Llais y Disgybl yng Nghymru: effaith y pandemig Covid-19

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Pupil Voice in Wales: the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Pupil Voice in Wales: the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Audience   This project was undertaken as part of the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry in Wales. The findings are aimed at Welsh Government, LEAs and educational consortia with a view to supporting schools to further develop their pupil voice activities and enhance the impact of pupil voice.

Overview   Review of pupil voice in Wales and investigation of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on pupil voice activities in schools.

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Action required   The purpose of pupil voice in Wales should be clarified at national level to complement policy frameworks on children's rights, well-being, sustainable development and educational curricula. Learning from the legacies of the pandemic, pupil voice should be strengthened to build resilience and optimise communications with children in future emergencies. Existing and new resources on pupil voice, a children's rights approach to education and human rights education should be collated and made available to practitioners and in ITE. Implementation of pupil voice should be monitored in all educational settings.

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

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Executive Summary

This report responds to research questions about the impact on pupil voice in Wales of the Covid 19 pandemic and examines lessons that can be learned from the experience of school staff and pupils. The research was conducted with a view to informing any review by Welsh Government of how pupil voice can be better supported in the current and likely future environment.

'Pupil voice' for the purposes of this report is an umbrella term commonly used to refer to arrangements to encourage and enable learners in educational settings to take part in some way in decision-making.

The research comprised a desk-based review of relevant literature on pupil voice, the policy context in Wales and what is already known about the impact of lock downs, school closures and other Covid 19-related restrictions on pupil voice activities, followed by empirical work comprising an online survey to which 99 schools in Wales responded. Evidence of positive practices and reflections were collated to inform the report's conclusions and recommendations.

The literature review revealed several policy agendas that are variously identified with or serviced by pupil voice (in and beyond Wales). These include learning skills for citizenship, improved learning and well-being, practising democracy, realising children's rights and embedding whole school rights-based approaches, and promoting human rights education. In Wales, since devolution, children's rights and participation have featured prominently in policy discourse. The pre-pandemic trajectory of pupil voice should be seen in that context, alongside and inter-connected with significant and distinctive policies on educational curricula and the growth of the overarching policy framework on well-being of future generations.

Post-devolution support for children's participation is evident from Welsh Government funding for a children and young people's assembly, Funky Dragon, and then a consultative platform called Young Wales, and the establishment of the Children's Commissioner for Wales whose remit includes representing children's interests to government. From 2018, the Senedd has supported a Welsh Youth Parliament elected by 11 to 17-year-olds in Wales. At local authority level, there is a legal requirement for arrangements enabling children's participation in decision-making. At school level, school councils are a legal requirement. Under well-being of future generations legislation, public service boards are encouraged to engage with children to inform the boards' decision-making. The schools inspectorate for Wales, Estyn, has developed principles and best practice examples on pupil participation.

This wider policy context is important because it offers opportunities to connect pupil voice activities where appropriate with policy conversations at local and national levels. It provides an environment conducive to impact for messages and initiatives generated by children in schools, which research literature suggests is important for the children involved to feel that their efforts are noticed and regarded as worthwhile. Some of the recommendations made in this report are directed at better connectivity between the different levels and types of participation opportunities afforded to children in Wales.

There is no doubt that in Wales as in many other countries, Covid 19-related restrictions disrupted many pupil voice activities. Research studies reflect common concerns about failures to engage with children or conduct child impact assessments when the early emergency measures were put in place. Equally there is evidence of improvement in communication as time went on. Two notable common themes in the literature reviewed are the 'digital divide' and associated inequalities of access to opportunities for learning and participation, and the finding that schools where already there were good practices of participation were more resilient to the disruption and its aftermath.

In Wales, significant efforts were made at national level both by the Welsh Government, assisted by the Children's Commissioner for Wales, and by the Senedd and its committees, to communicate with and listen to children and to learn from their experiences and their views. At the school level, the data collected for this research indicates that while there was disruption to pupil voice activities, this was accompanied by remarkable efforts by some school leaders and staff to find alternative ways to support pupil participation. Although pre-pandemic pupil voice activities were curtailed, some 70% of schools participating in the survey reported that they found ways to 'keep things going' both during lockdowns and on return to in-school restrictions (class 'bubbles').

Research participants describing adaptations that were made all remarked on the rapid up-skilling in use of online technologies that took place in their schools. New ways of engaging with pupils using a range of platforms, surveys, quizzes and social media were found. Whilst good for those who could access it, this needs to be considered alongside the concerns about inequalities in access to online facilities.

School closures and subsequent 'bubble' restrictions were associated with deterioration in skills and confidence amongst pupils returning to school, requiring efforts by teachers to get back to pre-pandemic levels of engagement. At the same time, research participants identified potentially lasting benefits from the adaptations they had had to make, including not only upskilling in deployment of online systems and social media, but also greater collaborative working both within school and with external agencies and communities, opportunities for more diverse engagement, greater focus on well-being of pupils and use of outdoor space, and a renewed or reinvigorated commitment to pupil voice.

Interestingly, some research participants reflected that pupil voice is now seen as part and parcel of what is required by the Curriculum for Wales, galvanised by lessons from the pandemic. One school leader remarked: 'It's never been a better time to be an ethically informed citizen'.

In conclusion, this research suggests that while Covid 19 measures had disruptive effects on pupil voice activities in schools in Wales, there were some positive effects in terms of deployment of different (mainly digital) tools and techniques and increased awareness of the importance of pupil voice as an integral part of design and delivery of the curriculum. While learning lessons for handling of future emergencies involving disruption to normal school routines, it is also a good moment now to articulate more clearly the place and function of pupil voice in implementation of the Curriculum for Wales and in the broader policy context of children's participation.

1 Introduction and Background

This report sets out findings from research on pupil voice in Wales and the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on pupil voice in Wales. The research is aimed at helping Welsh Government to review how pupil voice can be better supported in the current and likely future environment, taking into account wider government policy as well as the impact of the pandemic on schools.

The research questions were as follows:

1. How has the pandemic impacted on pupil participation in schools across Wales?
2. What lessons can be learnt from teachers and pupils on how pupil voice has been effectively engaged during and post pandemic?

The background to the research is the closure of schools in Wales, as in many other places across the world, from early 2020, and continuing restrictions on normal school attendance during the following two years.

The school closures and restrictions might be assumed to have a negative impact on pupil voice. International research undertaken by UNESCO and the Council of Europe (2021) indicates that there has been an overall loss in opportunities and learning on student voice during the pandemic. However, there is currently limited evidence regarding what happened in the delivery of pupil voice during the pandemic in schools across Wales.

Our research was organised in two phases. First, a literature review was conducted on pupil voice generally, on pupil voice in post-devolution Wales specifically, and on what is already known about the impact of the pandemic on children's participation in decision-making. Secondly, empirical research was conducted, deploying an online survey with educators, to learn directly from local experience what were the main challenges to supporting the delivery of pupil voice in Wales during the pandemic. From this data, examples of best practice were collated, evidencing where educators successfully continued to empower children to participate in decision-making in schools.

This report sets out the findings from both phases, followed by recommendations so far as indicated by our analysis.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the essential contribution of each research participant, and the invaluable support provided by members of the research support team at Bangor University.

2 Methodology

2.1 Phase 1 of Research: Literature review

The literature review was aimed at clarifying in the context of this research what 'pupil voice' is, how it forms part of a wider understanding of children's participation in decision-making, and what is known already about the impact on this of Covid 19.

To gain understanding of pupil voice in academic and policy discourse, a rapid review of academic and grey literature was carried out by searching for key words:

> 'pupil voice, 'pupil participation', child participation, 'children's rights', 'UNCRC', 'pupil voice in education', 'children's rights in education', 'children's rights approach to education, 'school councils', 'citizenship education' and 'democracy in schools,' etc.

After reviewing this literature, themes were identified suggesting several different policy agendas served by pupil voice or participation in education.

The next step was to identify the dominant policy agenda serviced by pupil voice in Wales and this was done by conducting a review of law and policy documents on children's participation, children's rights, and education in Wales, since devolution in 1999 up to 2022.

Lastly, a rapid review was conducted to discover what research evidence already exists of the impact of Covid 19 on pupil voice, both within Wales and elsewhere. Key words searched for were:

> 'Covid 19 and children's rights', 'Covid 19 and children's participation in decision making', 'Covid 19 and pupil voice, 'Covid 19 and pupil participation', 'Covid 19 and school councils,' Covid 19 impact on schools', Covid 19 and children's right to be heard', etc.

All steps of the literature review were carried out between March 2022 and October 2022. There was no restriction on the age of the publication, but the general focus was on documents written post devolution. Insights derived from the literature review informed the design of the survey for Phase 2, as explained below.

2.2 Phase 2 of Research: Empirical Research to assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on pupil voice and what lessons can be learned.

This phase of the research required empirical research with educators to consider how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on pupil voice in schools across Wales and what lessons can be learned, thus addressing the research questions:

1. How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on pupil voice in schools across Wales?
2. What lessons can be learned from teachers and pupils on how pupil voice has been effectively engaged during and post pandemic?

2.2.1 Research Design

The research used mixed methods combining quantitative, closed, and qualitative, short, open-ended questions to answer research questions. The online survey was developed, and data collected, using software for which Bangor University has a site license: Online Survey for Teachers (Using Jisc Online Surveys, Link to survey[1]). Survey questions were aimed at gauging the perception of those who facilitate pupil voice within schools of the impact of the pandemic on their work: what is happening, when/to whom, and how, and how this varied during the pandemic and from the period immediately preceding it.

2.2.2 Sample Description

The target population for the study was defined as members of school staff responsible for pupil voice in mainstream primary, middle and secondary schools in Wales.

A systematic sample design with implicit stratification was used for selecting primary, middle and secondary schools out of 1424 schools in Wales. Schools were selected from an ordered list by local authority (Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Isle of Anglesey, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Neath Port Talbot, Newport, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Rhondda Cynnon Taf, Swansea, Vale of Glamorgan, Torfaen and Wrexham), and within local authority by language medium (Dual stream, English medium, English with significant Welsh, Transitional and Welsh medium) and the percentage of pupils in schools eligible for free school meals (eFSM) (mean percentage scores) for 2019/21. Within each school only one person was selected and invited to complete the pupil voice questionnaire.

2.2.3 Survey Procedure

The questionnaires were conducted online with a bilingual email invitation letter sent to the school headteacher in March 2022 by the regional school consortia (GwE, EAS, Mid Wales Partnership, CSC, Neath Port Talbot Partnership), and three follow-up reminders in the form of a Zoom meeting, email and phone call followed. Ninety-nine schools in Wales participated in the pupil voice survey. This represents a response rate of 11.79%. Between March 2022 and April 2022 schools were invited to an online Zoom session to encourage schools to engage with the Collaborative Evidence Network ('CEN') surveys. A follow-up reminder email was then sent to the schools in the form of an email in May 2022. This was sent to the schools via the school consortia and mentioned that the CEN research officers would be contacting schools with a courtesy follow- up reminder call. Between May 2022 and June 2022, the final follow-up reminder phone calls were made to the schools to encourage schools to engage with the CEN surveys.

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[1]Copy of Online Survey

Copy of Welsh Lang Survey

Once a school accepted the CEN project invitation, the survey link for the pupil voice questionnaire was sent to the school headteacher/nominated member of staff to forward on to the pupil voice lead in school (if there was no such position in the school, the school headteacher was asked to complete the survey questionnaire). The survey could be completed in Welsh or English.

