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Belonging, community and capability: listening to the voices of young children to realise process quality in early childhood curriculum enactment in Wales

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problem of how to achieve process quality in early childhood education (ECE) in a manner that attends to young children's views. Process quality, the interactional experiences of the child in ECE, is highlighted by the OECD as a critical driver for development and so should be the focus of ECE curriculum enactment, which should be responsive to children's interests. We report findings from a project that explored young children's educational experiences of ECE during Covid-19 that provide insight into what children value in ECE. These findings can be used to consider how we ensure process quality in ECE by attending to what children value in curriculum enactment. The findings demonstrate the value that children place on belonging to the school community and illustrate young children's capacities to express their experiences with nuance and detail.

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Children's voice; Wales; COVID-19; process quality; early years; curriculum enactment

Introduction and background

This research explores the perceptions of young children in Wales, who were aged 3–6 during the COVID-19 pandemic, in relation to their educational experiences during school lockdowns and the subsequent return to school. The central aim of this paper is to amplify the voices of children who told us about their education, in order that they may inform the realisation of *process quality* in early childhood education contexts as schools negotiate their way through the pandemic recovery period and beyond.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has a long history of advocating for high quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) internationally and has interrogated and problematised the notion of quality in its series of Starting Strong reports. This paper responds to the issues raised in the most recent OECD Starting Strong report published in 2021 and considers the relationship between process quality, curriculum and pedagogy. Process quality is defined as 'children's daily interactions through their ECEC settings – with other children, staff, teachers, space and materials, their families and the wider community' (OECD 2021, 15) and is considered 'the most proximal driver of children's development, learning and well-being' (15).

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Research in ECE has underlined the importance of adult–child interaction for children’s outcomes (e.g. Fleer 2019; Lewis, Fleer, and Hammer 2019; Sylva et al. 2014); emphasising the role of the adult in responding to children’s interests to extend or develop their ideas, thinking and/or conceptual understanding. There is also considerable attention paid to the need for relational pedagogy which attends to ‘the needs, passions and interests of learners’ (e.g. Papatheodorou 2009, 4), and in which the learner ‘has experiences and knowledge that become the lenses through which new knowledge, information and experience are filtered and understood’ (7). There is international consensus then, that adults working in high quality ECE should enact pedagogies that are responsive, relational and intentional (e.g. Fleer 2011; Payler 2009).

The OECD sets out how curriculum and pedagogy are powerful tools that shape interactions, and hence process quality, within ECEC settings (2021, 3). The OECD adopts the following definitions for curriculum and pedagogy:

[Curriculum] sets the principles and goals that ECEC staff use to foster children’s development learning and well-being, [and pedagogy] refers to the strategies and techniques implemented by staff to offer these opportunities. (3)

However, we are mindful of the challenges that exist to narrow definitions that separate curriculum and pedagogy from each other and from processes of assessment (e.g. Priestley and Xenofontos 2021) and find it useful to consider what has been described as a holistic definition in which curriculum is understood to be ‘the multi-layered social practices, including infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated’ (Priestley and Xenofontos 2021, 3). Such a conceptualisation aligns with notions of the early years curriculum including the lived experiences of children and those in their communities (e.g. Wood 2020). By adopting such a view, we can position process quality as (i) nested within this broadly conceptualised notion of curriculum and (ii) realised through curriculum enactment. We suggest that in the ECE setting, then, curriculum enactment that realises process quality in ECE involves the adoption of relational and intentional pedagogies centred around experiences that are derived from children’s interests and/or known to be valued by them.

