a crucial first step, as it profoundly influences the way knowledge is understood and the path of data interpretation (Crotty, 1998; Cohen et al., 2018).

This study adopts the interpretivist research philosophy, which emphasizes the constructive nature of social reality and attaches importance to the significance of understanding the subjective experiences of research participants. This stance is highly consistent with the core objective of this study, which is to explore how in-service secondary school teachers in South Wales understand and implement media literacy education within the DCF framework.

On the other hand, this study cannot adopt positivism as its research philosophy, as positivism emphasises the pursuit of objective, measurable facts and endeavours to discover universally applicable laws. Interpretivism, however, contends that quantitative methods alone are insufficient for fully comprehending the complex behaviours and subjective experiences of human beings (Bryman, 2021). This study focuses on media literacy practices from the teacher's perspective, a theme inherently embedded within specific social and educational contexts. That is to say, teachers' pedagogical

practices are influenced by multiple factors including educational policies, the characteristics of their teaching environments, and curriculum design. Consequently, this research aims to explore in depth how teachers construct meaning around DCF within specific contexts, translating macro-level policies into actual classroom teaching behaviours, rather than seeking to form generalisable predictive conclusions.

Pragmatism, as one of the three dominant paradigms in educational research, is often regarded as a suitable choice because it emphasises approaches that are effective in practice (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2015). It is particularly associated with studies that employ mixed methods. However, the present study does not adopt a mixed-methods design; instead, it relies on a qualitative approach in order to explore issues in depth. For this reason, pragmatism was deemed less appropriate. In contrast, interpretivism enables a sharper focus on teachers' perspectives, allowing the exploration of authentic "teacher voices". This aligns closely with the inductive design of qualitative inquiry, whereby themes and understandings are generated through the collection and interpretation of teachers' lived experiences.

Interpretivism also resonates strongly with the overarching aims of the Curriculum for Wales, which seeks to develop ethical, informed citizens who are capable of critical and reflective engagement with information (Welsh Government, 2015). To support students in achieving these aims, teachers must themselves critically interpret and apply media literacy principles in their pedagogical practice. An interpretivist philosophy therefore provides the theoretical foundation for this study, foregrounding teachers' perspectives as a central lens through which to understand how curriculum goals are enacted within real classroom contexts.

In sum, interpretivism provides an appropriate philosophical foundation for this research. It focuses on teachers and their teaching practices, delving deeply into teachers' understanding and implementation of DCF related to media literacy. This stance not only aligns with the study's objectives but also supports the overarching purpose of investigating how educational policies are lived out in practice. The research design and methods adopted in this study are aligned with the researcher's philosophical stance and the overarching research objectives.

3.1.3 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Reflexivity is widely recognised as a central component of qualitative research, requiring researchers to acknowledge their role in shaping the research process and outcomes (Berger, 2015; Hammersley, 2013). It rejects the idea that inquiry can begin with a 'clean slate' (Denscombe, 2015), instead

emphasising that researchers' values and assumptions inevitably influence how knowledge is constructed (Preissle, 2006). Reflexivity therefore involves an ongoing process of questioning one's position, perspectives and impact on the study (Kralik, 2005). Closely related to reflexivity is positionality, which requires researchers to locate themselves within their study and acknowledge the ways in which their prior experiences, values and identities shape the production of knowledge (Cohen et al., 2018; Holmes, 2020).

As the researcher, I inevitably bring particular experiences and perspectives to this project. Having been educated and worked in China before undertaking doctoral study in Wales, I approach the DCF with both an outsider's comparative perspective and a developing insider's understanding of the Welsh education system. My longstanding interest in media literacy and digital competence may incline me to highlight their significance in teaching practice, while my position as a doctoral student rather than an in-service teacher may shape the way I interpret the professional experiences of participants.

To address these potential influences, I engaged in continuous reflexive practice throughout the research. Prior to data collection, I kept a research journal to document my assumptions, expectations and questions, drawing on strategies recommended by Olmos-Vega et al. (2022). During questionnaire design, I sought to phrase items in a neutral way, avoiding leading questions. In the analysis stage, I used open coding in NVivo, allowing themes to emerge inductively from participants' responses rather than imposing pre-existing categories. Reflexive writing was employed throughout to interrogate my interpretations and make visible the influence of my positionality. Rather than eliminating bias, this approach aimed to acknowledge and manage it, thereby enhancing the study's credibility, dependability and confirmability.