The school invitation letters, and follow-up reminders were undertaken as part of other Bangor University CEN school projects.

2.2.4 Statistical Analysis

The on-line survey was conducted alongside other Bangor University-led CEN projects where schools in Wales were selected and invited to other CEN projects. As such we used the practical selection of schools to contact for the pupil voice survey. We used post-stratification techniques, to correct for the unequal selection probabilities and survey non-response, matching the responding dataset to the population dataset on type of school (primary, middle and secondary) and region (area 1 [Ceredigion, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Isle of Anglesey, Powys and Wrexham], and area 2 [Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Carmarthenshire, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Neath Port Talbot, Newport, Pembrokeshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Swansea, Vale of Glamorgan and Torfaen]). The population data on school type and region were obtained from the sample frame, i.e., all the population members (list of all the school names in the target population, including all primary, middle and secondary schools in Wales).

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS software.

Qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis via SPSS software and directed first at the challenges schools faced and secondly at the work done by schools to ensure pupils were listened to.

2.2.5 Limitations

The research only focused on mainstream primary and secondary schools and did not include a focus on special schools or Pupil Referral Units. This would require further research with an online survey better tailored to addressing the requirements of supporting pupil voice in these institutions. Although there were more questions that we could have asked in the survey, keeping it concise meant that we had a good response rate.

Children were not included as participants in this research study. However, the Observatory on the Human Rights of Children, in conjunction with GwE Gogledd Cymru and KESS2 are intending to host a pupil voice summit with children to hear from children their opinions on pupil voice in Wales, the impact of Covid-19 on pupil voice and to discuss the findings of this report.

3   Literature review

What is pupil voice?

'Pupil voice' is an umbrella term commonly used to refer to arrangements to encourage and enable learners in educational settings to take part in some way in decision-making.

A review of academic and grey literature discloses that such arrangements may be put in place for a variety of reasons, or policy objectives:

a.   Learning skills for citizenship (for example, National Foundation for Educational Research (2002); Crick Report (1998); Wyness (2009).
b.   Better learning, child well-being and teaching experiences (for example, Fielding and Ruddock (2002); Halsey et al (2006); Demetriou (2019); Lyle et al (2010); Flutter and Rudduck (2004); Rudduck and McIntyre (2007); Alexander (2017); Anna Freud School of Mental Health (N.D.).
c.   Practising democracy in schools (for example, Flutter (2007); Collins, N.D., Keating and Janmaat (2016); Huddleston (2007); Wyness (2009).
d.   Realising the rights of the child (for example, Noyes (2005); Lundy (2007); Lundy & O'Lynn (2018).
e.   Embedding rights (including participative rights) in whole school approaches (for example Covell and Howe (2005); Sebba and Robinson (2010); Robinson (2014); EHRC (2020).
f.   Learning about human rights and embedding Human Rights Education (HRE) (for example Struthers (2015); Struthers (2021); Lundy and Martinez (2018); EHRC (2020); Robinson et al 2020).

In the above list, a, b, c and f can be seen primarily as to do with the education of the child, with a, c, d and f focused on developing knowledge, skills and attitudes and b. on the quality of the learning experience and the well-being of learners and teachers.

Items d and e reflect an ambition going beyond what a child learns and the relational well-being of school participants. Realising the rights of the child is a much wider policy agenda, serviced by amongst other things, strategies to embed rights in the way schools (and other organisations) are run. As explained in the following section of this literature review, this point has a particular resonance in Wales. An agenda for realising children's rights includes a construction of children as entitled to be regarded as active participants in decision-making on matters affecting them, including, but not limited to, decisions affecting their education and school environment.

Several research studies attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives for pupil voice. Halsey et al (2006) suggest that pupil voice activities with no or little impact in terms of actual change have fewer, or even negative, impacts on children. Edinburgh University and Children in Scotland (2020) and Huddleston (2007) suggest also that a whole school, inclusive approach, going beyond formal structures such as school councils, is more likely to be successful in achieving the aims of pupil voice.

3.1 Pupil Voice in Wales – Policy and legislation

3.1.1 Distinct devolved approaches

Devolution has enabled different approaches to emerge in major policy fields, including education. Children's rights, and adherence to the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ('UNCRC'), gained traction in devolved policy-making, attracting cross-party support and colouring distinctive approaches in several areas including education, social services, youth justice and poverty alleviation (Butler and Drakeford, 2013).

In 2004 the National Assembly for Wales resolved in a plenary resolution that the UNCRC would be the overarching set of principles for all devolved policies on children and young people (National Assembly for Wales 2004). Children's participation in decision-making was one element of the Welsh Government's agenda to promote and respect the rights of children and the UNCRC, supported by early policy documents, such as Rights to Action 2004, with one of the 7 Core Aims (Core Aim 5) having a specific focus on the participation of children (Welsh Assembly Government 2004). Another policy document, Extending Entitlement, also had a specific focus on children's participation in decision making (Welsh Assembly Government 2001).

These policy documents were overarching policy documents, acting as guidance for services that impacted on children, including education. As Lewis et al (N.D p.5) comment:

> 'Therefore, given the centrality of education, teaching and schools in most children's lives, it would be surprising not to find the UNCRC featuring prominently in prescribed curricula, government directions and guidance in Wales.'

The post-devolution development of pupil voice policies and practice needs to be understood in this broader context. Pupil voice has evolved in its own way in Wales. It is significant also that the Education Act 2002 allowed for a separate National Curriculum for England and for Wales, with the Welsh Government responsible for mandating the Wales curriculum.

This shift towards children's rights was exemplified in major strategies in the first two Assembly terms on children's services, child poverty and youth justice, as well as early structural innovations including the creation of the Children's Commissioner for Wales and Welsh Government support for a non-statutory children and young people's assembly known as Funky Dragon (Williams 2013; Croke et al 2021), the introduction of regulations in 2005 to make School Councils compulsory (note school councils are not compulsory in England) [2], and the development of National Participation Standards (Crowley and Skeels 2009). During this period, Welsh

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[2] These required a governing body of every maintained school in Wales (other than a maintained nursery school or a maintained infant school) to establish a school council, the purpose of which is to enable pupils to discuss matters relating to their school, their education and any other matters of concern or interest and to make representations on these to the governing body and the head teacher (Schools Council (Wales) Regulations 2005).

Government developed resources and a website (2008-2014) to help practitioners to understand pupil voice and translate it into practice (Welsh Government, N.D). In 2009, in response to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's Concluding Observations, the Welsh Government published a national action plan on children's rights (Welsh Government, 2009) including a commitment to develop a National Participation Strategy, Regulations and Guidance on pupil participation in formal educational settings for children and young people aged 3-18 years and national training packages for teachers. This did not come to fruition as such, but the following two years saw significant legal and policy developments on children's participation and children's rights in Wales:

- The Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 made a requirement on local authorities in Wales to make arrangements promoting and facilitating children's participation in decisions affecting them.
- 'Pupil Participation – a good practice guide' was published, with a useful list of examples of meaningful participation at different levels at school (Welsh Government 2011).
- The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 ('the 2011 Measure') imposed on Welsh Ministers, when exercising their functions, a duty to have due regard to the requirements of the UNCRC. This covers all functions, thus including Welsh Ministers' functions relating to education, learning and teaching, and schools.
- The 2011 Measure also contained a specific duty to raise awareness of the UNCRC amongst the public generally, including children.
- Under the 2011 Measure, Welsh Ministers must make and report on a scheme setting out their arrangements for delivering on their due regard duty. In the subsequent Welsh Government Children's Scheme (Welsh Government 2014) children's rights impact assessments are a key part of these arrangements.

3.1.2 Rights, participation, education and pupil voice

Successive Welsh Governments supported efforts to feed young people's views into Welsh Government policy-making, first by supporting the charity 'Funky Dragon' and later a project called 'Young Wales' managed by Children in Wales (Croke and Williams 2018). In addition, part of the remit of the Children's Commissioner for Wales is to engage with children and represent their standpoint to Welsh Government. On the parliamentary side, there is the Welsh Youth Parliament established in 2018 and supported by the Llywydd and Senedd. It is notable that educational matters were selected amongst the priorities of both cohorts to date, with the current Welsh Youth Parliament having chosen to focus on as 'Education and the New Curriculum' (discussed below) (Welsh Youth Parliament 2022).

These structures offer potential for engagement between pupil voice in schools and national conversations between government and children. However, concern has been expressed about the limited interface between children's voice in schools and local and national opportunities (Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group 2020). It would be very useful if the forthcoming evaluation of the Welsh Youth Parliament and an evaluation of Young Wales, could offer insights on this issue. As reported by Croke, there are other country examples that successfully link pupil participation in schools to national youth parliaments (Croke 2016). It is notable that the Welsh Government Children's Scheme Compliance Report 2018 – 20, (Welsh Government 2021a.)

when discussing participation and committing to review its national strategy on participation, does not mention pupil voice as part of the structures or initiatives that support participation.

Likewise, the connection between pupil voice in schools and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 ('WFGA 2015'), is not explicit, at least at the level of national policy discourse. The Act places a duty on all public bodies to carry out sustainable development and improve and achieve economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being. All public bodies must ensure that when making decisions they take into account the impact they could have on people living in Wales in the future (WFGA 2015). As part of the activity to deliver on the 7 Well-Being Goals undertaken by Public Service Boards across Wales, children's participation should be routine (Croke et al 2021). The Future Generations Commissioner and the Children's Commissioner for Wales worked jointly to produce guidance for public service boards under the Act on engaging with children to inform the work of the boards. (Children's Commissioner for Wales and Future Generations Commissioner 2018) However, there has been no evaluation to date regarding how far children are being effectively heard in these processes, and no explicit connection has been made with pupil voice opportunities in schools.

Meanwhile, in education-focused developments Welsh Government (2015a) published the Successful Futures report, which identifies four key purposes for the curriculum, to help all children and young people become:

1. Ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives.
2. Enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
3. Ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world, ready to be citizens of Wales and the world.
4. Healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

Meaningful and purposeful pupil participation was intended to be a strong feature of the new curriculum that was under development.

In 2016, a thematic report entitled Pupil Participation Best Practice Guide was published by Estyn (2016) which explored the characteristics of schools with strong pupil participation and identified the contribution it can make to school improvement as well as the benefits to children and young people themselves. Estyn (2016) reported that the majority of schools across Wales, were succeeding in supporting and encouraging pupil participation practice. The main findings of the report indicated that pupil participation is strong in schools where defined characteristics are present.

The report also noted that between September 2013 and July 2016, nearly all schools that had been inspected, complied with the School Council Regulations 2005 (Estyn 2016). Estyn (2016) reported that school councils make a valuable contribution to improving the school learning environment and that pupils' views are taken into account and influence decisions. From their pupil questionnaires conducted before inspecting education settings, they found that learners felt respected by staff and that staff listen to their views and also make changes based on their suggestions (Estyn 2016).

This positive assessment from Estyn in 2016 gives very helpful insights as to the critical components of successful pupil participation in the education context in Wales. The report also details best practice examples across schools in Wales.