Accessing children’s interests and gaining insight into what they value is problematic. It is acknowledged that many ECE practitioners lack knowledge about how to engage with children in such a way that provides such insight, and supports and extends their learning (Walsh, McGuinness, and Sproule 2019). Evidence also suggests that adults do not routinely consider children’s competencies when planning for their learning and participation in ECE contexts (e.g. Waters and MacDonald 2022; Murphy et al. 2022). It has been argued that in school settings, children’s participation rights are often described using terms such as ‘pupil voice’, ‘the voice of the child’ or ‘the right to be heard’ which has been traced back to the endorsement of the UNCRC (Noyes 2005). Holding congruence with this view, Whitty and Wisby (2007) note clear links between children’s voices and notions of UNCRC participation rights. At the same time, it is also acknowledged that terms such as ‘children’s voice’ are ill defined and controversial (Murray 2019; Robinson and Taylor 2007). Singer (2014) suggests that the power dynamic which exists between adults and children frequently results in a superficial and tokenistic acknowledgement of children’s voices rather than meaningful engagement. Murray (2019, 1) calls for ‘a definition of children’s voices that recognises pluralism in children’s perspectives and puts the onus on not only hearing – but attending to’. From this child rights position, it is not sufficient to recognise the interests of children at a superficial level; there is a need for adults to take these views seriously and act on what has been said. In this paper, we argue that such action can be taken by attending to children’s perspectives in the realisation of process quality through curriculum enactment in early childhood education for foundation and primary education.

Edwards (2021) presents a compelling argument that internationally, we may move towards ‘an interpretative understanding of [ECEC] quality encompassing children’s perspectives’ (40); this

study provides an example for consideration in this regard. As discussed below, the policy background in Wales is one in which children’s rights are centrally placed, and this should mean the epicentre of control for learning and teaching (or, broadly, ‘curriculum enactment’ as per the above definition) should be negotiated considering children’s perspectives. Therefore, the authors argue that the insights from the empirical study presented here are valuable in consideration of achieving process quality through curriculum enactment both locally and more broadly, since process quality is the concern of all those involved in the provision of early childhood education.

Context

Welsh education reform

Wales is one of the four constituent nations of the United Kingdom, with devolved responsibility for education. In order to ensure all learners develop knowledge and skills required for the twenty-first century, the education system is undergoing significant reform including the introduction of a new curriculum (Harris, Jones, and Crick 2020). From 2022 onwards, ‘Foundation Learning’ describes the curriculum provision for children aged 3–7 years and is specified through the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) which has four purposes as its central rationale. These are that children are supported to be:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society (Welsh Government 2022b)

Critical to the CfW is the notion of subsidiarity (Donaldson 2015), which requires that teachers are curriculum makers, able to ensure the immediate contextual relevance of the content of their curricular offer. At the time of writing, there is no explicit pedagogical guidance for school-based ECE, however it is offered for funded settings working with children aged 3–5 and this indicates the direction of pedagogic advice for schools. This guidance is built upon recognition of children’s agency and capability:

By creating a space that actively promotes listening to the voice of the child, we can begin to recognise and respond to the unique background and needs of each child, and children can begin to understand their rights. The key principles essential for holistic and meaningful learning for all children start with skillful, observant and interested adults, who provide authentic and engaging experiences in effective, exciting environments. (Welsh Government. 2022a, 7)

Such an approach is situated within the broader context of the Welsh Government’s overall vision for children and young people which is based around seven core aims developed from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (see WAG. 2006. 2008, 3). There is a long-standing commitment to a pedagogy in which adults are responsive to children’s interests and experiences, however the enactment of such pedagogy has appeared, previously, to be inconsistent (Lewis et al. 2017) not least because of varied and conflicting constructions of young children’s capability (Chicken and Tyrie 2023; Waters-Davies and MacDonald 2022). As set out above, jurisdictions need to ensure that there is a clear articulation – and enactment – of the relationship between curriculum and pedagogy to safeguard the security of process quality in Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Edwards 2021; OECD 2021). This paper considers how we can use children’s experiences of education during the COVID-19 pandemic to contribute to understanding this relationship, and therefore the realisation of process quality locally in Wales, and more broadly as an area of ongoing international concern (OECD 2021).

Present study

This research draws upon a socio-cultural approach (Rogoff 2003) and is epistemologically underpinned by critical realism (Bryman 2016), working alongside the conceptual framework of agency (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). From this position, young children are constructed as capable and agentic meaning-makers who make sense of their worlds through their social experiences within it (Malaguzzi 1998). Underpinning and interconnected with the conceptual framework of agency is a rights-based approach that draws on the UNCRC (United Nations 1989) article 12, within which all children have a right to participate in decisions that affect them. Younger children's voices are therefore recognised as valuable and important (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, and Bottrell 2015; Lancaster and Kirby 2010; Lomax 2012).