3.2 Research Approach and Methodological Choice

The research methodology established the logical pathway for knowledge generation within this study. This study adopts an inductive approach, meaning the research did not commence from pre-established hypotheses. Instead, it progressively constructed understanding from data provided by teachers, allowing patterns and themes to emerge naturally. Induction is particularly appropriate when existing theoretical frameworks are limited or insufficient to explain a phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Given the scarcity of knowledge regarding South Wales teachers' understanding and application of the media literacy component within the DCF, this study does not test a predetermined hypothesis. Instead, it seeks to

construct understanding from teachers' narratives, rendering the inductive approach appropriate.

In contrast, a deductive approach proceeds from theory or hypothesis, subsequently testing these against data (Bryman, 2021). This research design is not applicable here, as the study does not seek to confirm or disprove an established theory, but rather to explore teachers' understandings and specific teaching practices within a particular policy framework. A deductive logic would risk overlooking the nuanced, context-specific perspectives that are central to the research questions.

Aligned with the inductive orientation, the study adopts a qualitative methodological approach. Qualitative research places greater emphasis on the construction of meaning, context, and depth compared to measurement and numerical summarisation (Creswell, 2023; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Given the study's focus on teachers' personal understandings and classroom practices – phenomena inherently complex, subject to individual variation, and deeply embedded within specific educational contexts – the selection of qualitative research methods is fully justified. The decision to avoid a mixed-methods design was also deliberate. Whilst mixed-methods research offers both breadth and depth, its implementation demands substantial time, resources, and a larger sample base (Tashakkori et al., 2015). Given this study's small-scale exploratory nature, incorporating quantitative methods would not only compromise desired reliability and validity but potentially diminish the depth of insight and richness of data sought through qualitative inquiry.

The adoption of qualitative research methods and inductive reasoning implies a greater emphasis on the transferability of findings rather than statistical generalisability. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted, qualitative research findings do not purport to encompass all possible contexts but rather provide valuable insights for practice within similar educational settings. In this sense, the present study's outcomes may offer practical guidance for other schools implementing DCF, while remaining grounded in the authentic voices of participating teachers within their specific contexts.

In summary, the combination of an inductive approach and a qualitative methodological choice provides an appropriate foundation for answering the research questions. It allows the study to privilege teachers' perspectives and generate contextually rich insights into how media literacy education is understood and enacted through the DCF within the Curriculum for Wales.

3.3 Research Strategy: Case Study

This study employs the case study approach as its research strategy, owing to its capacity to examine complex educational phenomena within authentic contexts. Scholars such as Yin (2009) and Stake (1995) contend that case studies constitute in-depth investigations of defined systems, events, activities, projects, or policies, conducted through multiple data collection methods in a concentrated or extended research period. This study defines the implementation of media literacy education within the DCF at a single South Wales secondary school as a clearly bounded case. Although the participants are drawn from different subject disciplines within this institution, the research remains focused on a single phenomenon: how teachers interpret and enact media literacy under the DCF framework.

The choice of case studies in this research stems from their alignment with the exploratory questions posed. Case studies are particularly suited to addressing 'how' and 'why' research questions (Yin, 2009), enabling researchers to capture the complexity of practice within authentic contexts. Within this case study, the 'how' pertains to how teachers integrate media literacy education into their classrooms, while the 'why' addresses the enabling conditions and constraining factors encountered during this integration. Achieving these insights would prove challenging through a research design emphasising breadth over depth.

3.4 Methodology

This section will build on the research philosophy and design considerations discussed in the previous sections to provide a detailed account of the specific methods and implementation steps adopted in this study. The content mainly includes sampling strategies, data collection methods, data analysis approaches, and ethical considerations.

3.4.1 Sampling

This study is qualitative in nature. In qualitative research, sampling is commonly purposive, since the aim is to gain rich and contextually relevant insights rather than statistical representativeness (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, a purposive sampling strategy was employed in this study, focusing specifically on a secondary school in South Wales. Participants comprised serving teachers from various subject areas within the school, all possessing practical experience of implementing DCF principles within their classroom practice. This approach ensured the selected interviewees were

relevant to the research phenomenon under investigation: the implementation of media literacy within the DCF framework.

Initially, the research design envisaged distributing questionnaires to approximately 30–40 practising teachers across several secondary schools in South Wales. Subsequently, 2–3 teachers would be selected from among the questionnaire respondents on a voluntary basis for follow-up semi-structured interviews. However, due to practical constraints and time limitations, only 15 questionnaires were collected from a single school. The sample included teachers from diverse subject backgrounds, offering a degree of variation that facilitates a multi-perspective understanding of media literacy implementation within DCF.

Although the scope and size of this study's sample were reduced, its purpose was not to draw universal conclusions but rather to generate transferable insights. This aims to assist similar educational contexts by focusing on a clearly defined case to capture nuanced descriptions of how teachers understand and practise media literacy within the DCF framework in their professional environments.

