

“Start at my feet” commentary

Challenges arise in every area of life, but in turn, so do opportunities to help mediate those difficulties, and this is especially the case in any educational environment. In contemporary Wales, following the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, getting fast medical attention is difficult, transport is unreliable, and lack of affordable housing (Ahmed, 2021) all add to the challenges school communities face in our society today. All of these challenges impact attendance, health and wellbeing, and directly influence how teachers are able to teach, how children are able to learn, and how the parents and wider community are handling everyday life for themselves and their children. On the other hand, schools are working together with their communities to help release some of the burden modern parents are facing. This can come in the form of free school meals, the option to have transportation for their children, and other opportunities that directly help the community such as the opportunity to earn further qualifications through voluntary work at school. I have watched first hand during bridging days how all of these opportunities influence the everyday life of school and how it not only helps the teachers and the children, but also the community to better adapt to the teaching and learning experience.

To begin, I will focus on the challenges that affect the teaching, learning, and well-being of schools, focusing on my bridging experience and further knowledge. Firstly, in Wales, a growing challenge for schools is the rate of teachers leaving their positions due to burnout, hence a teacher shortage within the country that is beginning to happen. It is said that 55% of teachers are planning to leave the profession earlier than planned (Jotkoff, 2022). This is following the possible lack of support, teacher strikes for better pay, and the constant workload with 80% of teachers feeling like they are taking on extra work to make up for the shortage of teachers in their district (Jotkoff, 2022). Within Wales, although based on data gathered before the COVID-19 outbreak, entries to initial teacher training education (ITE) have been below target for three years since 2017 (The national foundation for educational research, 2020), however I can possibly predict that since the collection of this data and after the effects of a pandemic, this challenge has only increased. This all can affect teaching immensely. By not having enough teachers, educators are having to stretch themselves to complete a job and this will not only influence the time and effort they will put into actually teaching but also the enthusiasm will be missing in their classroom effectively influencing the child's experience of school. Interestingly, however, when observing and inquiring with staff members within my bridging school about this

issue I was met with different responses. Some argued that a teacher shortage shouldn't be categorized as a crisis within the country, instead the issue should be honed in on areas with large populations such as cities. Further, these staff members went on to say that, depending on the county, there are too many teachers and that it is difficult to find a permanent teacher placement specifically in Pembrokeshire. This leads to a rise in learning support assistants which, according to my bridging school, is the most expensive resource they have.

Additionally, there are multiple challenges that affect the learning of children in my area. Within my own community, as well as the community of my bridging school, there are a plethora of different schools with diverse backgrounds, following world issues such as war. There is a growing amount of refugee children being introduced to local community schools in the area, with five Ukrainian Families with children in my bridging school since 2022 and many other families from Southwestern Asia. This raises certain challenges such as language barriers, differing religious customs, and well-being concerns. Language barriers can affect the learning of pupils by creating stress on these children, affecting their ability to learn. As well as this, it will also influence their parents' well-being when they are unable to understand their child's work, or their teachers' report and may be unaware of what is going on in their child's education, hence them being unable to help support their child's learning to the extent that they would otherwise. Epstein (2002) explains in the six types of parental involvement framework that parents who are proactive and invested in their children's education can have a positive effect on their child's attitude towards learning, and in turn their success in school. However, the language barrier poses a challenge and may influence the parents' attitude on education when they are unable to understand their children's teachers and community. Another challenge that may come from the refugee crisis is the rise of differing religious beliefs, specifically in the cities of Wales. For example, in Wales, the Muslim population has grown by 50% between 2011 and 2021 (Munnik, 2022), meaning schools must learn to accommodate different cultures, religious practices, clothing, and food preparations, and a lack of this accommodation within education may result in an impact to learning. If parents are taking their children out of school in favour of a more accommodating school, this could cause these parents to move to different communities that offer those opportunities.

Furthermore, challenges that affect a student's well-being are especially evident within my bridging school with communities in the area of my bridging school ranking poorly on the deprivation statistics (Collins, 2021). In my bridging school, there are five hundred and ninety eight students, 33% of those students being eligible for school meals (Estyn, 2016), meaning

the challenges of poverty may influence these students' well-being. Living in poverty means these children are more susceptible to certain diseases, poor nutrition, material deprivation, and mental health problems. On top of that, if the wider community also may suffer in poverty, according to the deprivation statistics, it means that communities are unable to help each other by sharing in resources like food, transportation, and blankets which will in turn affect the students' well-being. It is also interesting to add that children in poverty are two times more likely to be bullied (Newson, 2016), possibly for their lack of appropriate clothing or uniform, being eligible for free school meals, or perhaps because of a lack of social skills depending on whether their parents are in work or not, or even if these children are the primary carer of them. As a result of bullying, children may struggle with low self esteem, have low attendance, or even suffer from depression. All of which impact the well-being of these students.