Estyn's (2018 -2019 p.33) annual report stated:

> 'In recent years, schools in Wales have strengthened their commitment to the [UNCRC], with increasing numbers using it to underpin their work to promote excellence, equity and wellbeing. As part of this work, they are giving pupils a more influential voice in decisions about their education, from choosing a learning activity through to agreeing the individual support they will receive or shaping school policies. Around nine-in-ten pupils in key stage 2 feel that teachers and other adults in school listen to them and care about what they think about the school. However, this reduces to around seven-in-ten pupils in key stage 3 and to around a half of pupils in key stage 4. In a few primary schools and in a majority of secondary schools, 'pupil voice' groups are directed too much by adults. In these schools, despite opportunities for participation, pupils are not involved enough in decision-making about core aspects of school life, including aspects of teaching and learning'.

This echoes findings in the Children's Commissioner's 2018, Right Way Education Survey that showed that only 42% of young people in secondary schools felt that they could take part in decisions as compared to children in other settings, primary schools (72%) and special education schools (74%) (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018). It likewise chimes with earlier assessments in the Wales NGO Alternative Report and the UK Children's Commissioners reports, that pupil participation can be inconsistent across education settings in its practical application across Wales (Croke and Williams 2015; UK Children's Commissioners 2015).

The Children's Commissioner has supported the promotion of pupil voice and developed guidance for a child rights approach to education. Since the development of the original 'The Right Way' a children's rights approach for public bodies (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2016), the Children's Commissioner for Wales has produced a guide focused on a children's rights approach to education.   As stated in the education guide (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2017 p.10).

> 'Children's rights should be at the core of the whole setting, planning and delivery.'

The guide sets out practical objectives for educators on how to implement a children's right approach in accordance with each of the 5 principles of a child rights approach. Some of the practical objectives are directly relevant to the implementation of pupil participation and the Children's Commissioner for Wales includes some best practice examples from education settings across Wales.

The Commissioner has also carried out further research to learn how children could maximise their voice through secondary school councils. The key findings of her 2021 report 'How to maximise young people's voices through secondary school councils' were:

- School councils are valued and are seen as important across school settings.
- Young people in secondary schools find school councils less valuable than children and young people in other school settings.
- Young people in secondary schools feel less able to participate than children and young people in other settings.
- Effective participation supports and enables young people's wellbeing.
- Young people with protected characteristics don't always feel they have equal opportunities to participate.
- Young people that are less academically or socially confident don't have equal opportunities to participate.
- Many young people feel that their school council does not link to a wider structure of participation and operates in isolation from the rest of the school community.
- Pupils are not always chosen for the school council in a way that is perceived as fair nor in a way that is in line with regulations.
- Many governing bodies are not regularly sharing decision making with school councils and not all secondary school governing bodies follow regulations around Associate Pupil Governors.
- Young people in secondary schools feel less able to take part in decision making about their learning than those in other settings.

The report presents helpful case studies from education settings across Wales that identify where best practice exists in relation to secondary school councils. It recommends a 'great school council' in accordance with the 5 principles of The Right Way (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2021). The Children's Commissioner has also published:

- Top tips for a great school council written with young people. (Children's Commissioner for Wales N.D. a.)
- Participation: How? What? Why? A Guide for teachers. (Children's Commissioner for Wales N.D. b.)
- Make a difference – a young person's guide to taking action.

More recently Estyn (N.D) have also published their principles for an effective School Council or Pupil Group using the evidence they have collated from their inspection reports. This also recognizes the challenge of representativity noted above, and recommends, that 'pupil representatives are from diverse groups that represent the whole community across all year groups' (Estyn N.D). Hafod primary school has also been noted as excellent case study example of an 'inclusive ethos and a culture that promotes pupil participation'. (Estyn 2020). This example also asserts the importance of schools that embrace a rights based approach to education.

Wales is in the process of major reform of the education system, with legislation that supports children with additional learning needs (Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018) (ALN) and also a new curriculum for learners aged 3-16 years (Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021). The new curriculum has been co-constructed with practitioners, its development informed by 'school autonomy in determining curricular content, child-centred pedagogy and a focus on so called "21st Century skills"' (Knight et al 2022). The Welsh Government guidance on the new Curriculum reinforces the importance of the ALN legislation, explaining that the legal framework established by this Act plays a crucial role in

enabling the curriculum to deliver strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and well-being (Welsh Government 2022a). The ALN Act (Section 6) also places a duty on persons exercising functions under the Act to have due regard to the views, wishes, and feelings of the child.

The Curriculum and Assessment Act 2021 (Section 64) includes the promotion and learning of children's human rights with due regard to be given to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.Welsh Government states, (Welsh Government 2022 a)

> 'In designing, adopting or implementing a curriculum, section 64 of the Act also places a duty on schools, settings, and providers of EOTAS (Education other than at school) including PRUs to promote knowledge and understanding of Part 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, among those who provide teaching and learning.'

The guidance also acknowledges that a key principle of the approach is to ensure that children and young people participate in decisions about their learning and their wider school experience, stating:

> 'Learners should experience their rights through their education and develop a critical understanding of how their educational experience supports their rights. Schools and settings can develop this experience by taking a children's rights approach. A key principle of this approach is the rights of children and young people to participate in decisions about their learning and their wider school experience (Welsh Government 2022a.).'

The guidance also focuses on involving learners directly in the designing and co-construction of their curriculum suggesting the following steps.

> 'Enabling learners to make choices about what and how they learn.
>
> Collecting qualitative feedback after learning experiences, which informs ongoing curriculum design.
>
> Considering learners' perspectives on a daily basis in the classroom through participatory pedagogy.
>
> Involving learners in setting priorities for the curriculum and for learning content.
>
> Ensuring that resources are identified to support participation.
>
> Ensuring that consultation, analysis of learners' views and feedback are included as steps in the curriculum design and evaluation process.
>
> Ensuring that feedback on the outcomes of learner voice contributions are given to learners and staff and that this is factored into the timescales for curriculum design.

Ensuring that learners are informed about the school's process of curriculum design in an accessible language and format and that they know what opportunities there are to get involved.'

The current state of law and policy, and structures in Wales on children's rights and well-being of future generations, appear highly supportive of pupil voice. Children's participation is a theme running through Welsh law reform on children's rights, disability rights and ALN, and this provides both scope and opportunity to contextualise and enhance pupil voice.

3.2 Covid 19 and Children's Participation in Decision-Making

3.2.1 Children's participation in national decision-making

There is a large amount of research evidence across many countries about the impact of Covid-19 emergency measures on education settings, with one of the most significant impacts of the Covid-19 emergency measures globally being the closure of schools. The major education system reforms referred to in the above section have been implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic when education settings saw a shift to emergency remote teaching. From March 2020 onwards, education settings had to adapt to online learning, teaching and assessment in Wales and internationally (OECD 2021, UNESCO 2021). Of great concern was children who were already vulnerable. The effective withdrawal of school as a safe sanctuary from abuse in the home kept some children in situations of vulnerability with limited opportunity to access help, (Croke and Hoffman 2021) although in Wales and other countries, as the pandemic progressed, education institutions were kept open for the most vulnerable pupils.

School closures, however, created a digital divide whereby some children were not able to access devices/broadband to support their online learning, exacerbating existing inequalities in educational attainment. Closures also reduced children's opportunities to play and meet up with friends (Council of Europe 2021; Eurochild 2020; Croke and Hoffman 2021). The negative impacts of emergency measures and school closures on children's rights are reported in detail by research undertaken by the Observatory on the Human Rights of Children, for the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (Croke and Hoffman 2021). This research reviewed the impact of Covid-19 Emergency Measures on children's rights across 32 ENOC member states. Of the children's ombudspersons who received complaints, 76% noted an increase in complaints to their offices during the height of the pandemic. Negative impacts were noted on education rights, mental health, violence against children, children's right to play, to an adequate standard of living and contact with families. Indeed, negative impacts were reported on all thematic areas of children's rights (as defined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child), including education. The research emphasised the negative effects on children with additional vulnerabilities and the exacerbation of existing inequalities.

Key findings of the research regarding children's participation were:

'Children were not treated as a specific audience for the purposes of consultation, or the dissemination of information about the pandemic.

Children were treated as objects of the emergency measures rather than as participants in their making' (Croke & Hoffman 2021 p.5).

This is reinforced by a statement from the Council of Europe that children were the 'least likely group to be consulted or to otherwise play a role in the decision-making behind these measures' (Council of Europe 2021).   Lundy et al's (2021) global study also reported that only 20% of children felt that their governments were listening to them when making policy decisions about how to manage the Covid-19 crisis.   As Lundy et al (2021 p.278) expressed, children:

'raised their concern with the lack of willingness from their governments in taking their perspective into account when making decisions about school closures, and how to ensure their access to their education online.'

Children in the study also communicated their concerns regarding governments lack of willingness to talk to them directly or to provide them with information that was child friendly (Lundy et al 2021). Another study undertaken in 20 countries by Larkins also reported that there was little evidence of children influencing public sector decision making (Larkins 2020).

42% of Child Ombudspersons in the ENOC research reported government failure to take account of children's rights in initial emergency measures, but 69% said that increasingly they were taken into account in subsequent decisions. However, only a minority of jurisdictions in the ENOC research carried out Children's Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) on decision-making regarding the development of Emergency Measures, including measures affecting schools. In the jurisdictions that did conduct CRIA, only a minority included consultation with children (Croke and Hoffman 2021). An important component of an effective CRIA is that children are consulted (ENOC 2020).

As one Children's Commissioner commented:

'Decision-makers should have engaged with children and considered their views throughout the decision-making process, yet children's views were at times completely absent from decision-making.'

Decisions regarding school closures/openings and Covid-19 school mitigation strategies were made across jurisdictions, for the most part without consideration of children's views (Croke & Hoffman 2021). This is despite the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stating that children should be included in all decisions that impact on them even during times of emergency or crisis, or their aftermath (UN Committee 2012). Furthermore, in April 2020, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child advised governments to focus on 11 points to protect Children's Rights. Number 11 was: 'Provide opportunities for children's views to be heard and considered in decision making processes on the pandemic (OHCHR 2020 p.34).

3.2.2 Student Voice during the pandemic

A Council of Europe and UNESCO (2021) study on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student voice, reported in Europe, Middle East and North Africa, the majority of young people lost out on opportunities to have their voice heard and to learn competences to assert their rights. One third of teachers said that students

were never given an opportunity to participate in decision making during lockdown. Community engagement and social action projects were badly affected (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2021). 52% of formal governance structures such as school councils were suspended. Furthermore, school councils were more likely to be stopped during the pandemic in schools with a higher number of socio-economically disadvantaged students. Disadvantaged students did not have the same opportunities because of their home environment and limited digital access. Also, slightly more school councils were suspended in state schools as compared to private schools (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2021).

Practices such as online quizzes and class polls to promote student voice increased with the transition to remote teaching and a range of case studies demonstrate that some schools were creative in devising opportunities for their students. However, transition of student voice activities to the digital environment was considered by teachers to be one of necessity rather than one that they would choose. The teachers were aware of the digital divide that negatively impacted disadvantaged pupils who did not have access to technology. Furthermore, online communication was challenging for many students and inequalities arose through the dominance of sub-groups of peers leading student voice activities. Interestingly, the report notes that the success of student voice was dependent on pupil's already existing 'real world' bonds. It was also found that schools rarely used digital technology to involve children in school governance decisions.

The Council of Europe and UNESCO (2021) study reported that the most resilient schools, even in the event of the pandemic, that continued student voice projects were schools that:

- Already had access to reliable technology and high-speed digital infrastructure.
- Pupils with home environments who had access to private space, reliable connections, support in addressing technological issues and encouragement to take part in student voice activities.
- Schools with the strongest civic cultures, with students used to giving their opinions, teachers who were used to delivering student voice activities and had good links to community organisations.
- Charismatic, committed and enthusiastic leaders (usually teachers, or outstanding students).
- Strong pre-existing relationships between teachers and students.