3.4.2 Data Collection Method

In accordance with the research design, an online questionnaire was selected as the primary tool for data collection. The purpose was to capture a 'snapshot' of secondary teachers' experiences and perspectives regarding the implementation of media literacy within the DCF. The initial design envisaged supplementing the questionnaire with semi-structured interviews during the second phase of the study to enhance the depth of findings. However, due to time constraints within the project's timeline, subsequent interviews could not be conducted, rendering the questionnaire the sole data source. Questionnaires are a widely employed method for gathering data on teachers' practices and attitudes. Whilst often associated with quantitative traditions, they can also be integrated within qualitative approaches to capture diverse perspectives and generate rich insights (Terry & Braun, 2017).

The online questionnaire was designed and distributed via Microsoft Forms, ensuring accessibility and efficient collation of responses (Cohen et al., 2018). It comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended items gathered demographic information such as subject specialism, years of teaching experience, and familiarity with DCF, alongside brief attitudinal data collected through Likert scale items. The complete questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix A. However, open-ended questions formed the core of the instrument, permitting participants to describe in their own words how they integrated media literacy, the challenges encountered, and the obstacles

faced. In this manner, the tool resembled what Terry and Braun (2017) describe as a 'fully mixed qualitative questionnaire' – one capable of generating quantitative data while also yielding qualitative insights, though analysis prioritised interpretative treatment of qualitative responses.

Overall, this questionnaire yielded not only quantitative data illustrating trends and proportions but also descriptive and interpretative data. This provided a panoramic perspective on how teachers at a South Wales secondary school engaged with media literacy education within the DCF.

3.4.3 Data Analysis

Immediately following the data collection stage, the data analysis stage can commence. When a study enters the data analysis phase, it is necessary to select the most appropriate data analysis approach at the outset, which can also reflect the ontology, epistemology, and methodology in the research philosophy (Bryman, 2021). Especially for qualitative research, the purpose of analysis is not to draw generalizable research results, but to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018). As Patton (2002) pointed out, there is no universal formula for qualitative analysis; instead, the chosen method must be "fit for purpose" with the research goals. Given the interpretivist and inductive stance of this study, thematic analysis (TA) was identified as the most suitable method.

Thematic analysis is a flexible analytical approach that enables researchers to identify, interpret and present patterns of meaning within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Although thematic analysis is sometimes criticized for lacking uniqueness, it remains one of the most widely used techniques in qualitative research, providing a clear set of tools for systematic coding and theme refinement. This is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm adopted in this study.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, all responses were exported from Microsoft Forms and imported into NVivo to ensure systematic organisation. The familiarisation phase involved reading and re-reading the open-ended responses, noting initial impressions. Open coding was then applied to identify meaningful segments of text related to teachers' experiences of implementing media literacy in the DCF. These codes were deliberately broad and descriptive at first, allowing the data to speak with minimal preconception. In the next phase, similar codes were grouped together into categories, enabling the identification of potential themes. Themes were iteratively refined, reviewed against the dataset and given concise, informative labels. Finally, themes were organised into a narrative structure, supported by illustrative extracts, to address the research

questions.

Throughout the process, reflexivity was essential. The researcher maintained analytic memos to document assumptions and decisions, recognising that TA is not a neutral activity but a situated and interpretive practice (Braun & Clarke, 2022). NVivo software facilitated transparency by providing an audit trail of the coding process. In line with the qualitative and exploratory nature of the project, the analysis aimed for transferability rather than statistical generalisability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), offering insights into how teachers at a South Wales secondary school interpret and enact the media literacy strand of the DCF.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided the research from its inception to the reporting of findings. Following the UWTSD Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice and the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024), approval was obtained prior to data collection. In line with these standards, participants received an information sheet explaining the study aims, procedures, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any stage before anonymisation. Consent was confirmed electronically via the questionnaire form.

Anonymity and confidentiality were carefully protected. No names or personal identifiers were collected; all responses were anonymised using numerical codes (e.g., T1, T2), and the school has been anonymised in reporting as “School A.” All data were stored on encrypted, password-protected OneDrive accounts, with access restricted to the researcher and supervisor, in compliance with GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018). Data will be retained for five years and then permanently deleted.

Although risks were minimal, reflecting on classroom challenges could have caused some discomfort. To mitigate this, participants were reminded they could skip questions or withdraw without penalty. Contact information for professional support services was also prepared should it have been required. By maintaining transparency and reflexivity, the study sought to respect participant dignity and ensure credibility and trustworthiness in its findings.