On the other hand, despite the rising difficulties within the community that teachers, parents, and pupils are facing in contemporary Wales, Schools in the community are coming up with opportunities to help lower the impacts these challenges have on teaching, learning, and well-being. Within my bridging experience, I observed how the school gives opportunities to parents, specifically refugee families, by inviting families into the school to sit with their children through a lesson, and then have the option to stay and have lunch with their child as well. Parental involvement also improves the communication between parent and teacher, and allows the teacher to adjust their teaching based on their background knowledge of the child (Goodall, J. Et al. 2011), positively affecting the teaching in the classroom as well. I found this particularly unique to this school and hope to introduce it into my own teaching practice, if able, after witnessing how this helped the teacher to be able to teach children in a better way, in particular, to children with additional learning needs, and also build a relationship with the parents and influence the parents' attitude to education. Moreover, further opportunities that affect the learning of students have grown following social-economic change. There is the opportunity for additional language teachers that can be trained and hired more effectively, online support for both children and the community available in schools, and formal transition plans that can be adapted to a child, meaning the well-being of certain children are considered, particularly children with additional learning needs.

Within my bridging school, the opportunity for children with parents on active duty in the army is vast. Every week, they are able to visit a forest school, coastal school, educational visits, and STEM sessions, a few of which have been known to increase concentration and motivation to learn in students (O'Brien and Murray, 2006). The Mini Explorers programme (forest school)

offered by my bridging school, commented that it is an excellent way for service children to build a relationship with staff and understand they have a safe adult to talk to (Thomas and Cottrell, 2022). Similarly, it helps these children learn by improving their problem solving skills, and expand upon their communication skills (Thomas and Cottrell, 2022).

In addition, my bridging school offered opportunities that not only affected the students well-being, but also the teachers and surrounding communities well-being. I observed in my bridging school that teachers were being offered the opportunity to not have to pay for lunch everyday, but instead they were provided homemade soup with a bread roll, tea, and coffee. This was introduced after the school started to notice teachers struggling to not only afford to make lunch during a growing cost of living crisis in the UK, but to also help manage time. A few teachers also commented that it made the school feel more like a community by gathering all staff to eat together at lunch and create stronger bonds of friendship, hence the improvement of their well-being. On top of that, the well-being of all children are thought of, so the school has breakfast prepared for them every morning during registration time, including toast and a drink, in case of children who were unable to eat breakfast that morning at home, due to poverty. Additionally, the school works for the community with a family Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) for parents that might need support as well. This has been known to support the effects of loss, relationships, social skills, anxiety, and behaviour.

Lastly, my bridging school provides opportunities for the community, even for those who don't have a child who attends the school, in the form of volunteer work. In partnership with a local college, anyone in the community has the opportunity to volunteer at the school and attend online sessions within this college in order to gain extra, or their first qualifications, with over two hundred people already partaking in this opportunity since 2006 (Thomas, 2022), which they can then use to help apply for jobs in the future. Furthermore, with the growing housing crisis, the school has a dedicated team in helping rehome displaced families affected by the crisis, searching for suitable housing. The school is also in partnership with Plant Dewi, which includes weekly sessions for divorced or absent fathers wanting a relationship with their children, and young parents to bond with their child through arts and crafts, sharing food, and gaining confidence, helping the well-being of both parent and child.

To summarise, my observations at bridging sessions, as well as general knowledge of schools in Wales, show that schools are starting to work with their communities more, in many ways, to help with the current difficulties of a post-pandemic world. By introducing policies that help in

teaching, learning, and well-being, such as the availability of food, forest school opportunities, parental involvement, and many more, the community is always supportive of more opportunities to defend against challenges. In conclusion, this knowledge will influence what I will do when I am teaching in a school. Inspired by the professional standards, I plan to set clear expectations about my practice in an ever-adapting world, understanding that differing cultures, religion, and economic status exists, and that no child can learn exactly the same as any other child. I also plan to reflect on my practice if something isn't working for a certain classroom, but lastly I plan to support my colleagues if they are struggling, and attempt to help further their development if possible.

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