The broad research question guiding this study were:

1. What are young children's experiences and perceptions of their education during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are adults' perspectives on the impact and recovery from COVID-19 on young children's education?

The study was conducted in 2022 following 2 years of experiences of lockdowns and social restrictions from March 2020 until May 2022 (Watkins and Morgan 2023). The capability of children to 'tell' of their experiences in nuanced ways and with depth is highlighted as significant for the realisation of process quality through curriculum enactment particularly against a backdrop where some teachers appear to doubt the competence of children to participate in meaningful ways in their earliest years of schooling (see Chicken and Tyrie 2023; Murphy et al. 2022; Waters-Davies et al. forthcoming).

This study provides insight into what children, aged 3–6 during the COVID-19 pandemic, value from their ECE experience in Wales, and as such provides an opportunity to build on this knowledge in realising process quality through curriculum enactment. More broadly, the study set out here provides an opportunity for those in other contexts to consider how to access the voices of their youngest learners in order to inform their realisation of process quality.

Method

The data presented in this paper were generated as part of a study commissioned and funded by the Welsh Government (Tyrie et al. 2023) to explore the experience and perceptions of young children and the adults that supported them (i.e. parents/carers and teachers) during the COVID-19 pandemic. To engage with a range of young children, their teachers and their parents/carers, a qualitative multi-site case study design was employed (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe 2009). Ethical approval was granted by the lead university in the collaborative research team.

Four primary schools (3–11 years) in South Wales were selected via purposive sampling to ensure a diverse sample of children. From these schools, eligible classes were pragmatically self-selected by the schools based on the age of the children and class/teacher availability. For inclusion in the study, children had to be aged 3–6 years during the pandemic and be enrolled in a primary school in Wales at the time of the study. Research evidence highlights that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted particular groups (Richards-Belle et al. 2020), including those of ethnic minority (Platt and Warwick 2020), of lower socio-economic status (Patel et al. 2020; Shoari et al. 2020; Waters-Davies et al. 2022), with the experience of the care system (Roberts et al. 2021), and with disabilities or underlying medical conditions (Masi et al. 2021). Therefore, it was important to represent children with various diversities in this study and gain an understanding of a range of children's educational experiences during the pandemic. Accordingly, teachers at the four sample schools were asked to

select children of as diverse a range as possible (e.g. those of ethnic minority, from lower socioeconomic background, with known underlying medical conditions, or those of higher weight), whose families you feel might be able to engage in the study.

Across the four schools, 30 children (girls $n = 14$; boys $n = 16$), aged 3–6 years at the time of the first lockdown, were included. Additionally, 6 teachers (female $n = 6$, male $n = 0$), and 20 parents/carers (mothers $n = 17$, fathers $n = 1$, other $n = 2$) of the above children were included in the study. There was a clear gender imbalance in the recruitment of teachers and parents/carers, which was not intentional but is important to note as the findings from adults' perspective in this research are primarily from the perspective of females. The methods of data collection were threefold: firstly, participatory creative methods were used with children (including researcher field notes). Secondly, interviews (via Zoom or phone) were conducted with parents/carers. Finally, face-to-face or online (via Zoom) interviews were conducted with teachers from the children's current and previous academic year. Data collection took place between January and March 2022.

Creative activities with children

Central to the research design was a construction of children as experts in their own lives, which is in line with the theoretical frame for this study and the Welsh Government's commitment to children's rights and participation in research studies (Welsh Assembly Government 2007). Accordingly, the research adopted participatory creative methods for eliciting young children's experiences, perceptions and recollections. Drawing on the Mosaic approach (Clark 2001; Clark and Moss 2011, 2017), and informed by the Reggio Emilia philosophical approach of listening to children (Fernández-Santín and Feliu-Torruella, 020), the study introduced a number of creative activities to elicit conversations and interviews (see also Chicken et al. 2023). Although creative approaches are not a guarantee of full and active participation, they have the potential to engender collaborative forms of data production (Mannay 013; 2016). These participatory methods of data production were adopted to provide a space where children could have control in leading the conversations and directing the data that was generated. The interviews with teachers, and other significant adults (parents/carers) also adopted a semi-structured approach to enable a space for participants to introduce new topics and reflect on their interactions with young children during the pandemic.