4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which explores how media literacy is understood and implemented within the DCF in secondary schools across South Wales. Data were collected through fifteen valid questionnaires, which included both closed and open-ended questions. The analysis adopts a thematic approach: quantitative results from closed questions are summarised to indicate overall trends, while qualitative comments are used to provide deeper insight and contextualised examples. The findings are organised around three overarching themes aligned with the research focus: (1) teachers' understanding of media literacy within the DCF; (2) classroom implementation of media literacy practices; and (3) challenges and support needs in embedding media literacy into teaching. Together, these themes illustrate both the opportunities and barriers faced by teachers in realising the aims of the DCF in relation to media literacy.

4.1 Theme 1: Teachers' Understanding of Media Literacy within the DCF

The survey data show that teachers generally recognise the significance of the DCF for students' learning, although their levels of familiarity and confidence in applying it are uneven. Out of the 15 valid responses, most teachers described themselves as either somewhat familiar or quite familiar with the framework, while only a small number indicated that they were very familiar. Despite these differences, the majority expressed either agreement or strong agreement with the statement that the DCF is important for learners' development of digital and media skills. (For detailed frequencies, see Appendix C.)

When asked about which aims of the DCF were most relevant to their subject teaching, the most commonly selected items aligned directly with media literacy competencies. These included encouraging critical thinking about online information, helping students use digital tools safely, supporting responsible online behaviour and communication, and understanding rights, licensing and copyright. The emphasis on these aims suggests that teachers conceptualise media literacy not only as a technical skill but also as an ethical and critical dimension of the curriculum.

Qualitative comments add nuance to these trends. Several respondents raised doubts about the framework's applicability in rapidly changing digital environments. As one teacher noted: *"Due to continuous and fast paced advancements in digital technology, aspects of the DCF seem to be already outdated"* (T2). Another questioned the reliability of technology itself, remarking: *"I don't trust the reliability of digital devices enough for them to be essential for my lessons"* (T5). These perspectives illustrate a tension between teachers' recognition of the importance of media literacy and their scepticism about whether the DCF provides a stable and practical foundation for embedding it.

Overall, Theme 1 indicates that teachers acknowledge the relevance of media literacy within the DCF, but their familiarity with the framework and their confidence in its implementation vary. This unevenness appears to be shaped by both external factors, such as the pace of technological change, and internal factors, including teachers' professional training opportunities and personal attitudes towards the role of technology in education.

4.2 Theme 2: Classroom Implementation of Media Literacy

4.2.1 Types of classroom activities

The questionnaire results indicate that teachers employed a wide range of classroom activities directly linked to media literacy. The most common included asking students to check the reliability of online sources (reported by 68% of respondents), using news or social media as discussion material (63%), supporting students to create and share digital content such as videos or posters (63%), and helping students collaborate online through shared platforms (63%). Activities such as discussing legal and ethical use of online content (42%) and teaching about online privacy and data protection were also present but less widespread. These results suggest that teachers recognise media literacy as encompassing not only critical evaluation of information but also responsible creation, collaboration, and ethical awareness in digital spaces.

Open-ended responses enriched these findings with practical examples. Several teachers described how media literacy activities were embedded into subject-specific learning. In humanities and ICT-related lessons, teachers emphasised critical evaluation of online information, for instance:

"I have undertaken a research task with Y8 pupils using Artificial Intelligence which we then used to discuss and question the reliability of information. This led to an exercise which required pupils to identify the most reliable sources of information" (T1).

"Discussed the reliability of different online sources and use online sites to share work." (T 7).

"Research and discussion of validity of resources on robotics, AI, etc." (T9).

In expressive arts, media literacy was linked to copyright and responsible digital practice. As one photography teacher explained: *"Everything we do is computer based. One example is crediting with images and finding original images" (T2).* In geography and geology, teachers used subject-specific applications, such as *"Collecting reliable sources for secondary data for fieldwork" (T3)* and *"Monitoring current levels of volcanic activity in the*

Cascade Range" (T5).

These examples illustrate that media literacy was not only present in general classroom discussions but also carefully adapted to subject-specific contexts. For example, in arts education, copyright and image attribution were emphasised, while in science and geography, the focus was on data reliability and real-time monitoring. Such diversity demonstrates that media literacy implementation is highly contextualised, varying according to the nature of each subject and the priorities of individual teachers.

4.2.2 Frequency of implementation

Despite the variety of activities reported, their frequency of use was uneven. Approximately two-fifths of respondents indicated that they implemented media literacy activities weekly, while others reported monthly (21%), once a term (21%), or only rarely (10%). One teacher acknowledged the practical difficulty of sustaining these activities regularly, noting: *"Trying to fit digital skills tasks in naturally, the time it takes to organise to book an IT room"* (T7). This variation highlights a gap between recognising the value of media literacy and consistently embedding it into classroom routines.