The study demonstrated that:

> 'Successful student voice projects do not arise in a crisis, but rather are more resilient to the crisis drawing on remembered emotional bonds from a close classroom community, with the expectation that online activities will in time reconnect to the "real life" social world (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2021 p. 19).'

The study reflected however that there had been an overall loss in opportunities and learning on student voice during the pandemic and this must not continue into the recovery period, and that in particular disadvantaged students must be supported to speak out (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2021).

3.2.3 Wales-based response and children's participation in decision making during the pandemic

If we consider the Wales-based response, at the beginning of the pandemic, there was limited involvement of children in decision making regarding opening/closing schools or mitigation strategies. However, the Children's Commissioner for Wales (CCfW N.D), developed a Coronavirus Information Hub for children and in May 2020 also designed an online survey to consult children for their views on their experience of the pandemic (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2020/2021).

24,000 children participated in the survey that was disseminated by the CCfW, Welsh Government, Children in Wales and the Welsh Youth Parliament. (The online survey was repeated in January 2021 with nearly 20, 000 children). The views of children were reported by CCfW to have influenced governmental decision making (Croke 2022).

For example, in the June/July 2020 phased return to schools, there was a specific focus on supporting Year 6 primary pupils, which was directly informed by the survey findings, as this age group reported several concerns. This was able to be done by CCfW sharing early survey findings with Welsh Government, even prior to any report publication (Croke 2022).

Two Q&A sessions were also arranged with the Welsh Government Minister for Education and young people, regarding school assessments. These came because of the positive engagement with the CCfW on the survey project. Direct communication to exam candidates by Welsh Government (with CCfW advice and input), and by Qualifications Wales, were inspired by these engagement events. There were also press conferences for young people and a young person's petition was taken into account by the Welsh Parliament so that graduation was not dependent on exams (Croke 2022).

As the pandemic progressed, the CCfW reported that children's rights impact assessments were used to influence Welsh Government Cabinet decision making and these assessments drew on a wide range of evidence, including children's views and experiences from the surveys with children. The CCfW commented that:

> 'Welsh Government position has sometimes been that there is 'not time to consult', however children have been consulted through surveys and Ministerial Q&As for example, which has influenced CRIAs (Croke 2021).

The Senedd Children and Young People and Education Committee also consulted with children as part of their Inquiry into Covid-19 and recommended that Welsh Government undertake CRIA (Senedd Children and Young People Committee, 2020). This presents further evidence of a strong parliamentary committee continuing to consider children's views and their rights as part of their scrutiny role during the pandemic. The ENOC report emphasised the importance of scrutiny by children's commissioners'/ombudspersons, parliamentary committees and NGOs as key to minimising negative impacts of emergency measures (Croke & Hoffman 2021).

In January 2022, representatives from the CCfW's Youth Panel, who are also a part of a network of young people from across Europe called ENYA, presented findings

from their research on how to respond to future pandemics, to the First Minister (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2022).

However, there did not appear to be a children's rights impact assessment or consultation with children on the January 2022 decision to keep schools open in Wales (Welsh Government N.D) and this reflects the ENOC research and earlier research by Hoffman that often the use of CRIAs and consultation with children can be both ad hoc and inconsistent (Hoffman, 2020; Croke and Hoffman 2021).

While it is critical that schools are only closed as a last resort (WHO Europe 2021) it is essential that Welsh Government demonstrates that they have adhered to their duty to have due regard to the UNCRC under the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 and as per their commitment in the Children's Scheme, openly and transparently publish their children's rights analysis regarding their decision-making. The experience of the pandemic suggests that participation of children in governmental decision-making needs to become better embedded, so that children are included in all decisions that impact on them.

A Public Health Wales (2022 p.17) report is conclusive of Covid 19's impact on the mental health and well-being on children, stating:

> The COVID-19 pandemic, and response measures to control the transmission of the virus have majorly impacted and disrupted the familial, social, economic and educational lives of children and young people in Wales and through these the key protective factors for mental wellbeing. A number of groups have been identified as being at higher risk of negative impacts.

This confirmed the findings of the ENOC (2021) research that the pandemic has had negative effects on children with additional vulnerabilities and the exacerbation of existing inequalities. A recommendation of the Public Health Wales Report (2022 p.11) is to:

> **Listen to and value the views, priorities, and experiences of young people** and give young people the opportunity to share their stories and experiences of the pandemic. Ensure active participation and engagement of young people in the design and delivery of the ongoing pandemic response, education, and interventions to support recovery.
>
> In future emergencies strengthen the identification and mitigation of impacts on mental health and wellbeing and children and young people, using tools such as MWIA and Children's Right Impact Assessments (CRIA).
>
> In future emergencies provide mechanisms to ensure that the **voice and views of young people on how the emergency situation is impacting their lives** is heard and that young people are actively engaged in the development of policy, interventions, information and communications.

3.2.4 At the school level

Most recently in an evaluation undertaken by Estyn (2022), the most significant impacts of the pandemic on school children were highlighted. These were impacts on children's learning, such as a noted deterioration in literacy and numeracy skills and in secondary schools, children's fluency and inclination to speak Welsh. The report suggests that the long-term problem in relation to the gap in performance between poorer pupils and their peers, has arguably been made worse as a result of the pandemic. The Estyn report also comments on the variable approach to the implementation of the new curriculum across schools.

The Estyn 2022 report has noted a concerning impact of the pandemic on the persistent absence amongst many pupils and many children not returning to school since the pandemic. However, the report also acknowledges that many schools have improved their communication with families during lockdowns and this has led to a better understanding of the challenges that communities connected to schools were facing.

In relation to well-being, schools and other education settings play a critical role in the development of the child as well as a sense of societal connectedness (Langford et al 2011). Lockdowns and home confinement were reported to exacerbate children's mental health difficulties (PHW 2022, Croke and Hoffman 2021; Senedd Children and Young People Committee 2020). Through continuing virtual contact and modification of teaching practices, some schools attempted to mitigate some of the harms caused by the pandemic (Office of National Statistics N.D).

The Estyn (2022) report noted an increase in demand for well-being and mental health support. The Chief Inspector of Education commented that this was an area where schools responded strongly with many secondary schools in particular striving to offer strong support for pupils with specific emotional, health and social needs (Estyn 2022). Some schools were recognised as rolling out more-wide ranging provision.

There has also been research conducted in Wales to learn about the impact of the pandemic on children aged 10 -11 years of age's mental health and life satisfaction. This research, 'reported a high degree of school connectedness before and after the pandemic, with no evidence of change in ratings in teacher relationships, pupil relationships or pupil involvement in school life' (Moore et al 2022). This is a positive finding that children of this age group seemed to feel supported and connected to school and Moore et al (2022) argue that this may have prevented a steeper increase in mental health difficulties.

During the pandemic the Whole School Approach to Mental Health (Welsh Government 2021b) began its process of implementation and there has seemingly been an emphasis less on 'catching up' and more on supporting children's emotional recovery from the pandemic, e.g., see Welsh Government programmes Summer of Fun and Winter of Fun, part of a wider set of programmes under 'Renew and Reform'. There was also the introduction of the 'renew and reform' recovery plan published in July 2021 which sets out how the Welsh Government planned to help the education system recover following the Covid-19 pandemic (Welsh Government 2021c) with the top priority being a focus on the well-being of children. The Chief

Inspector of Estyn (2022) has however warned that there will be a growing demand for emotional and mental health support, and this will be challenging for increasingly stretched schools and indeed other services.

The Welsh Government communicated strongly during the pandemic, regarding the importance of children's participation in their school/education setting, a statement was given by the Welsh Government (2020) on participation:

> Participation has important links with well-being and serves to meet children's rights to participate in decision-making in their school or setting. It is important, therefore, that schools and settings facilitate the continuation of participation arrangements. Schools and settings will need to consider a range of arrangements for facilitating continued participation….).

There is, however, currently limited research regarding the impact of Covid-19 or the detail of how and if children were effectively involved in the decision-making that affected them at school level and if their views were taken into account.

3.3 Summary of findings of literature review

Several agendas were identified as serving pupil voice, however, realising the rights of the child was identified as the most prominent, common element in the review of the literature and the law and policy environment for pupil voice in Wales. Despite this, the connection with human rights generally, and human rights education, is not always made clear. The Curriculum and Assessment Act 2021 and associated guidance is noted as a clear opportunity for taking forward a reinvigoration of pupil voice. However, other important agendas for driving forward pupil voice developments, such as embedding rights in whole school approaches, teacher training/CPD and local/national governmental decision-making will require the development of policy that fall outside of the curriculum.

From the review of policy and legislation in the Welsh context, it emerges that there are several labels for 'pupil voice' (e.g., 'Pupil Voice', 'Student Voice', 'Learner Voice', 'Pupil Participation') and also various definitions as to what this means for education. This is reinforced by recent research undertaken by Murphy et al in 2021 with Foundation Phase teachers in Wales who shared different understandings of the notion and enactment of participation as it relates to the children they teach. The review of policy and legislation also illustrated that there has been a consistent move towards and also a commitment made in the Welsh Government's Children's Scheme Compliance Report (Welsh Government 2018-2020 p.420) to develop 'a revised participation strategy' but that such a strategy does not appear yet to exist, or if it exists, to be readily accessible.

The review also indicated that resources on pupil participation are fragmented and difficult to find. Welsh Government no longer supports a collation of resources and guidance for educators that were supported by the pupil voice website between 2008 and 2014. The Children's Commissioner for Wales and Estyn have developed resources that are helpful in advising on best practice. However, there does not seem to be a coherent monitoring framework for monitoring the implementation of pupil voice across Wales.

In relation to children's participation in decision-making during the pandemic, the review demonstrated that most children were not consulted at the start of the pandemic on decisions that affected them (e.g., school closures). However, several agencies (including Welsh Government) spearheaded positive work to ensure that children's right to be heard in national decision-making was respected. At the school level, the Council of Europe and UNICEF (2021) study in relation to student voice, reported that most young people lost out on their opportunity to be heard at school level. It was also recognised that student voice was more successfully continued where it was already embedded as part of the school ethos before the pandemic.

These are all important findings in relation to promoting the development of pupil voice in the Covid-19 recovery period in Wales. The review identified that there has been no research regarding the impact of Covid-19 on pupil voice at the school level in Wales, hence the importance of the empirical research discussed in Section 4 to develop further understanding regarding supporting pupil voice in the post Covid-era.

The next phase of this research aimed to learn whether pupil voice activities were negatively impacted by the pandemic. It also collates examples of best practice, where schools successfully continued to empower children to participate in decision making, yielding valuable lessons for future pandemics.

4 Analysis of empirical findings

4.1 Online Survey

As outlined in Section 2.2, educators were invited to respond to a short online survey regarding the impact of Covid 19 on pupil voice activities in school settings. The analysis identifies whole cohort responses and responses broken down by school type, (i.e., primary and secondary), and region (i.e., GWE and Mid Wales Partnership schools [North and Mid Wales] and Central South Consortium, Education Achievement Service, Partneriaeth, Neath Port Talbot schools [South West and East Wales]).

As part of the on-line survey there was opportunity to add additional comments in response to two open-ended questions. From these responses, qualitative evidence was gathered to add context to the quantitative findings.

