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Effective Pupil Support in Secondary Schools

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Summary

- Pupil support needs to be tailored to individual needs. What works best will, therefore, vary from pupil to pupil and from school to school.
- It is important to take a whole school approach to pupil support and to develop an ethos that is focused on promoting wellbeing. This calls for effective school leadership and buy in from teaching staff.
- Pupils need to be involved in the design and delivery of support and schools must engage effectively with external agencies, families, communities and employers.
- Collaboration between schools is vital. It enables them to share expertise and learn from each other. However, it is difficult to achieve if schools see themselves as being in competition with each other.
- Plans to reform the curriculum, teaching training and Continuing Professional Development in Wales provide an important opportunity to improve pupil support. There is a role for specialist staff in supporting pupils with complex needs but all teachers should be able to deliver basic forms of pupil support and teacher training needs to equip them to do this.
- Wellbeing should be put at the heart of the new curriculum and this will require a change of attitude. It will be important to understand and emphasise the link between academic attainment and wellbeing and this will need to be reflected in outcome measures and the way in which school performance is assessed and inspected.
- Particular attention should be paid to supporting vulnerable pupils through periods of transition. Primary and secondary schools must work together and it is important to establish a clear 'line of sight' from age 3 right through to year 11 and beyond into post-16 education and training.
- There are examples of good practice in Wales that can be learnt from but there is also a need for experimentation and innovation. 'Pioneer Schools' provide an excellent opportunity to trial different approaches to pupil support in order to discover what works best in a range of different contexts.

Introduction

The Minister for Education and Skills asked the Public Policy Institute for Wales (PPIW) to provide advice on the best ways to provide effective pupil support¹ in secondary schools. In particular, he wanted evidence about:

- The most effective approaches to pupil support;
- How to provide effective support during transitions;
- The role of teachers in pupil support; and
- How pupil support ought to change with the new curriculum in Wales.

This report summarises the key lessons and recommendations from an expert workshop held in November 2015 attended by academics, practitioners, Welsh Government officials from a range of departments and the Minister for Education and Skills (see Appendix 1 for a list of participants). It begins by describing the context and defining pupil support, before summarising the key points made by the independent experts about how to improve pupil support in secondary schools in Wales.

Context

The case for change

Within the current education system pupil support in secondary schools in Wales can be split into two core aims:

1. The delivery of professional Personal and Social Education (PSE) via the curriculum content; and
2. The provision of appropriate and timely advice and support services and guidance opportunities within an overall school environment which fosters the development of wellbeing and these personal, social and life skills. This excludes counselling provision but includes contacts with external agencies which provide this level of support.

The Minister for Education and Skills wishes to ensure that secondary school pupils in Wales receive the best possible support. There is concern that at present support varies between schools and that vulnerable young people, who lack supportive relationships outside of school, could fall through the gaps in provision. The provision of PSE can be variable in terms of

¹ Throughout this paper 'pupil support' is used to refer to all practices and processes that look to care for pupil needs, enhance wellbeing and encourage the development of essential personal, social and life skills.

quality and it is up to schools to plan and deliver a broad balanced programme to meet the specific needs of learners. The framework laid out for PSE in Wales suggests that all staff have a crucial part to play. The ethos and organisation of the school or college is also important. Whilst concerns are largely about the curriculum for PSE it is also noteworthy that Wales, like most of the UK, does not have enough teachers who have been trained specifically to teach PSE. Many came into the profession as specialists in other subjects.

Estyn inspections reveal a mixed pattern of wider pupil support. A recent review reported that only a minority of schools took a strategic approach to co-ordinating 'learner support'² (Estyn, 2014) and Donaldson (2015) found that children and young people would like to see a greater focus on general social competences (life skills and personal confidence, personal and social education), basic skills (i.e. literacy and numeracy), more vocational education and careers guidance.

Objectives

The Welsh Government is keen to see improved pupil support within the current secondary school curriculum to take the pressure off external services which often have to deal with the consequences of a failure to intervene early. It is also keen to explore the best way to provide support alongside the introduction of the new curriculum³ in Wales which will have pupil wellbeing at its heart.