4.2.3 Teachers' roles in delivery

When asked about their main role in planning or delivering these activities, most respondents positioned themselves as facilitators in class (74%). Others also identified as designers or planners (37%), co-teachers with colleagues (21%), or observers (10%). This distribution suggests that while many teachers are directly responsible for guiding media literacy activities, fewer are involved in designing structured lessons or collaborating extensively across departments. The reliance on facilitation rather than systematic planning may partly explain the inconsistent frequency observed.

4.2.4 Cross-curricular integration

The findings also reveal that media literacy is often embedded within subject-specific learning rather than taught as a separate component. For example, in the humanities, teachers emphasised evaluating online sources and discussing ethical issues in relation to current affairs; in expressive arts, the focus was on copyright and digital creativity; in science and geography, media literacy appeared in the form of analysing real-time data or validating online information. As one teacher summarised: *"Research and discussion of validity of resources on robotics, AI, etc."* (T9). This cross-curricular application reflects the DCF's intention to position media literacy as a responsibility across subjects, but it also means that practice depends heavily

on individual teachers' subject expertise and priorities.

Overall, Theme 2 illustrates that teachers are implementing a diverse set of media literacy activities across different subject contexts. However, the depth and regularity of these practices vary, with some teachers embedding media literacy weekly while others only occasionally integrate it due to time, infrastructure, or curriculum pressures. The predominance of the "facilitator" role further suggests that media literacy is frequently approached as an addition to subject teaching rather than as a systematically planned element. These findings point to both the adaptability and the fragility of media literacy within the DCF: it is being taken up creatively across disciplines, but its implementation remains inconsistent and highly dependent on local conditions.

4.3 Theme 3: Challenges and Support Needs in Media Literacy

Implementation

4.3.1 Reported challenges

Teachers identified a number of recurring challenges in embedding media literacy within their classroom practice. The most frequently cited issues were limited time in the timetable, lack of suitable practical resources, and limited opportunities for CPD or training, each highlighted by almost half of respondents. A further third noted that students' digital competence levels varied widely, while some also mentioned the difficulty of assessing students' media skills.

Open-ended responses provide vivid illustrations of these obstacles. Several teachers highlighted the technical barriers they face, such as *"50% of computers not working for a period of time"* (T2) and *"The IT infrastructure (devices and connections) throw up barriers to effective and efficient lessons"* (T5). Others pointed to the limitations of student behaviour, explaining that *"Despite explicit teaching about how to ensure sources are reliable, young people still continue to take the quickest and easiest options with many of them trusting the first thing they find on the internet"* (T1). Such comments reveal how both resource constraints and entrenched student habits can undermine attempts to integrate media literacy consistently.

4.3.2 Desired forms of support

When asked what types of support would help them address these challenges, teachers emphasised three broad areas: professional development, practical resources, and systemic investment. Around one-third of respondents called for more regular CPD opportunities, clearer guidance on DCF expectations, and access to expert advice or mentoring. Teachers also requested more practical lesson examples and templates to illustrate how media literacy can be embedded across different subjects.

Several participants drew attention to broader systemic needs. For example, one wrote that *“Parents need to be educated about their children’s access to, and reliance on, technology – and they need to work with schools to enforce boundaries and promote critical thinking”* (T1). Others stressed the necessity of financial support: *“Funding for additional laptops or chromebooks or ipads etc.”* (T10) and *“Increased funding”* (T2). These responses underline that, while teachers are seeking improved training and pedagogical resources, many also view media literacy as requiring institutional and policy-level commitments beyond the classroom.

4.3.3 Structural constraints

Finally, some comments suggested a deeper structural challenge. Teachers observed that digital competence and media literacy do not hold the same curricular weight as other statutory skills. As one respondent argued: *“For the LNF framework there are compulsory Maths/Numeracy and English/Literacy GCSEs. Digital competence is supposedly a crucial, statutory, cross-curricular skill in the Curriculum for Wales but there is no equivalent GCSE even planned for”* (T9). Another explained: *“The course content of what I teach has to come first. If digital technology gets in the way of that then I will stay away from relying on it”* (T5). These reflections highlight that the marginalised status of the DCF within assessment frameworks may discourage teachers from prioritising media literacy, even when they recognise its value.

Overall, Theme 3 reveals a complex set of challenges and support needs surrounding the implementation of media literacy in the DCF. Teachers consistently cited time, resources, and training as the most pressing obstacles, while qualitative comments emphasised the difficulties created by both unreliable infrastructure and student behaviour. At the same time, respondents articulated clear requests for professional development, practical lesson resources, parental engagement, and greater institutional investment. The findings also suggest that systemic issues—particularly the lack of parity between digital competence and formally assessed

subjects—continue to limit the extent to which teachers can embed media literacy within their practice.

