

## Teaching Literatures in Wales

Olive, Sarah; Davies, Mary; Maelor, Gwawr

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## TEACHING LITERATURES IN WALES – PANDEMIC IMPACTS & DIVERSITY

**A Welsh Government Collaborative Evidence Network project (CEN7), 2021-22  
Dr Sarah Olive (Bangor University), Dr Mary Davies (Swansea) & Mrs Gwawr Maelor (BU)**

We investigated teachers' perceptions of pandemic impacts on teaching literatures in secondary schools in Wales and internationally. We reviewed the existing, international research & ran an online survey of teachers. 47 secondary school teachers from across Wales participated: roughly half in Welsh, half in English; roughly the same proportion from Welsh & English medium schools (with fewer other language type schools represented).

This document shares our key findings about the challenges of, & 'silver linings' from, teaching literatures during the pandemic; what literatures are taught in Wales, from Manon Steffan Ros to Shakespeare; changes to authors & texts during the pandemic; lack of diversity and attempts to redress that.

Bringing DESIblitz's bus, their Bollywood Shakespeare exhibition, accompanying film & Q&A to educators and students, celebrates the work of Asian film professionals. It suggests one way to diversify the teaching of Shakespeare, as well as 'classic' authors & texts more generally. It recognises that the pandemic created challenges to providing highly participatory & engaging experiences with literatures for students, especially dramatic literature, & celebrates a return to live, touring activities by arts & culture professionals.



Credit: DESIblitz

## Why teaching literature matters

- Literature plays a vital part in several subjects/Areas of Learning Experience (AOLEs) Welsh ♦ English ♦ Drama ♦ International languages (such as French & Spanish) ♦ Languages, Literacy & Communication ♦ Expressive Arts.
  - So, this project refers to *literatures* plural.
- One aim of Languages, Literacy & Communication (LLC AOLE) is to ‘build a lifelong love of literature’ for learners (Welsh Government, 2019).
- Our teacher participants said that literatures contribute to the richness & revitalization of the Welsh language as well as social justice & equality of education.
- Beyond skills, research & our participants suggest that literatures are beneficial in:
  - Contributing to health & wellbeing
  - Widening perspectives
  - Ensuring lifelong learning
  - Fostering literary & cultural industries

## Challenges in teaching literatures during the pandemic

- Engaging students in interpersonal interaction with teachers & each other.
- Avoiding a monolithic teacher voice dominating over students’ voices in discussion.
- Developing students’ confidence in sharing their ideas.
  - This matters because developing discussion, multiplicity of perspectives, & communications skills are widely seen as key to studying literatures.
- Struggling to cover assessed texts & topics, losing some richness & breadth of coverage, & resisting teaching to the test.
- Ensuring parity of provision across different schools within a state or nation: teaching literatures during the pandemic was perceived to be differently impacted depending on how well-resourced schools were.
- Ensuring parity of provision for learners with disabilities, from low-income families – especially those with little or no access to technology, & whose home language was not the dominant one in their national setting.

## ‘Silver linings’ in teaching literatures during the pandemic

- Creativity was perceived to be inherent in literature-based subjects & to dispose its teachers & students to be adaptable.
- Techniques & texts were chosen that encouraged students to reflect on pandemic impacts on their lives e.g. specially chosen creative writing tasks & texts chosen for their relevance to times of social upheaval.
- Approaches that worked well were incorporated into teaching post-pandemic. These ‘Covid keeps’ included the use of audiobooks & critical literacy approaches to texts.
- Pandemic disruption to teaching literatures was perceived to usefully coincide with popular activism around race, ethnicity, gender, climate crisis, & the new *Curriculum for Wales*. The intersection of these events incentivised teachers to diversify texts (more on this below).

## What happened in terms of authors & texts taught during the pandemic?

Popular authors & texts, both before and after the pandemic, with participating teachers include the following (listed by language & roughly in order of teaching from KS3 to A level).

In terms of Welsh language authors, the prose of Bethan Gwanas ♦ Manon Steffan Ros (especially *Fi A Joe Allen*) ♦ Tudur Dylan Jones (especially *Y Bancsi Bach*) ♦ Geraint Vaughan Jones ♦ Caryl Lewis (especially the novel *Martha, Jac a Sianco*) was frequently identified as taught. Regarding plays ♦ Lewis' play *Arkies* was also popular, along with ♦ Gwyneth Lewis' *Y Streic a Fi* ♦ Saunders Lewis' *Siwan*, & ♦ Willy Russell's *Shirley Valentine* in a translation by Manon Eames. Popular Welsh poets & poems included ♦ Bryan Martin Davies' 'Glas' & ♦ Iwan Llwyd's 'Tai Unnos'.