Over the next couple of years Pioneer Schools will trial new approaches to the curriculum and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). These changes offer an opportunity to review existing pupil support and explore new approaches to teaching and learning. Following Professor John Furlong's review of teacher training in Wales (Furlong, 2015), there will also be significant changes to Initial Teacher Training. As a result it is important to determine whether it is more effective to upskill all teachers to enable them to provide effective pupil support or to train specialist teachers and/or other professionals to deliver Personal and Social Education (PSE) and pupil support.

² In Wales learner support services include three elements:

- Learning coaching which aims to guide pupils so that they can make informed decisions, identify goals and become independent learners;
- Personal support which aims to help pupils develop solutions to and overcome personal, social, emotional and physical situations that are barriers to their learning; and
- Impartial careers information, advice and guidance

³ <http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/curriculum-for-wales-curriculum-for-life/?lang=en>

What Approach Should Wales Take to Pupil Support?

Effective pupil support involves meeting pupils' pastoral needs (e.g. helping a child to cope with social or emotional difficulties) and supporting their learning (e.g. encouraging motivation, self-esteem etc.). Pupils' needs vary so support has to be tailored to individual circumstances.

The experts discussed the advantages and disadvantages of specialist and generalist approaches to pupil support⁴. They suggested that both are necessary and that the evidence shows the importance of adopting a whole school approach (see for example Zins et al., 2004; NICE, 2009; Weare, 2015; Banerjee et al., forthcoming). A whole school approach is difficult to get right and we do not have good 'off the shelf' models. Nonetheless, a number of factors are known to be linked to successful whole school approaches. These include:

- Strong leadership - School leaders need to know what makes students tick, how communities work and how to meet standards. They also need to drive the view that wellbeing is the responsibility of everyone (see for example HMIE, 2004; NICE, 2009);
- A wellbeing focused school ethos - The culture of the school is the starting point for a successful approach to pupil support (see for example Weare, 2015). Little things (such as how children are greeted in the morning) can make a huge difference to how young people feel about school (see for example Tobler & Stratton, 1997);
- Buy in from staff and clarity about responsibilities - All staff need to understand and support the schools commitment to enhancing wellbeing and supporting pupils and be clear about their responsibility in achieving this (see for example NICE, 2009; HMIE, 2004);
- The involvement of pupils in the design of support - Articulation of the elements of support need to come from conversations with young people (see for example NICE, 2009) and so will vary from school to school. This sort of engagement will lead to individual differences in strategic responses explaining why a prescriptive policy would be unsuitable;
- Engagement with external services - Whole school approaches still require contact with specialist services (see for example Weare, 2015);
- Engagement with families and communities (see for example NICE, 2009); and
- Collaboration between schools – Our experts suggested that partnership working between schools is a good way to facilitate learning about what works and sharing of

⁴ A specialist approach sees specialist 'guidance teachers' or similar responsible for pupil support whilst a generalist sees all teachers responsible for pupil support.

specialist services. However, it was noted that policies (such as league tables) which foster competition between schools inhibit collaboration. The Stanway Federation Learning Centre⁵ was cited as a model of partnership working which supports collaboration among primary and secondary schools in order to provide additional capacity for the schools to meet the needs of learners. It provides support and interventions that can be targeted at individuals or small groups of learners which is a cost effective way of meeting some of the diverse needs that young people have.

A long term perspective is also necessary. Evidence suggests that short term interventions do not have a lasting impact (Banerjee et al., forthcoming). Experts also suggested that given that the Welsh Government has adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the basis for policy making for children and young people in Wales, it might be useful to consider a rights based approach⁶ to pupil support.

What is the Role of Teachers in Providing Pupil Support?

The experts argued that responsibility for pupil support should be shared by all teachers and that taking this away from teachers in England has lowered its status (see for example Gray, Galton, McLaughlin, Clarke & Symonds, 2011; Blatchford et al., 2012). However, specialist guidance teams have a role to play in providing specialist support working with external agencies. Experts recognised a need for three types of support:

1. Immediate level support by all teachers (in-school provision);
2. Intermediate level support provided by a smaller specialist group who deal with issues of assessment, co-ordination of effort and engagement with external agencies and parents (in-school provision); and
3. High level support including counselling (external support).