5 Discussion

This discussion chapter interprets the findings of the study in light of relevant literature, aiming to critically analyze how media literacy within the DCF in South Wales is understood and implemented by in-service secondary school teachers. The chapter unfolds around three themes identified in the findings: teachers' understanding of media literacy within the DCF; the implementation of media literacy practices in classrooms; and the barriers and support needs encountered when integrating media literacy into practice. In doing so, the discussion highlights the tension between policy expectations and classroom realities, along with implications for curriculum reform, teacher training, and future research.

5.1 Teachers' Understandings of Media Literacy within the DCF

The findings of this study indicate that while the majority of teachers acknowledge the importance of the Digital and Media Literacy Framework (DCF) in developing pupils' digital and media skills, there exists a degree of variation in teachers' familiarity with and knowledge of the framework. Some respondents described themselves as “quite familiar” with the framework, whereas only a small minority claimed to be “very familiar.” Teachers also identified aims most relevant to their subject teaching, such as encouraging critical thinking about online information, supporting responsible online behaviour, and discussing copyright. This indicates that teachers recognise, at a conceptual level, that media literacy encompasses not only digital skills but also its ethical and critical dimensions.

These findings resonate with wider academic debates on the definition of media literacy. Livingstone (2004) and Buckingham (2007, 2019) have emphasised that media literacy cannot be reduced to technical proficiency, but must involve critical engagement, evaluation, and creation. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) frames media and information literacy as an essential civic competence, enabling learners to “think critically and click wisely.” The fact that teachers in this study identified critical and ethical elements of media literacy indicates that they are aware of this broader framing. At the same time, some participants expressed scepticism about the DCF's applicability in rapidly changing digital environments, with one teacher commenting that

“aspects of the DCF seem to be already outdated.” This reflects concerns raised by Handley (2018) and OECD (2020), who argue that frameworks can quickly lag behind technological advances, creating uncertainty for educators tasked with implementation.

A further tension concerns the degree to which teachers distinguish between digital competence and media literacy. Even though the vast majority of respondents understood and recognised the objectives related to media literacy education within the DCF, their responses often focused on how to integrate digital tools into teaching, with less emphasis on cultivating critical analytical skills. This definitional ambiguity resonates with Meace's (2024) findings, which indicate that Welsh secondary teachers tended to interpret the DCF as a framework for technology integration rather than for cultivating critical media literacy. This issue is not confined to Wales; research reveals that educators across Europe frequently equate media literacy education with ICT (Nygren et al. 2022). This underscores the difficulty of embedding media literacy within secondary subject teaching. Furthermore, the varying levels of familiarity and confidence reported by teachers in this study regarding the DCF indicate that conceptual clarity remains an issue, directly impacting its implementation in the classroom.

Another dimension revealed in the findings is the scepticism about the reliability of technology itself. One teacher remarked: *“I don't trust the reliability of digital devices enough for them to be essential for my lessons.”* Such concerns point not only to technical frustrations but also to deeper questions about the role of digital media in pedagogy. As Buckingham (2019) cautions, uncritical enthusiasm for technology risks obscuring the cultural and ethical dimensions of media literacy. Teacher scepticism may therefore reflect a cautious stance toward balancing digital integration with critical reflection—a tension that policymakers often underplay.

Overall, among secondary school teachers in South Wales, the importance of media literacy education within the DCF has gained widespread recognition. However, the uneven level of understanding demonstrated is constrained both by external factors such as rapid technological change and internal factors including familiarity with policy and the extent of relevant professional training. This indicates that although the policy positions media literacy education as a crucial factor in cultivating ethical and informed citizens, teachers' grasp of this framework remains fragmented. This finding further underscores the necessity for clearer guidance and ongoing professional development for teachers, enabling them to distinguish between digital competence and media literacy, and to integrate both effectively into their teaching practice.

5.2 Classroom Implementation: Diversity and Inconsistency

The second theme of this study focuses on how teachers implement media literacy education in the classroom. According to the research data, the classroom practice forms are rich and diverse, including encouraging students to verify the authenticity of information obtained from the Internet (68%), using social media and news as cases for discussion in the classroom (63%), and supporting students in creating and sharing digital content (63%), etc. Among them, there are also less frequently used methods such as "frequently involving discussions on legal and ethical issues" (42%) and content related to online privacy and data protection. These findings indicate that teachers are making efforts to integrate media literacy teaching into their subject teaching practices in teaching activities, but there are still significant differences in the nature of specific activities and the frequency of media literacy teaching among different subject environments and individual teachers.