In terms of English language authors, the prose of ♦ Louis Sachar's *Holes* ♦ Michael Morpurgo's *Private Peaceful* ♦ John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* ♦ Robert Cormier's *Heroes* ♦ Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* ♦ Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* ♦ Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* were frequently identified as taught. William Shakespeare dominated English language plays taught with ♦ *Romeo and Juliet* & ♦ *Macbeth* being the most popularly taught of his texts. ♦ Willy Russell was also a popular playwright, especially *Blood Brothers*, & ♦ J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*.

The authors & texts that dominate the participating teachers' responses, whether in Welsh or English, are entirely by White creators & almost entirely feature White main characters. There were very slightly more female authors among the Welsh language texts than their English counterparts, but they remain a marked minority.

Most teachers who participated in our survey had made some changes to authors & texts taught during the pandemic. At higher levels of secondary school, less change was reported to authors & texts, perhaps relating to minimising disruption to high stakes assessments. Where changes were made at this level, they were minimal & narrowly related to coping with the pandemic. At lower levels of secondary school, more & wider change was reported, citing *Curriculum for Wales* & teachers' diversifying texts in the wake of popular activist movements like Black Lives Matter.

– Negatively-perceived changes, identified by participating teachers, like having to cut down work on texts during remote learning, were identified as temporary & pandemic-related.  
+ Positively-perceived changes, around diversifying the curriculum, were envisaged as being made for the long-term.

O Neutrally-perceived changes included those to the curriculum & made by exam boards.



### 'I want some more!'

Find out more about this project – & other Bangor projects on the impact of the pandemic on teaching Welsh & literacy (Welsh & English). Watch the webinar video at the following URL or use the QR code: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teV56zTgwgs>

## Diversity in teaching literatures

Pandemic upheaval sometimes accelerated longer-held agendas for diversifying texts. Some teachers saw a potential efficiency to making changes necessitated by the pandemic, & those desired for other reasons, at the same time.

Around a third of participating teachers reported that their visions for teaching literatures had changed during the pandemic. Activism had increased their desire to offer diverse, relevant & wide-ranging texts. For example, one teacher changed their texts to include those perceived to be more relevant to Wales & more 'diverse'. These English language texts included ♦ **Hamed Amiri's *The Boy with Two Hearts* (an Afghani Welsh writer) & ♦ Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* (a Black British writer).** Another said, 'we have moved to introduce more diversity and will be teaching ♦ **Colm Toibín's *Brooklyn* paired with ♦ Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*' (a White Irish writer & a Black American writer).**

Another teacher\* used an audiobook of ♦ **DD Armstrong's *Ugly Dogs Don't Cry* (a Black British writer).** The novel, set in West London, is a retelling of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), a text prevalent in UK classrooms. For them, the need to provide 'stretch and challenge', deeper thinking, & independent learning to students during the pandemic; offer a more diverse & inclusive curriculum; & the perceived availability & accessibility of audiobooks, compared to hard copies during remote learning, fruitfully coincided.

Some existing research\*\* from England suggests that the pandemic has interrupted such changes or been used to justify change not yet having been made. However, our research found that teachers of literatures in Wales have accelerated change-making around diversity, where they have the autonomy to do so, through the affordances of *Curriculum for Wales*. For instance, one participating teacher wrote that their planning for the new curriculum during this time of pandemic & activism had led them to 'start to think about diversifying the texts we teach ... with a focus on the cultural heritage of our students'.

\* Murphy, G. (2022) 'Audiobooks: At Home and at School', *Teaching English*, 28, pp. 21-22.

\*\* Elliott, V., Nelson-Addy, L., Chantiluke, R., Courtney, M. (2021) *Lit in Colour: Diversity in Literature in English Schools*. London: Penguin & Runnymede Trust. <https://litincolour.penguin.co.uk/>

### 'Utter forth a voice' a.k.a. have your say!

We would like to hear your thoughts on this leaflet and/or the Bollywood Shakespeare event. We'd be thrilled if you could [complete a short survey](#) by following this QR code. You could win the collected back issues of the British Shakespeare Association *Teaching Shakespeare* magazine (20 issues)!

If you would like to comment, ask a question, or find out more about the project, please contact the project lead Dr Sarah Olive [s.olive@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:s.olive@bangor.ac.uk). Find me on Twitter [@drsaraholive](https://twitter.com/drsaraholive)