It was also suggested a specialist guidance team might work across several schools creating partnerships which would allow for collaboration and sharing of good practice.

Experts emphasised the importance of training for all teachers in the area of pupil support. Young people often seek support from the staff who they know best and feel that they can relate to, so all teachers must be able to provide immediate support.

⁵ For more information see: <https://www.stanway.essex.sch.uk/tsflc/>

⁶ <http://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/people/children-and-young-people/rights/uncrc/?lang=en>

The Furlong and Donaldson Reviews have created a unique opportunity to recast initial teacher training and CPD in Wales. Experts highlighted what they saw as important gaps in teacher training in England (see for example Furlong, 2013; Ball, 2013) and suggested that teachers in Wales need training in child and adolescent development (Reid, 2007). In particular they need to know how to speak to pupils about issues which are significant for them (e.g. issues of sexuality, relationships etc.) and it was suggested that the recommendations of the National Attendance and Behaviour Review be re-visited.

Training teachers in this area has as much to do with changing attitudes as changing structures (see below for more discussion of changing attitudes). Our experts argued that it was important to harness the energy and enthusiasm of teachers and that those who are engaged in research on their own practice can contribute to understanding 'what works' (see for example ResearchED, <http://www.workingoutwhatworks.com/>).

Putting Wellbeing at the Heart of the Curriculum

Experts stressed the importance of putting wellbeing at the centre of the curriculum but suggested that this would require a change of attitude among teachers – in particular a greater awareness of the links between academic attainment and wellbeing (see for example Public Health England, 2014; Durlak et al., 2011). At present a narrow focus on attainment was seen as a barrier to effective pupil support in England (see for example Gray et al., 2011) and it was noted that teachers often claim that they do not have time for pupil support because of the pressure placed upon them to meet targets relating to GCSE grades and other key benchmarks.

This has implications for the accountability, outcomes and assessment frameworks used to judge school performance and our experts suggested that whilst the curriculum reform plans have been well received in Wales, there is concern about what outcomes and assessment in some of the new Areas of Learning and Experience⁷ (for example Health and Wellbeing) will look like. The curriculum and accountability frameworks need to be thought about in conjunction and the inspection system will have to align with this so it will be important to work closely with Estyn.

⁷ <http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/curriculum-for-wales-curriculum-for-life/?lang=en>

Support During Periods of Transition

There is a lot of evidence which points to the cost of failed transitions (see for example Trotman et al., 2015; Graham, 2014). Experts suggested that improved information sharing between primary and secondary school would help make support during and following transitions more seamless. They also believed that as children get older peer support models become more age appropriate (Gray et al., 2011; Cowie & Wallace, 2000).

There was strong support for Donaldson's recommendation that a clear 'line of sight' is established from age 3 to 16. Experts explained that some young people struggle to come to terms with differences in the ways they are taught in primary and secondary school and suggested ways to facilitate a more gradual transition (see also Reid, 2007). Teaching staff from Newport High School explained that they employ transition maths teachers who work with years 5 and 6 to enable pupils to get used to the style of teaching at secondary school and is considering doing the same in English. In addition Year 7s are taught largely in their own wing of the school, teachers come to them and every pupil has their own chair, tray, locker etc. which creates a similar environment to primary school. In Year 8 children spend half their time in a Year 8 wing and half their time in the wider school. Vertical tutor groups are also working well at Newport High School.

The experts suggested that it may be worth exploring the potential for 3-16 schools to alleviate problems associated with transitions. They also highlighted the importance of governance arrangements that strengthen links between primary and secondary schools (for example federations). It was felt that more attention could be given to the transition to post-16 education and training and there was support for the idea of extending the 'line of sight' into young adulthood. Many young people think further ahead than they are given credit for and Careers Education and Guidance could play a greater role in assisting them to make the transition from school to college and college to employment.

PSE in Wales

Experts believed that the teaching of PSE in Wales needs to be improved and that the status of the subject needs to be enhanced. It was felt that renaming it might help and it was suggested that 'Social and Emotional Learning' might provide a better description of what is being sought. However, the experts agreed that clarity of purpose and aims is more important than terminology. There was also a discussion of how PSE should be assessed and it was suggested that self-assessments might be worth exploring.