The survey asks participants to reflect on a period of time from pre-pandemic, through to the pandemic, with Covid-19 lockdown when schools were closed, to schools reopening with the restrictions of class and year bubbles. (As indicated in Methodology Section above, n = 99 in all of the figures outlined below).

4.1.1 Participative Activities/Pupil Voice Pre-Pandemic

Question 1 of the survey asked the research participants what kind of participative /pupil voice activities happened in school pre-pandemic. The question asked the participants to differentiate between formal and informal participative activities. 'Formal' meaning within structures such as school councils or committees and 'informal' meaning stand-alone projects or activities supportive of pupil voice at class or other group level but outside of formal structures. See Figures 1, 2, and 3 below.

Fig 1, Pre pandemic, what kinds of participative activities / Pupil Voice happened in your school?(Q1)

Legend: All Schools

Fig 2, Pre pandemic, what kinds of participative activities / Pupil Voice happened in your school? (Q1)

Legend: GwE & Mid, CSC, EAS NPT

Fig 3 , Pre pandemic, what kinds of participative activities / Pupil Voice happened in your school? (Q1)
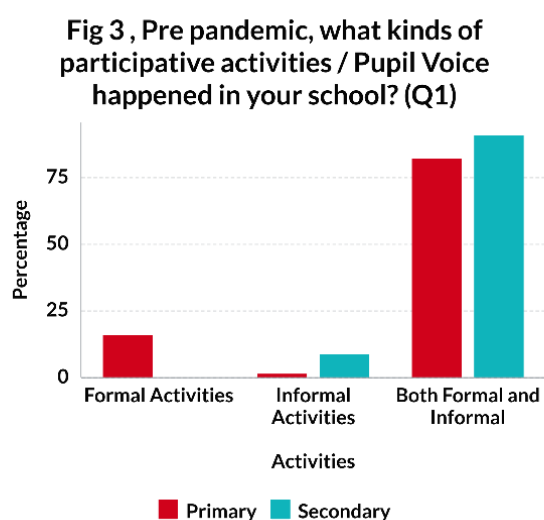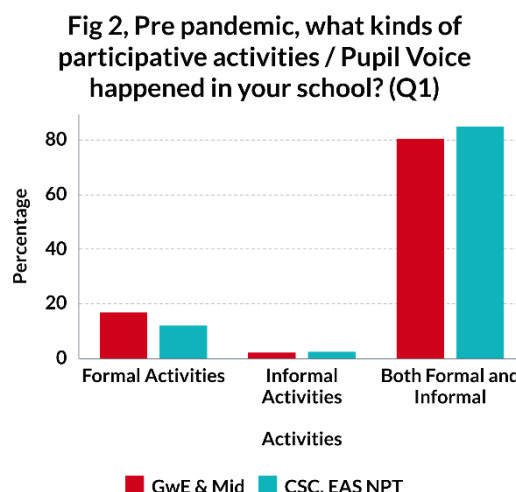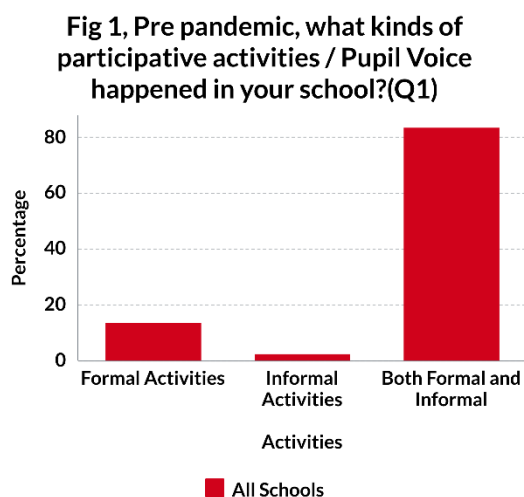

Legend: Primary, Secondary

Figure 1 above illustrates that in 80%+ of the schools that responded to the survey a combination of both formal and informal participative/pupil voice activities were being delivered before the pandemic. There is little difference between schools' facilitation of participative activities in North/Mid and South Wales and between primary and secondary (See Figures 2 and 3).

It is worth noting that there were no secondary schools declaring that they delivered only formal activities and that almost no primary schools declared that they delivered only informal activities (See Figure 3).

4.1.2 The impact of lockdowns/isolation periods on Participative Activities/Pupil Voice

Question 2 in the on-line survey considered what participative activities/pupil voice activities were curtailed or limited during lockdowns/ isolation periods. Participants who declared they delivered both formal and informal activities in Figures 2 and 3 above, were able to decide whether either or both types of participative activity were curtailed during lockdown. Figures 4, 5, 6 (below) show which activities were curtailed or limited by the lockdown and isolation periods. The Figures illustrate that

all types of participative activities were curtailed or limited. Again, there is no marked difference in North/Mid and South percentages.

Fig 4 , Which of these activities were curtailed or limited by the lockdowns / isolation periods?(Q2)
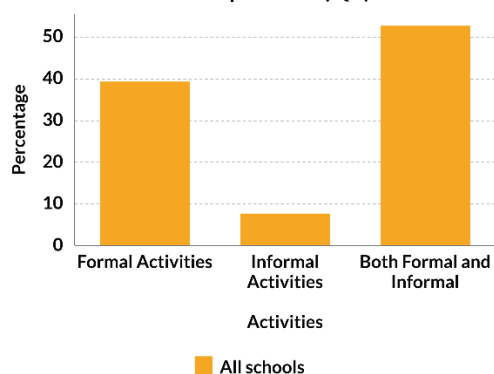

Fig 5, Which of these activities were curtailed or limited by the lockdowns / isolation periods? (Q2)
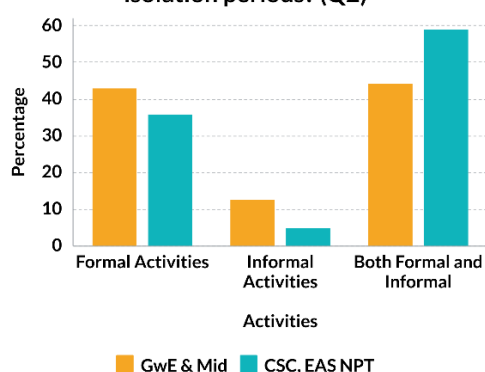

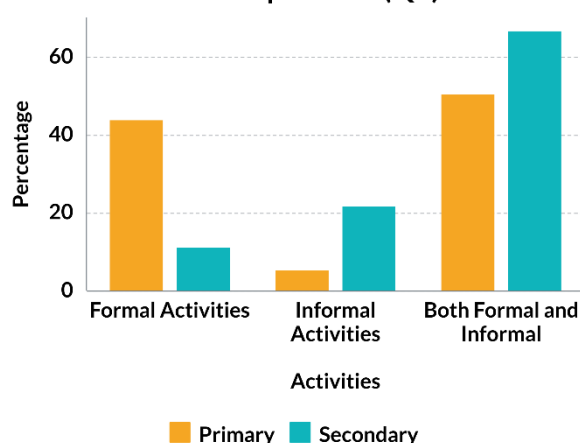**Fig 6 , Which of these activities were curtailed or limited by the lockdowns / isolation periods? (Q2)**

Figure 4 shows that across all schools, formal activities (almost 40%) were more affected than informal activities (less than 10%). Figure 5 shows that once again formal activity is more affected than informal and that this is consistent in both North/Mid and South Wales. Figure 6 shows that formal activities were more significantly curtailed in primary schools as compared to secondary schools. This may be due to primary school aged children not being so well equipped to respond immediately to the demands of online activities and the informal activity limitation in the secondary schools may well be due to a more formal online regime – meaning that opportunities for informal discussions and feedback may have been more limited.

Figure 6 also shows that 50% of primary schools and 67% of secondary schools reported that both formal and informal participative activities were curtailed. Given that pre-pandemic over 80% of primary schools and 90% of secondary schools were

conducting both formal and informal pupil voice activities we can see the extent of the impact of the lockdown.

4.1.3 Continuing participative/pupil voice activities during the lockdowns/isolation periods

Question 3 in the online survey asked educators if they found ways to keep participative activities/pupil voice going during the lockdowns/isolation periods. See Figures 7, 8, 9 below.

Fig 7, Did you find ways of keeping things going during the lockdowns / isolation periods? (Q3)
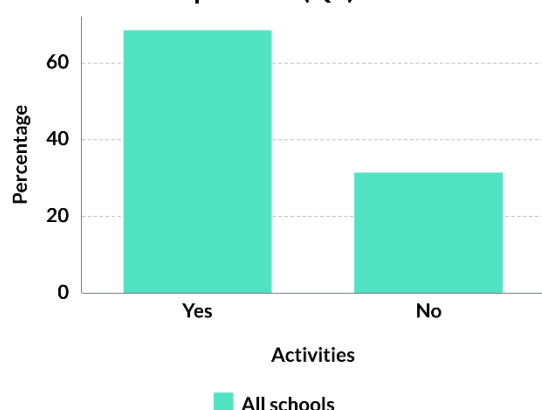
Fig 8, Did you find ways of keeping things going during the lockdowns / isolation periods? (Q3)
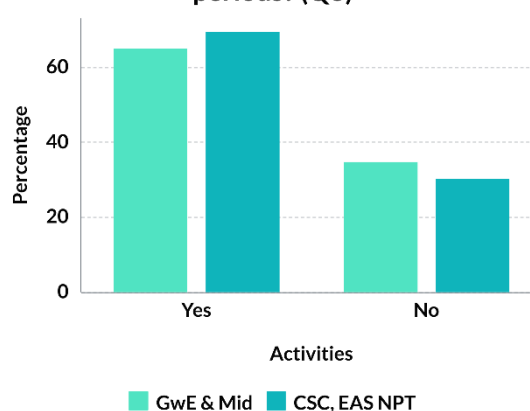
Fig 9 , Did you find ways of keeping things going during the lockdowns / isolation periods? (Q3)
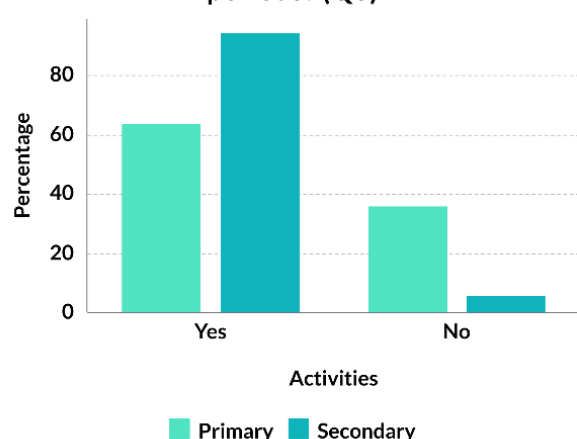
The responses to question 3 are particularly interesting in light of the responses to question 2. Although we have seen that across Wales and in both primary and secondary education sectors, respondents reported curtailment of their ability to deliver participative activities/pupil voice activities, almost 70% of schools reported that they found ways of keeping things going during the lockdown. Although we do not have evidence, an interpretation of this may be, that if respondents had not found

ways to keep things going that there would have been a far greater curtailment of participative activities/pupil voice activities reported in question 2 above.

4.1.4 Participative/Pupil Voice Activities that were curtailed or limited by the regulations (year/class bubbles) that were placed on schools when they returned to the classroom.