In addition to the quantitative data presented in closed-ended responses, the qualitative comments collected from open-ended questions further illustrate the diversity of media literacy education in teachers' actual teaching practices. For instance, in the humanities and ICT-related subjects, the presentation of media literacy often involves assessing the reliability of online resources and discussing the impact of emerging technologies. For example, one teacher described a research task on artificial intelligence in their eighth-grade class, which sparked a classroom discussion on the credibility of information sources (T1). In contrast, art teachers linked media literacy to copyright and responsible digital practices, with one photography teacher emphasizing the importance of citing sources for images (T2). Science and geography teachers, on the other hand, focused on evaluating secondary data and monitoring real-time information, such as volcanic activities (T3, T5). These examples demonstrate how teachers understand and adapt the goals of media literacy within their specific subject areas.

These findings echo policy expectations: the DCF views media literacy as an interdisciplinary responsibility rather than a standalone subject. As Estyn (2019) pointed out, the intention is to integrate digital competence, including media literacy, into all subjects to enhance both subject learning and digital competence. Similarly, Crick (2021) emphasized that this interdisciplinary approach requires teachers to adapt the goals of digital and media literacy based on their subject background, leading to significant variations in implementation. The diversity observed in this study reflects these

expectations, indicating that teachers are indeed integrating media literacy into their subject teaching.

However, the research results also indicate significant inconsistencies in the frequency and depth of implementation in the classroom. About two-fifths of the respondents stated that they integrate media literacy education every week, while others said they do so monthly, once per semester, or rarely. As one teacher explained, "Trying to fit digital skills tasks in naturally, the time it takes to organise to book an IT room" (T7), which shows that external conditions often have an impact on the regularity of media literacy education. These results are consistent with the concerns of the Education Standards Bureau (Estyn, 2019) regarding the uneven practices of schools in digital capabilities, and also align with the observation of the OECD (2020) that the Curriculum for Wales sets ambitious requirements for teachers' use of the DCF, but does not fully provide the resources needed to meet these requirements in practice.

The results also indicated that teachers' roles in delivering media literacy are often limited to facilitation rather than systematic planning or cross-departmental collaboration. Seventy-four percent of respondents identified themselves primarily as facilitators, compared to only 37% who described themselves as planners or designers, and 21% who reported working as co-teachers. This predominance of facilitation suggests that the delivery of media literacy is frequently ad hoc, dependent on individual lessons and teacher initiative rather than embedded within structured, whole-school strategies. Previous research supports this interpretation: Petko (2012) emphasised that in the absence of clear pedagogical frameworks, teachers tend to revert to familiar routines, resulting in fragmented implementation.

At the same time, the cross-curricular model has also given rise to inconsistencies. Although there is an intention to integrate the DCF across various disciplines, this study reveals that implementation largely depends on teachers' competing priorities, such as their subject-specific knowledge and pedagogical confidence. While some teachers reported creative and meaningful integrations of DCF elements, others acknowledged that due to time constraints or the structural demands of their subject areas, they infrequently incorporated media literacy education and digital skills development. One respondent commented: "The course content I am required to teach must come first. If digital technology interferes with delivering that content effectively, I will choose not to rely on it" (T5). This reflects the concern raised by Buckingham (2019), that media literacy is often treated as an "add-on" rather than a core component of education. In other words, teachers are primarily accountable for fulfilling subject-specific

curriculum requirements—particularly those tied to examination syllabi—while expectations related to the DCF, including media literacy, are perceived as supplementary and thus vulnerable to being deprioritised.

Overall, the findings highlight a tension between the adaptability and fragility of media literacy within the DCF. On the one hand, teachers are integrating media literacy in diverse and subject-specific ways, fulfilling the policy vision of cross-curricular application. On the other hand, the inconsistent frequency, the reliance on facilitation rather than structured planning, and the dependence on individual teachers' initiative point to unevenness that may undermine the policy's goals. These findings underline the need for clearer guidance, more systematic planning, and stronger institutional support to ensure that media literacy is not left to chance but embedded consistently across subjects and schools. The following section therefore turns to the kinds of support and structural measures that could address these challenges, drawing on both the questionnaire evidence and existing literature.

5.3 Strengthening Teacher Support and Addressing Barriers to Media Literacy Implementation

Within the Welsh education system, media literacy is positioned within the DCF as a statutory cross-curricular responsibility. This means that teachers in all subjects are expected to embed aspects of media literacy into their teaching. While this reflects the ambitious vision of the Curriculum for Wales, the evidence from this study indicates that implementation remains uneven and constrained by a combination of conceptual uncertainties and practical obstacles. To ensure that the aspirations of the DCF are realised, greater attention must be given to the kinds of support that enable teachers to engage confidently and consistently with media literacy. Drawing on the findings and relevant literature, this section proposes recommendations that address professional learning, initial teacher education, clearer guidance and accountability, and wider systemic support.