Three creative methods were designed based on earlier studies with children during the pandemic (Boffey et al. 2021; Lomax 2012). All activities were developed to be completed in the classroom but they were also appropriate to take home and share with parents/carers. Activities took place over four visits by researchers to each school (including a familiarisation visit). After each of the activities, children were offered a one-to-one interview (a 'chat') with a researcher to describe what they had done and what it meant to them.

1. *What is in my world*: a polaroid camera was used to take a photograph of the child which was then put in the centre of a piece of paper. Children were asked to draw the important people, places, and things in their everyday life, while the researcher discussed this process with them. Children were then given stickers to place next to the things which they did not have access to during the pandemic. When the pictures were completed, researchers spoke with the children (one-to-one) about the things that they did not have access to in the pandemic.
2. *Fly away and create a new school*: the children and researchers built a toy plane together. Once the planes were built, they were flown to an imaginary new world (on the other side of the classroom) where there was neither pandemic, nor any schools, and the children were asked to create their idea of the perfect school. The researcher and children drew the things that children felt they needed to learn and enjoy their time at school. Researchers then spoke with the children to explore the materials produced.
3. *Bins and keepsake boxes*: the researcher reminded the children of lockdown. Children were invited to decorate two boxes: one box to keep memories of the things that they liked doing

when they were in lockdown and one box to put all the things they did not like. Children wrote down memories from lockdown on individual pieces of paper, decided which of these things they liked doing and which they didn't, and then placed the individual pieces of paper in the respective boxes. A researcher then spoke with each child about what was in their box.

Semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents/carers

Following the creative activities, face-to-face or online interviews were conducted with teachers and interviews with parents/carers were conducted online or by phone; children were also invited to the first section of the parent/carer interviews. These interviews were semi-structured in their nature and therefore were flexible, allowing for participants to guide the conversation. The interviews explored adults' perspectives on the children's experiences of education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysis

Following data gathering, data was anonymised using a secure database. Child and adult data were then transcribed verbatim. NVivo® software was used to manage the dataset which included the child activity transcripts, photographs of activity outcomes, fieldwork notes and parent/carer and teacher interview transcripts. Analysis was undertaken via a process of reflexive thematic analysis using Braun and Clark's (2021) six stages. Each stage of the process is explained below:

1. Stage 1: familiarisation. Familiarisation of the data was undertaken by three of the research team as soon after data generation as possible. This involved a process of reading and re-reading the data alongside the researcher fieldnotes to understand the context within which the data was generated.
2. Stage 2: generate codes. Codes were generated within NVivo® by the three researchers focusing on one or two schools each.
3. Stage 3: construct themes. The three researchers reviewed and considered the codes generated in stage 2 and constructed broader themes that described groups of codes.
4. Stage 4: review themes. During stage four, three further members of the research team joined the analysis, supporting with the review of themes. This was deemed useful as they had not been involved in earlier stages of analysis and so were able to act as critical friends to the overall process. This review process led to the construction of six overarching themes.
5. Stage 5: define and name themes. The six overarching themes were defined and named by the team involved in stage 4. These draft definitions were then shared with the wider project team, for discussion, and final agreement.
6. Stage 6: production of report. Abstracts and vignettes for each theme were created using both written and visual data to represent the breadth and depth of each theme. These were then used as the basis for reporting the data (see Tyrie et al. 2023).

Findings

This paper reports on data from the study that pertains to process quality, under the heading *Community and belonging in school*. The full study findings are reported in Tyrie et al. (2023).