Question 4 asked educators whether participatory activities/pupil voice activities were curtailed or limited by the regulations (year / class bubbles) that were placed on schools when they returned to the classroom. This question was asked to ascertain how the later restrictions affected participative activities/pupil voice activities. See Figures, 10, 11, 12.

Fig 10 , Which of these activities were curtailed or limited by the regulations (year / class bubbles) that have been placed on schools since returning to the classroom? (Q4)

Fig 11 , Which of these activities were curtailed or limited by the regulations (year / class bubbles) that have been placed on schools since returning to the classroom? (Q4)

Fig 12 , Which of these activities were curtailed or limited by the regulations (year / class bubbles) that have been placed on schools since returning to the classroom? (Q4)

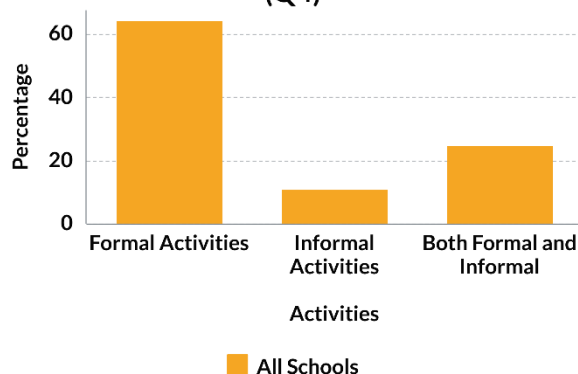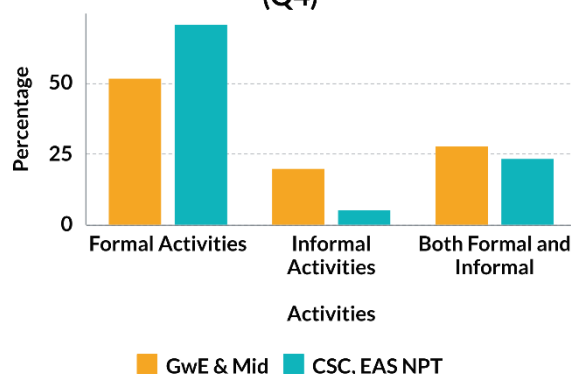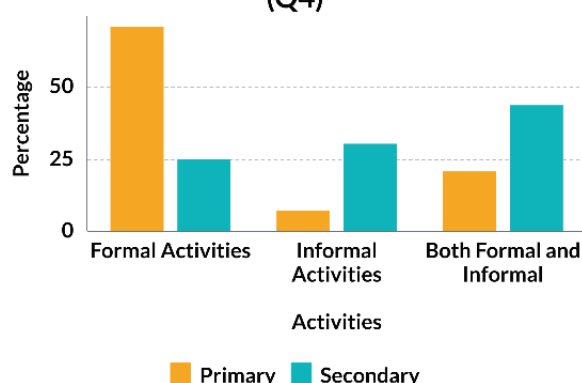Figures 10, 11, 12 illustrate that once again, formal activities were curtailed to a greater extent with almost 65% of all schools surveyed stating that formal activities were curtailed. Evidence from the qualitative responses (see below) indicate that

schools struggled with continuing cross-year school councils as having representatives from several bubbles on school councils for example, was problematic. Looking deeper into the figures shows us that interestingly again, primary schools (71%) were affected more notably than secondary schools (25%) with formal participative activities being more significantly curtailed or limited. This again may indicate that primary school aged children struggled more significantly with the transition to online pupil voice activities.

4.1.5 Ways to support the continuation of participative activities during the Covid 19 regulations (year / class bubbles)

Question 5 in the survey asked educators if they had found ways to continue participative activities during the Covid regulations, during the implementation of the year / class bubbles. See Figures, 13, 14, 15.

Fig 13 , Did you find ways of keeping things going while under the covid regulations? (Q5)
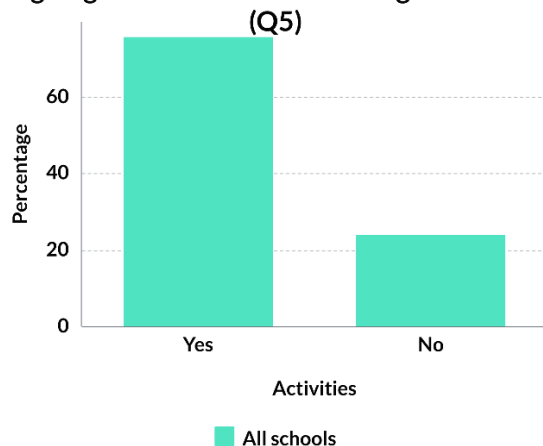
Fig 14, Did you find ways of keeping things going while under the covid regulations? (Q5)
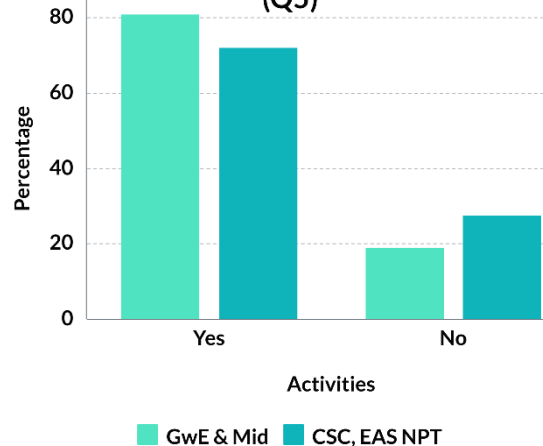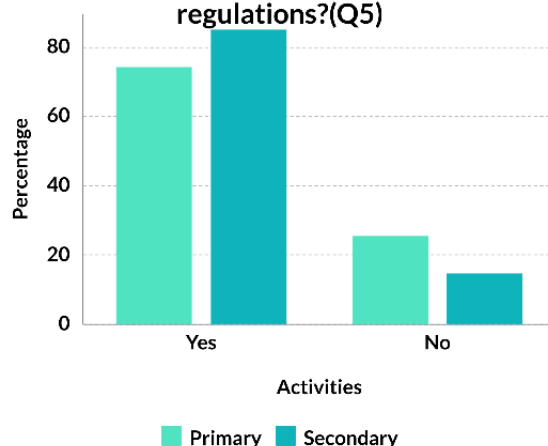
Fig 15 , Did you find ways of keeping things going while under the covid regulations?(Q5)

Comparing the responses in this question to Q3 in the online-survey, it is encouraging that respondents felt they were also able to keep things going while

under the in-school Covid regulations. The proportion of positive and negative responses from across the regions of Wales is similar. Furthermore, the gap between primary and secondary responses was closed somewhat between the lockdown period and the back to school bubble period of Covid-19 restrictions. Qualitative responses indicate that primary schools felt more confident using online systems as time progressed during the pandemic.

4.2 Analysis of open-ended questions

The open-ended questions (6 and 7) in the online survey yielded helpful information regarding methods that worked particularly well in helping to continue participative or pupil voice activities. This section reports data from the open-ended questions.

Half of all the schools reported that they had an inclusive agenda prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

One school leader reported:

> 'we had a really inclusive agenda that wasn't limited to participation of the few. This took time to establish initially, and it isn't a switch we can just turn on'. (PT1)

Another leader emphasised the importance of pupil voice being integral to the education setting:

> 'I think it's integral in any educational setting, but for us in particular, we need our community to work quite collaboratively with us and by the school… the pupils themselves and the families, the governors, the wider community and at the heart of that, the pupil voice element of it and their ability to influence what we do as a school.'(PT12)

Furthermore, another school leader reflected that pupil voice should not just be a tick box exercise, but educators must really listen to what pupils are saying to them:

> 'Pupil voice, it is more than the pupils having a voice, it is the pupils saying that we hear them. Pupil Voice is like a buzz word now, but our children would say that we hear, we listen, we don't just tick a box'(ST8)

School leaders however, reported that staffing changes and absences due to Covid-19 had impacted on them being able to run their school council. Schools reported they had to disband whole school elected councils due to the restrictions, however, day to day pupil voice/pupil voice groups were often supported within classes and fed to the rest of the school.

It was revealed from the qualitative responses that a quarter of schools were successfully able to continue to support and promote pupil voice during the pandemic, via online or other mechanisms. Whilst we recognise that the data reflects that the majority of schools struggled to continue activities successfully, examples from the qualitative data have been collated below to reflect on some of the learning and positive approaches to continuing pupil voice and participative activities during the pandemic.

4.2.1 Adapting to online technologies

School leaders reported that they adapted as quickly as possible as the pandemic hit to adapt to online mechanisms to support pupil voice. With regards to securing pupil's views, schools were able to gain pupil feedback via a variety of online platforms. One school leader commented on how they tried to upskill as rapidly as possible:

> 'As we upskilled rapidly as a school and as teachers, we used Google Form surveys with pupils to collate their views on the new approaches and technologies being used in order to refine provision in the later 'lockdowns' and stages of school building closures.' (ST2)

Other school leaders commented that they endeavoured to encourage pupil voice in all of their learning and teaching using online mechanisms:

> 'As a school we have always tried to be pupil informed in all of our learning and teaching. We would like to think that our online Teams meetings helped pupils feel like they had a voice in the lessons and activities that were being set during lockdown.'(PT2)

Schools used Microsoft Teams for survey style pupil voice, both when schooling online or in school. Google Forms questionnaires and surveys were invaluable in identifying concerns and addressing them throughout the lockdowns. Some schools used Jamboards to share ideas whilst the majority of pupils were at home. Flipgrid was also used in order to communicate and share ideas and encourage feedback from children. Cahoot was also to inform tasks / plan for the next week ahead with pupils. Hwb was also used for home learning and collaborative work too. As one school leader highlights:

> 'Online use of HWB platform was very useful for teachers and pupils and we are still using some aspects that we embraced during lockdown'. (ST1)

Google Classrooms were used to send messages and get pupils' feedback. Through the online classroom, pupils were able to communicate with teachers and heads of year through confidential comments. There were also mechanisms available for children to email the head of year/class teacher to share any concerns or raise points.

Schools were able to offer opportunities for pupils to decide the activities they were willing to undertake. This was achieved via online surveys, sharing ideas on online platforms and voting on preferred activities, topics and tasks. For example, one school gave a selection of activities that the pupils could choose and facilitated an environment where pupils could choose to participate as and when they wanted.

Another school encouraged children to upload their tasks and interests, and this gave the staff an opportunity to plan stimulating tasks that the children were interested in, 'a good way to get the voice of the pupils'.

These schools illustrate that they did everything they could to upskill and use the online technologies available to support pupil voice.

4.2.2 Collaborative working

School leaders also emphasised how they tried to support collaborative working using online mechanisms across school, and with agencies and communities externally.

School leaders reported that virtual assemblies were used to involve pupil voice within schools. One school leader reported how 'Pupil Voice Super Ambassadors have led assemblies via Teams.' Some schools noted how collaborative working projects using Microsoft Teams (whilst blended learning / whilst at home) allowed children to continue to work together on projects / pieces of work. Children were able to use break out rooms / set up their own meetings or work on a Power Point for example, this was recognised to have a positive impact on well-being, especially when children were isolated from each other in full lockdown.

Collaborative projects whilst in bubbles when back in school were also noted to allow children to build relationships / communicate with other classes through Microsoft Teams. This was something identified, through well-being discussions with the children, that they wanted to develop.