A central issue is that policy ambition continues to outpace the everyday supports available to teachers. Implementation is heavily dependent on competing priorities, teachers' familiarity with the framework, and their confidence in integrating critical media work into subject teaching. At the same time, structural constraints such as time pressures, unreliable infrastructure, and limited opportunities for professional development regularly disrupt attempts at consistent practice. In Ertmer's terms, first-order barriers (time, resources, CPD access) and second-order barriers (beliefs, interpretive ambiguity, self-efficacy) interact and reinforce each other, which helps to explain why practice often remains fragmented even where teachers

acknowledge the value of media literacy (Ertmer, 1999; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). Teachers themselves highlight these issues: “More examples of lessons and templates would help show how media literacy can be embedded across subjects” (T3); “50% of computers not working for a period of time” (T2); and, significantly, “Digital competence is supposedly a crucial, statutory, cross-curricular skill... but there is no equivalent GCSE even planned for” (T9).

Addressing these issues requires a joined-up support model. Professional learning should be reframed from narrow training in tools to a broader pedagogy of critical media literacy. Regular, subject-focused CPD ought to provide teachers with practical models of integration—showing, for example, how evaluating sources can be embedded in history enquiries, or how ethical issues around copyright can be explored in the arts. Such provision directly responds to teachers’ requests for exemplars and planning templates, and would strengthen the self-efficacy that second-order barriers currently undermine.

Initial teacher education also requires greater attention. PGCE and induction programmes should embed assessed modules on media and information literacy, combining conceptual clarity with cross-subject design work. Without this, new teachers are left to interpret the framework individually, reinforcing the trial-and-error approach reported in this study and in previous research (Petko, 2012; Meace, 2024). Integrating media literacy systematically from the outset of teacher education would ensure that future cohorts enter the profession prepared to deliver the DCF as intended.

At system level, some form of accountability are necessary. Teachers’ concerns that digital competence lacks the same assessment weight as literacy and numeracy (T9) reflect a wider issue: without benchmarks, media literacy remains vulnerable to being deprioritised. While a full GCSE may not be required, minimum standards, portfolio-based checkpoints, or departmental mapping exercises could provide the assurance that media literacy is being embedded across subjects. Establishing such mechanisms would address the perception of media literacy as optional and align its status more closely with the statutory expectations of the Curriculum for Wales.

Finally, the basic conditions for success must be stabilised. Investment in reliable infrastructure is essential to remove the routine frustrations that undermine confidence (T2), while greater parental engagement can extend critical practices beyond the classroom. As one teacher argued, “Parents need to be educated about their children's access to, and reliance on, technology – and they need to work with schools to enforce boundaries and promote critical thinking” (T1). Media literacy cannot be sustained by teachers

alone; it requires shared responsibility across schools, families, and policymakers.

In summary, the study suggests that effective implementation of media literacy requires action at multiple levels: sustained CPD provision, integration into initial teacher education, clearer guidance and accountability, and systemic investment in infrastructure and community engagement. Responsibility must be shared—between government, ITE providers, schools, and parents—if the DCF’s ambitious aims are to translate into consistent classroom realities.

6 Recommendations

This small-scale pilot study has provided useful insights into how teachers in South Wales perceive and implement media literacy under the DCF, but it has also highlighted several limitations in both design and process. The research lacked depth at certain points: the modest number of responses limited the scope for comparison, while reliance on school gatekeepers during the sampling stage meant that participation was largely passive rather than researcher-driven. The initial intention to combine questionnaires with interviews had to be abandoned, which inevitably reduced the richness of the data. In addition, the questionnaire design did not always succeed in tightly linking the DCF strands with media literacy, meaning that some responses reflected more general attitudes to digital skills rather than critical literacy practices.

If this study were to be repeated, several changes would strengthen it. A more targeted sampling strategy would be adopted, focusing on specific contexts such as PGCE providers or professional development programmes where media literacy is explicitly addressed. This would not only make access to participants more feasible but also produce data with greater relevance to policy and teacher education. It would also be valuable to refine the questionnaire so that items map more directly onto the DCF framework, alongside reinstating interviews to capture richer perspectives.

The implications for future research point towards a closer examination of how PGCE programmes in Wales, engage with the DCF and prepare new teachers to embed media literacy education. This study has raised my interest in investigating the role of initial teacher education in curriculum reform, since the challenges identified here suggest that classroom implementation depends heavily on preparation at the training stage. A future project that focuses specifically on PGCE provision, with a clearly bounded sample and mixed methods, would address the limitations of this pilot and make a stronger contribution to both policy and practice.

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