Experts emphasised the importance of risk management. They argued that young people's perceptions of risk differ from adults' views and that this needed to be reflected in pupil support. For example, Trotman et al., (2012) found that issues such as internet grooming, 'stranger-danger', drugs and gangs were less of a concern for young people than relationships. As a result it is important to involve young people in the design of PSE so that it reflects the range and complexity of the day-to-day issues that they are grappling with.

Innovation and Learning from Best Practice

The experts emphasised the need for innovation in approaches to pupil support. The best form of support will vary from pupil to pupil and from school to school. So a 'top down', one size fits all approach was not recommended. Experts agreed that the Welsh Government has an important role in emphasising the importance of effective pupil support but should allow schools flexibility in the way in which they deliver it. A school's approach needs to be developed in consultation with pupils and teachers and ideally with parents.

Experts highlighted examples of good practice in Wales including initiatives described by teachers from Newport High School (see above). In addition research has shown that mixed aged tutor groups and nurture groups have worked well in secondary school (Cooke et al., 2008; Colley, 2009), and the use of tutor time for pastoral purposes is also effective.

The success of the Foundation Phase was cited as a valuable source of good practice in improving wellbeing and attainment (Taylor et al., 2015). There is a need to find ways of making similar gains in secondary schools where teaching and learning is very different. Experts believed that more thought needs to be given to how the Foundation Phase fits with secondary schooling.

Conclusion

Pupil support should be tailored to individual needs and the particular contexts within which a school is operating. However, there are lessons that can be learnt from existing approaches and research into what works. A whole school approach appears to be the most effective. It is important to develop an ethos which is focused on wellbeing and there is a need for effective leadership and buy in from teaching staff. Pupils should be involved in the design and delivery of support and schools need to engage effectively with external services, and with families, communities and employers. Collaboration between schools is also vital. This enables them

to share expertise and to learn from each other. It is also important that primary and secondary schools must work together to ensure a smooth transition at the end of year 6.

The plans to reform the curriculum, teaching training and CPD in Wales provide an important opportunity to improve pupil support. There is a role for specialist staff in supporting pupils with complex needs but all teachers should be able to deliver basic forms of pupil support and teacher training needs to equip them for this.

Wellbeing needs to be put at the heart of the new curriculum and this will require a change of attitude. In particular it will be important to understand that academic attainment and wellbeing are closely linked and accountability frameworks, outcome measures, and processes of assessment and inspection need to reflect this.

Particular attention should be paid to supporting vulnerable pupils through periods of transition. This highlights the importance of collaboration among schools and colleges and the need to establish a clear 'line of sight' from age 3 through to year 11 and beyond into post 16 education and training.

There are examples of good practice in Wales that can be learnt from but there is also a need for experimentation and innovation. Pioneer Schools provide an opportunity to trial approaches to discover what works best in a range of different contexts.

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Appendix 1: Workshop Participants

Huw Lewis AM – Minister for Education and Skills, Welsh Government

Professor Colleen McLaughlin - Professor of Education, University of Sussex

Professor Stan Tucker - Emeritus Professor, Newman University Birmingham

Dr Dave Trotman - Head of Education Studies, Newman University Birmingham

Phil Jones - National Chair of the National Association for Pastoral Care in Education

Kathy Evans - Senior Lecturer, University of South Wales

Karen Cromarty – Senior Advisor, British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy

Damian Lawlor - Deputy Head teacher, Newport High School

Clare Healy – Head of Inclusion, Newport High School

Eleri Thomas - Deputy Children’s Commissioner for Wales

Andrew Johnson – Special Advisor, Welsh Government

Jo-Anne Daniels – Director of Infrastructure, Curriculum, Qualifications and Learner Support, Welsh Government

Emma Williams – Deputy Director, Support for Learners, Welsh Government

Teresa Holdsworth - Deputy Director, Youth Engagement & Employment, Welsh Government

Lowri Reed – Senior Implementation Officer for Behaviour and Attendance, Welsh Government

Launa Anderson – Principal Research Officer, Department for Education and Skills, Knowledge and Analytical Services

David Sargent – Senior Curriculum and Finance Manager, Welsh Government

Professor Steve Martin – Director, Public Policy Institute for Wales

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