In some schools, children worked in their bubbles and then shared ideas online to each other. For example:

> 'meeting for Collective Worship. Big Questions were posed when we all met up online in our classrooms. The children discussed then agreed a solution, opinions and then some spoke and people fed them back to the rest of the school live on camera.'(PT4)

Some school leaders noted how they had used Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams to conduct meetings for the different clubs in school – and even used Teams to present to Governing Body representatives on new initiatives within the school.

Other schools were even successful in continuing external collaborations making the most of the online mechanisms. For example:

> 'The school had a project with a school in Lesotho and throughout the pandemic have held online meetings with staff and pupils to continue the project.'(ST3)

One school noted that due to the increased use of Microsoft Teams both through blended learning and when returning to school they have been able to continue to share their learning with their communities, as commented on by a school leader below:

> '… community, inspired by the children's 'vision' i.e. police, parents / volunteers / Dogs Trust etc have been able to communicate well and reach a larger audience. Immersion days were able to continue due to Teams (Ballet Cymru for example did a workshop online that was successful throughout the whole school with each class participating in their own bubbles).'(PT5)

It is evident from the school leaders who offered information regarding efforts to continue pupil voice activities during the pandemic that innovation and upskilling to use online technology was key to successfully ensuring that pupil voice was able to continue, and that this benefited collaborative working both internally within school environments as well as externally with other agencies and communities.

4.2.3 Use of indoor and outdoor physical space

Other school leaders commented how when schools re-opened, they focused on supporting pupil voice in the outdoor environment through using active well-being activities, for example a school leader commented:

> 'We really focused on lots of active well-being activities and learning in the outdoors, involving the children as much as possible in selecting activities. We regularly reviewed our engagement levels and tried to ensure we provided more of the activities which promoted pupil engagement.'(PT3)

One school leader reported that after lockdown they had been able to continue children's involvement in staff recruitment by use of large classrooms that allowed for social distancing.

There was less commentary on use of outdoor space or innovative use of indoor physical space. Some schools obviously endeavoured to be creative once schools reopened. However, the majority of schools commented on how they had adapted to use online mechanisms.

4.2.4 School Councils: Lessons learned

In the majority of schools, the holding of school council meetings was curtailed until the pupils were back in school.

However, from analysis of the qualitative data, a quarter of all schools responded that they had continued school council meetings in some format. Some schools responded innovatively, arranging the councils via the use of online platforms and when back in school continued using online platforms due to bubble restrictions, or larger spaces to support social distancing or outdoor areas.

4.2.4.1 School Councils: During the lockdown or isolation periods

Schools used digital approaches to run council meetings and Google forms to gather opinions and information. Google classroom, Google Meet, and Google forms proved to be invaluable in supporting school councils throughout the pandemic.

> 'We met online via Teams/ Google meet. Children worked in their bubbles and then shared ideas online to each other… The children discussed them, agreed a solution, opinions and then some people fed them back to the rest of the school live on camera. We also ran year group pupil voice groups from our classrooms instead of across mixed year groups.'(PT4)

Another school reported the school council had successfully managed to continue the analysis of the SHRN report (School Health Research Network):

'When lockdown first began the school received their 2020 SHRN report (School Health Research Network). In previous years lots of consultation would have taken place with all pupils, staff and the community analysing and developing an action plan. Due to lockdown and the sudden change in the school day to going online this was modified to ensure some analysis would take place and action plan produced via online mechanisms. School council carried out the analysis over teams in subgroup workshops and staff too.'(ST3)

Another school demonstrated they had also been innovative in engaging children in research:

'We have also undertaken Action Research on the Benefits of Outdoor Learning. This was done using outdoor activities and a collaborative document on Google slides was used to record research. This proved successful and was picked up by Natural Resources Wales as a feature in May. We have tried hard this year to get as many Pupil Voice groups up and running and we have also introduced Well Being champions who focus on and promote good mental health.'(PT5)

School Councils used Twitter and Instagram pages to raise communication across their peers. One School Council began a weekly Monday Mail to signpost resources and well-being tools to the school community. Another school used 'Padlet' which allowed for the sharing of ideas during school closure and daily teams meetings allowed for pupils to have opportunities to share their thoughts on work and special events. Other school councils shared information on Seesaw.

4.2.4.2 School Councils: on return to school with class bubble restrictions

Schools found the return to school and the bubble restrictions challenging, this is reflected upon by a school leader in the following response:

'During the period of home-learning during the spring term of 2021, our school council met virtually via MS Teams for meetings. The purpose of this was to gather pupil voice for additional feedback on our home-learning arrangements which were daily live lessons via Teams meetings. Our school council, and other pupil councils, have Teams pages to communicate ideas and share information, something which has been really beneficial for us during the past 2 years. On return to school, the live communication became more difficult due to the restrictions of class bubbles and alternate break/lunch times.'(PT6)

The challenges with regards to school bubbles was also echoed by another school leader who commented that:

'The bubble system made it impossible for cross year groups to meet during the pandemic, so all council meetings had to take place online and when the pupils were home in the evenings. Since Covid regulations have relaxed we have been able to engage our councils in face-to-face meetings. The pupils have enjoyed this and are making fantastic progress with their agendas.'(ST4)

As is captured by the statements above, the intervention of classroom bubbles had impacted opportunities for cross year/whole school councils that schools had established pre pandemic.

Other schools reported that on return from school closures, instead of having School Council representatives from all the different years (due to Covid restrictions) one class was responsible for the School Council, and others for other councils, e.g., healthy schools. The groups then reported back, when relevant, during weekly Teams assembly. In another school, instead of having a School Senedd, each class became a Senedd group. Schools reported establishing sub-councils and this worked very well in order to be active in terms of key themes / challenges in the school. Schools reported how they successfully did virtual link ups with other pupil voice/school council groups within the school and established classroom pupil voice/council groups. As is reported by a school leader below:

> 'Class bubbles focus on a particular pupil voice council i.e. Y5a – Heddlu Bach, Y5b – Eco. Teams meetings / Campaigns were used to promote ideas, share knowledge and engage other pupils from within the school.'(PT7)

Another school leader communicated how the move to class councils was a positive journey for all involved:

> 'Pre Covid our councils were open to all children across the school, however due to obvious restrictions during the pandemic we gave each class a council responsibility to focus on. It has been a really positive journey for all involved. It provided children with the opportunity to take ownership within lessons (when returning to school) really embedding their ideas and then sharing with the school via Teams. It also provided children the space and focus when taking part in blended learning to continue to have their thoughts and voices heard.'(PT5)

With other school leaders also making adaptations to support councils across the school, with different classes taking on different responsibilities:

> 'Instead of having groups e.g., School Council from all of the different years, one class was responsible for School Council, another for Eco and so on. The groups then reported back, when relevant, during our weekly Teams assembly. Criw Cymraeg which was Year 6 made videos to help the other classes practise language patterns which were shared weekly.'(PT8)

Consequently, in some schools, class school councils were established and continued during lockdowns and also in bubbles but whole school councils were more challenging to continue.

One school leader commented that when back in school after the lockdown, due to the layout of the school, they could easily keep the three school bubbles separate during the school day, lunches and playtimes. Formal meetings were done in the school hall with social distancing in place or via Teams meetings. As reported by a school leader below:

'Back in school, year bubbles meant that we met in the hall spread out.'
(PT12)

Where other schools reported they supported the school council approach outside, where more than one bubble was involved.

4.2.5 Well-being check ins and communication with families

Schools reported that that they operated a significant telephone conversation programme where learners in the school were contacted on a weekly/fortnightly basis by a member of staff and set questions were used. To learn if further help or support was required or if children needed anything. Vulnerable learners had a higher frequency of contact. ELSA (Emotional, Literacy, Support Assistant) trained staff in other schools provided valuable 1 to 1 support to vulnerable pupils.

Some schools provided Google meet 1-2-1 check ins between teachers and students or encouraged group discussions on google classrooms. Some schools used Microsoft teams to have daily check ins/registration with pupils in the classes. This was done twice a day. Online forms / surveys were used more frequently to get feedback from young people on topics and wellbeing check ins.

Other schools ensured that communication was continued with parents/carer using applications like ClassDojo or telephone calls to ensure that parents/carers were kept up to date with everything they were doing and to provide them with any help or assistance/ technical support that they required to navigate online platforms. Seesaw also enabled pupils and parents to take pictures, write messages, record voice / video. Other schools did regular updates on the school web page. As one teacher communicated:

'The school website and social media accounts facilitated dissemination of information to our community.'(ST5)

4.2.6 Post Covid-19 reflections from school leaders

4.2.6.1 Challenges to reinvigorating pupil voice

Some schools noted that pupils' language and confidence skills were clearly affected by Covid lockdowns, which was recognised to impact on quality of discussion during pupil voice. School leaders reported that pupils have lost some of their confidence to contribute their views in meetings as they had not had the same opportunities for 2 years to participate in face-to-face discussions. This has led to teachers having to coach the children around effective participation again. Some leaders commented that it has taken time to get back to where they want to be in terms of numbers taking part and getting the systems back up and running.

4.2.6.2 Reinvigorating pupil voice

Some teachers reported that they are being successful in reinvigorating pupil voice since Covid, making it central to their planning and lesson planning linked to the new curriculum. They also noted there has been an increase in participation levels from the children since the pandemic, with pupils being more enthusiastic to participate and contribute to the pupil voice groups. A school leader commented:

'As soon as we have been able to work with bigger and cross year groups we have returned to previous activities. We have also increased pupil voice (outside of formal Parliament/ CSC survey/SLO survey data) on well-being as well as attitudes to learning and work scrutiny.'(ST6)

Some teachers reported that as they transition to the new Curriculum for Wales, pupil voice is already a priority and as such it has been one of the quickest things to recover. Furthermore, the educators valued the new skills and approaches thanks to remote learning.

'We've learnt many positive things due to remote learning which are evident in lessons around the school every day.'(PT9)

It was positive to learn that some schools were responding that they were really considering how to respond to the demands of the new curriculum and using the online skills that they had developed during the pandemic. Schools were also reflecting on how they could improve upon their pupil voice/school council activities and also embrace a rights-respecting approach, the following school leader captures this reflection:

'Using Google Forms to help construct the new curriculum. Working towards being a Rights Respecting School. A new structure- School Senedd with Ministers – P.V, Learning, Sport and Technology, each with their own sub committees. Timetabled meeting with a full Senedd and committee meetings.' (PT12)

This school leader also added:

'with the four purposes being at the core of everything that we're doing now. It's never been a better time to be more ethically informed citizen.'(PT12)

Making the important connection, referred to in the literature review and policy analysis, that pupil voice helps to contribute to children becoming ethically informed citizens, one of the four purposes of the school curriculum.

Interestingly another school leader responded:

'Prior to the pandemic Pupil Voice took place through elected councils, now all pupils form part of the pupil voice forums'. (PT10)

This reflects discussions above in the school councils' section that the pandemic may have had the effect of encouraging more children to become involved in class pupil voice/sub-council activities.

