

How Opportunities and Challenges in a School's Community Influence Teaching, Learning, and Other Aspects of the School

It is clear that within School X, there are a number of opportunities and challenges, all of which have a notable influence on different aspects within the school. The challenges in School X, which were discussed during my bridging experience, include factors such as being 'time poor', difficulty getting parents involved within the school community due to many of them working full time and having a very small support network of people from outside the school. Despite these challenges, School X also discussed a number of measures they have put into place in order to combat these factors such as parent open days, enabling different local communities to use the school as a venue to build up a bigger network and finding links with the local community in order to provide opportunities for the learners in order to support their education.

These are the overall challenges and opportunities School X faces and puts into place as a whole, however, doesn't include challenges and the effect these have on receiving opportunities for the individual learners within the school. For example, poverty has a major knock on effect on a number of factors, which can be especially harmful for children, and with "more than 1 in 3 children in Wales living in poverty" (McFarlane, 2022, p.g 6) it is essential that schools ensure appropriate measures are put in place to support these learners and their parents/carers. Other challenges for the school community and their learners include putting in the best support available and supplying resources to learners with individual needs, for example, those with ALN, health care needs, disabilities, are from an ethnic minority group or are in difficult family situations, as well as a number of other different factors including statistics from the 2019 PISA tests that can present different challenges which need to be overcome. 2019 PISA tests not only showed that "Wales' school systems [had] been ranked the worst in the UK for the fifth time running" (Wightwick, 2019) but that "54% of pupils in Wales sometimes or always felt miserable" and "63% of pupils in Wales sometimes or always felt worried" (Wightwick, 2019).

School X presented us with a wide number of strategies and techniques they have in place to support these pupils, as well as giving a teachers perspective on how to best support these pupils as well as work alongside their parents. This vast range of support involves catering to individual needs, putting in measures as a whole school and/or implementing certain procedures or equipment in particular year groups or classes to help individual learners.

The challenges and opportunities faced by School X have had a notable impact as a whole school and have affected factors such as teaching, learning and pupil wellbeing.

One particular challenge School X faces is pupils living in poverty. In order to support these learners and their families, School X have set up a breakfast club, a second hand uniform shop within the school, and offer a food bank made up of donations from the local community for parents, where they are able to pick up not only essential food items, but hygiene items such as toothpaste, sanitary towels and shampoo. By putting in steps to challenge some of the difficulties faced by learners living in poverty, this has had a positive impact on teaching, learning and pupil wellbeing. Having breakfast in the morning, especially for learners in school, is absolutely vital. Great Ormond Street Hospital states that "a 12 year-old who skips breakfast has the same brain power of a 70-year-old in the classroom" (2020) and that "children who eat healthy breakfasts are able to solve problems better and can think faster and more clearly". By introducing a whole school breakfast club, School X

eliminates the issue of learners going hungry during the school day and struggling to concentrate and/or retain information, as well as taking the stress off of parents/guardians who are unable to afford to provide their children with breakfast. The introduction of the second hand uniform shop, where parents/guardians are able to donate school uniform their child may have grown out of so they school can sell it, also takes away pressure for parents/guardians, as they are able to buy school uniform for their child for a much cheaper price, or, if still unable to afford uniform, for free. The second hand uniform shop not only helps parents, but the money made from selling the uniforms goes towards the school and is spent on resources in order to benefit the learners within the school. On top of this, ensuring every learner has a matching and correct uniform provides a sense of unity, pride and identity, which can help to support wellbeing. Supporting pupil wellbeing was highlighted as a particularly important priority for School X during my bridging experience, as they had chosen to draw in on statistics within Wales showing that pupil wellbeing needed drastic improvement across the country.

Another way the school has supported pupil wellbeing is through the introduction of Forest School. This is where once a week, either a whole class, or certain individual learners will visit a dedicated area of woodland and are able to explore it independently and with their peers without adult direction or intervention. This is extremely beneficial to the children for a number of reasons. Some of these are: supporting authentic context, giving learners freedom to respond to their environment independently, raising learners' confidence and allowing them to explore and make a mess as well as providing a safe space for them with links to the whole curriculum, among other benefits. A three year study conducting research into the benefits of forest school schools showed that on average, learners who had the opportunity to engage in Forest School had their reading and maths attainment scores both improve by 27% compared to their peers' improved attainment scores of only 22% and 11% in reading and maths respectively (McCree *et al*, 2018). Forest School can also result in overall improved mental health, especially for learners who maybe aren't so successful within the classroom, as it gives them the opportunity to take time out of the classroom to have more freedom and be successful in front of their peers.

Although School X faces challenges within its community, there are lots of opportunities that have come about due to different groups within the community offering experiences and opportunities for its learners. Some of these opportunities include being able to participate in poetry competitions and quizzes, hosted by the local rotary club and having the opportunity to be taught during their PE lessons by the local rugby club or during after school and lunchtime sessions. On top of this, local attractions such as museums and farms allow the school to take learners on school trips to visit. This helps provide an opportunity for learning outside of the classroom as well as supporting authentic context. Helping learners to engage with the curriculum in wider areas helps benefit their school experience and give them the chance to experience activities they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to take part in, which is why School X prioritises their relationship with their local community, and takes advantage of all the opportunities offered within it.

Despite having a wide range of opportunities within the local community, in terms of a close network within the school, School X has an extremely small one. Due to the nature of many of the jobs the parents/guardians of the learners have, it means that the vast majority of parents/guardians are extremely time poor, and are unable to volunteer their time towards the school's Parent and Friends Association (PFA). However, despite this, School X are still able to host a wide range of events which help to raise funds in order to provide more for the school.

Another challenge School X faces, but handles extremely well by adapting their teaching and learning techniques, is catering to learners with ALN. School X works extremely closely not only with the individual learners, but with the learner's parents/guardians. This ensures that the learner's individual needs are met both in school and in their home environment as effectively as possible, and that any routines, language and resources are kept consistent between both environments. This helps the learner to feel understood, and makes sure that the school and classroom environment feels familiar and safe, which is an essential part of making sure learners feel comfortable and happy whilst in school, not just for ALN pupils, but for all.

Overall, whilst School X faces a number of challenges within their school environment, by prioritising learner's wellbeing, being proactive with whole school ideas and prioritising their relationship with the community through engaging with local groups, attractions and societies. School X manages to provide a large amount of opportunity, not only for their learners but for staff, parents and the wider community.

The sense of community within School X and the chances provided for outdoor learning really stood out to me, and this is something I would really like to introduce and/or encourage when in school myself. This is because so much of modern day education is made up of indoor, non collaborative work environments, with a much needed improvement on focus for wellbeing, so I believe that having the opportunity to learn outside of the classroom in a different environment where collaborative work is encouraged not only helps the learners gain more from their lessons, but helps teachers to demonstrate the overarching values and dispositions required by the Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership in order to 'be the best they can be' (Education for Wales, 2018), and provide the best chance for learners to thrive and improve their overall wellbeing whilst in school.

Reference List:

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