While another school leader commented:

'Since COVID it has been good to re-establish more formal links between classes which will help our whole school approach to pupil voice. Our sports ambassadors programme and Digital Leaders initiative have flourished since the return.'(PT11)

It was positive to hear from school leaders that since the schools have reopened without the restrictions of class bubbles that:

> 'everything has returned as it was and the voice of the child through various councils is strong in every aspect of school life and community'. (PT12)

> 'We are now working to run all our pupil voice groups again, meeting in well ventilated rooms or outside when the weather is suitable'. (PT4)

Other leaders reported that pupil voice since Covid, had increased significantly. This is captured by the statement made by a school leader below referring to all of the many pupil voice activities that are being undertaken:

> 'Since Covid, pupil voice throughout the school has increased significantly. For example, a new pupil council has been set up and Wellbeing and Heddlu Bach groups have resumed. Since February of this year, the pupil council have been involved in a learning walk to look at the quality of display boards across the school. They have contributed to the new school prospectus, chosen new outdoor equipment for playtime activities, and been involved in the interview process when new staff have been appointed. Furthermore, all pupil voice groups are now contributing to the weekly newsletter whereby, they have the opportunity to tell parents/caregivers what they have been doing in school. Further plans to set up a digital leaders group, Criw Cymraeg and a Curriculum group are being developed'. (PT13)

When asked what they thought the future held, one school leader recognised the importance of pupil voice in ensuring that children have a chance to feed back their ideas and staff must give reasons for why things are not happening, as well as creating opportunities for children to have opportunities to know where they can go for help and speak up:

> '…feel that they have good choices, that they have a voice and we are listening. They suggest things that work, and when it happens, they are happy, when it doesn't we need to explain why.' (ST7)

5 Discussion

Since devolution, there has been remarked progression in Wales on implementation of children's rights, including participative rights, through public policy and law reform. There have been far-reaching reforms in education, which are current and ongoing at the time of writing, and which offer significant opportunities to promote pupil voice, children's rights and human rights education as integral and essential components of curriculum development and delivery. From the literature and the analysis of policy and legislation in the Welsh context we became aware that there are several labels for 'pupil voice' (e.g., Pupil Voice, Student Voice, Learner Voice, Pupil Participation) and also various definitions as to what this means for education. It may be helpful if there was clarity regarding a shared label, definition and indeed guidance for practitioners working across Wales. The analysis of policy and legislation also illustrated that there has been consistent commitment, exemplified in the Welsh Government Children's Scheme Compliance Report (Welsh Government 2021 p.42) to develop 'a revised participation strategy' but that such a strategy does not appear yet to exist, or if it exists, to be readily accessible.

A participation strategy, as Welsh Government has suggested, might help clarify for Welsh Government departments what they should be doing to effectively exercise their functions to deliver on their duty of due regard under the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011.This may also have a positive impact on the effective and coherent delivery of pupil participation across all sectors, including the education sector. Estyn reports on good practice relating to pupil participation across Wales, however the consistency in its application has been questioned by the Children's Commissioner for Wales and the Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group, during the last reporting and current reporting process to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Resources on pupil participation are fragmented and difficult to find. Welsh Government no longer supports a collation of resources and guidance for educators that were supported by the pupil voice website between 2008 and 2014. As the new curriculum is further embedded with children's rights being a component part of it, resources that already exist as well as new resources might be brought together and/or developed and made available to help educators ensure they are embedding a whole school approach to pupil participation. The Curriculum and Assessment Act 2021 and associated guidance is also a clear opportunity for taking forward a reinvigoration of pupil voice. Furthermore, children's rights are firmly threaded into legislation and public policy in Wales, and it seems appropriate that any refreshment of approach to pupil participation should be situated with the context of a children's rights approach to education. A school in which rights are embedded as part of a whole school approach will be a place where space and time are given to pupil voice, where children understand that getting involved in pupil voice is a way of respecting their own and others' rights and in which there is genuine engagement in promoting impact and influence of what pupils say. This was certainly picked up as strong theme within the literature review that children's rights that are embedded within a whole school approach will help better embed pupil voice. However, this requires teachers having appropriate training to learn about a children's rights and a children's rights approach to education, and to be supported to have the best skills to engage with children meaningfully. Teacher training and CPD which learns about

and learns from pupil voice will equip teachers with essential knowledge, skills and attitudes for engaging meaningfully in pupil voice with all the benefits to teachers and pupils alike as identified in the different policy streams.

The literature review also suggested that more work needs to be done to ensure that practices of child participation at the local and national level are better developed to support and connect with pupil voice at school level. Practices of participation in local and national government decision-making which connect with pupil voice, learning from pupil voice experience and outputs and offering opportunities for pupil voice to engage with local and national democracy, will bring benefit to both agendas i.e., pupil voice in schools and children's participation in local and national democracy. The review yielded important findings in relation to promoting the development of pupil voice and the empirical research that followed it, presented further valuable evidence regarding promoting the development of pupil voice in the Covid-19 recovery period in Wales.

It is evident from the information presented by educators as part of the empirical research, that Covid-19 certainly impacted opportunities to continue pupil voice, particularly in lockdowns or isolations. This finding reflects that of the Council of Europe and UNICEF (2021) study that reported that most young people lost out on their opportunity to be heard. It is also clear from educators' qualitative responses in the Welsh sample, that because pupil voice opportunities were limited due to the pandemic over a 2- year period, pupils' skills and confidence to participate had been negatively impacted upon. However, some educators have recognised this and are working to support children to again be confident in participating in, in person classroom environments.

The findings suggest that primary schools may have been more affected initially as primary school age children were not so adept at interfacing with online platforms. However, it is evident that some schools, as the qualitative evidence indicates, responded that they adapted to using online systems as the pandemic progressed, to ensure that children were able to give feedback, interact with their teachers and peers and participate in council or pupil voice groups. A minority of schools reported that they were even able to collaborate externally with other agencies and communities, using online platforms. These findings reflect those of the Council of Europe and UNICEF (2021) study, that with the transition to remote teaching some schools were creative in providing opportunities for their students.

It is noted by school leaders from their qualitative responses, that the skills they have developed in the use of online mechanisms and other technology has created invaluable opportunities to communicate in new ways with pupils, communicating cross school and externally with other agencies and indeed with parents and the wider community. This positive reaction contrasts with the Council of Europe and UNICEF (2021) study that reported that the transition of student voice activities to the digital environment was considered by teachers to be one of necessity rather than one that they would choose. The learning regarding online mechanisms contributing to pupil voice activities should be explored further and built upon to identify relevant benefits to the development of pupil voice going forward.

An interesting finding is that the move away from one elected whole school council in some schools (due to the restrictions of class bubbles) may have had the effect that

more children became engaged in pupil voice activities, as all classes formed pupil voice groups /sub councils. This is important bearing in mind prior research suggesting that school councils are not always sufficiently representative of all children in a school and sometimes tokenistic. (See Literature Review above, especially: Huddleston 2007, Lewars 2009, Wyness 2009, Edinburgh University and Children in Scotland 2020, Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2022).

Finally, in relation to well-being, it is noted from the qualitative responses that schools tried to maintain contact with pupils and parents/carers, using simple technology like phoning home but also online and innovative technology to check in and interact with pupils and their families. This reflects research done by Estyn (2022) that schools improved their communication with pupils and families and upscaled their support to ensure the emotional and mental health of pupils and families was supported. It also may support research undertaken by Moore et al that reported 'a high degree of school connectedness before and after the pandemic, with no evidence of change in ratings in teacher relationships, pupil relationships or pupil involvement in school life' (Moore et al 2022). It was also recognised by one school leader that pupil voice, within the context of children's rights education, can be an essential mechanism to children to be able to seek help and to speak out. This is reflected in the literature, by research undertaken by Struthers (2021).

It may also suggest that because there are schools in Wales with strong civic cultures, with students used to giving their opinions and teachers used to delivering pupil voice activities and because there were strong pre-existing relationships between teachers and students, that once educators overcame the challenges of technology, pupil voice in many schools started to once again flourish. This was strongly reflected upon by the Council of Europe and UNICEF (2021) study that commented that 'successful student projects do not arise in a crisis, but rather are more resilient to the crisis drawing on remembered emotional bonds from a close classroom community, (Council of Europe and UNESCO 2021 p. 19).' The act of embedding a children's rights approach to education and within that the importance of pupil voice, was also identified by the review as necessary to withstand the negative impact of crises such as pandemics. Practices of participation, ensuring children's voices are heard and children's rights are an integral part of whole school approaches should be better embedded so in the event of a crisis like a pandemic, they are continued and not disrupted.

However, without an effective monitoring system of pupil voice being delivered across Wales pre-pandemic, it is very difficult to evaluate whether this is the case. It is recommended that in the future, Estyn more consistently monitor and evaluate the delivery of pupil voice across education settings in Wales.

6 Final conclusion and recommendations

Overall, this research delivers some key messages:

- Pupil voice can service several agendas. When reviewing support for pupil voice in Wales it will be useful to be clear about what the policy intention is, beyond merely 'participation'. In other words, what is this form of participation for?
- In Wales, pupil voice has developed alongside a specific legislative framework implementing the UNCRC as well as on education and on sustainable development.
- Pupil voice in Wales was impacted by school closures and by restrictions on mixing when schools re-opened.
- The impact was not all negative.

Positive impacts included:

- Innovations of various kinds,

- Upskilling in deployment of online systems and social media,

- Greater collaborative working both within school and with external agencies and communities,

- Wider engagement of more pupils as variations on structures emerged: greater inclusivity,

- Greater focus on well-being of pupils and use of outdoor space,

- Renewed and reinvigorated commitment to pupil voice,

- Pupil voice seen as part and parcel of what is required by the Curriculum for Wales, galvanised by lessons from the pandemic. As one school leader remarked: '***It's never been a better time to be a more ethically informed citizen***'

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: A review of pupil voice should be seen in the context of the wider review of Welsh Government national strategy on children's participation to which Welsh Government committed in its 2021 report on its Children's Scheme Compliance 2018-2020.

Recommendation 2: The policy aims of pupil voice in Wales should be clarified, and situated clearly in the context of wider policy and structures in Wales for participation of children in decision-making, and within the overarching policy frameworks on children's rights and well-being of future generations.

Recommendation 3: The connections between pupil voice and human rights education (HRE) and children's rights education (CRE) should be clarified.

Recommendation 4: Estyn should monitor the implementation of pupil voice across all education settings.

Recommendation 5: Welsh Government should ensure that resources that already exist on pupil voice are collated as well as new resources created and made available to educators, to better support educators within the context of a children's rights approach to education and HRE/CRE.

Recommendation 6: Welsh Government should refresh its commitment in its 2009 National Plan of Action on Children's Rights to develop guidance on pupil participation in educational settings and suitable training for teachers both at ITE and CPD stages.

Recommendation 7: Welsh Government should ensure that children's views are heard and given due weight in any decision- making process that directly or indirectly affects them, so that their views are fully taken into account in times of public emergency, such as in a pandemic.

Recommendation 8: Welsh Government should ensure that information on the public emergency and emergency measures is made available to all children and is both accessible and child-friendly.

Recommendation 9: Welsh Government should ensure children are consulted during and after a public emergency so that their experiences inform children's rights impact assessments and crisis response plans as well as national recovery strategies.

Recommendation 10: Pupil voice should contribute to learning from experience of the pandemic and to development of preparedness for future emergencies. Where children already have strong relationships with their educators, are well practised in having their voice heard and their opinions taken into account, they will be able to adapt and implement change more quickly and effectively during and in the aftermath of emergencies.

Recommendation 11: Welsh Government when implementing guidance and developing new resources should consider how online technology/platforms can add to, complement and improve pupil voice opportunities in education settings.

Recommendation 12: Welsh Government should further explore and share best practice on ways of increasing breadth and inclusivity of participation in pupil voice.

Recommendation 13: Consideration should be given to how best to gain regular updates on children's experiences of pupil voice in practice, to better inform guidance and expectations of educators, with specific emphasis on the legacies of the pandemic and responses to it.

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