Community and belonging in school

Children expressed what was important to them about their education in school, by depicting what they had missed when their access to school-based education was restricted. Within this narrative were two sub-themes: the school environment and the wider school community. Collectively,

these experiences create a compelling sense of community to which the children felt they belonged and which they missed when schools were closed.

The school environment

A consistent message within the data was the importance that children placed upon the school environment. This was apparent in the voices of children, their caregivers and teachers. Older children, in particular, expressed the desire to be *physically* in school when this had been prevented during lockdowns. This theme was reflected in the drawings of children, with school buildings and spaces both inside and outside of their schools featuring prominently. An example of this can be seen in Jessica's drawing, (Figure 1) with Jessica (age 7) explaining that she had drawn her 'beautiful school', adding that she had missed her friends and teachers within it.

Some children noted missing particular spaces within the school, linking this to associated activities, including sport, play and learning. For example, Harriet, aged 7, stated: 'I missed school when there [was] lockdowns, the playing pitch for football, doing gymnastics and roly-polies and I missed the office'.

Comments related to the physical school environment were *always* interrelated with the social aspect of school life and relationships that children have within the school. Children frequently spoke about missing significant people, often their teachers, as Joanna (age 7) explained 'You could, like see your Mam and Dad but you didn't see the teacher, that was a bad bit, I missed him'. Darcy (age 7) also represented this in her drawing during activity one, which is visible in Figure 2.



Figure 1. Jessica (age 7) – Missing my school and friends.



Figure 2. Darcy (age 7) has drawn a picture of her teachers saying that she missed seeing them during the lockdowns.

This sentiment was supported by Heidi (age 6) who noted not being able to physically meet with significant others with a sense of sadness: '[I felt] a little bit sad because I didn't get to see my teacher and my friends'. Indeed, many children spoke about experiencing negative feelings as a result of not seeing others and frequently feeling 'sad'. Children often associated an inability to be physically with teachers within the school environment as having a detrimental impact on learning opportunities, for example Sofia (age 7), commented that: '(In lockdown) I couldn't see my teacher and I couldn't learn properly'.

Whilst children's voices were foregrounded within the study, the voices of significant adults corroborated what children were saying, as the comments of parent/carer of Noah (aged 5) illustrates:

We ... struggle(d) with it ... it is definitely a positive that he's, he's back in into a class environment.

Parents/carers reported that children missed both teachers and their friends during lockdowns, positioning both as having the potential to support learning within the classroom environment:

I think not being in that class environment with support from the teachers, and you know, his friends, he just, he just wasn't feeling it. So, we had to put in a lot of incentives there for him to like, do the work. But he's more than capable of doing what was set. I think it's just a lack of interest because of the [home] environment. (Parent/carer of Caleb, age 7)

Teachers also found the lack of a physical presence of children within the school environment problematic, since it became harder to help children who were struggling via online communication through a computer screen, and this was contrasted with support that could be offered when they were physically in the school environment. Cerys' (Teacher) views are illustrative of this:

When the young children were in class, I would, see them struggling with a letter and we'd sit down, you'd help them and show them ... I just couldn't do it through a screen ... without being there physically, I found that really, really hard.

The wider school community

When children returned to school between lockdowns and were organised into 'bubbles', data highlighted a sense of loss for activities and relationships which were previously shared with children across the school. The data indicated that children constructed their school experience through

opportunities in which they engaged with children and teachers outside of their class, positioning themselves as part of the wider school community. This was a theme found particularly in the data of the older children (age 6–8) and often related to their view of the negative impact of ‘bubbles’. For example, Daniel (age 8) said that he had always enjoyed playing with nursery children on the field and children from other classes at school, but that this was no longer possible. He added that he missed eating lunch with everybody in the school hall and assemblies and *‘everybody being together’*. Simon (age 7) explained how he did not enjoy online assemblies because he could not see the children from the other classes. Joshua (age 7) complained that he was no longer able to play with the older children on the school pitch. Jamal (age 7) recounted the changes with sadness:

It makes me sad when I was in year one ... All of my friends were in different classes, it was sad when the schools closed. It is sad that in playtime we cannot play together with other classes and also assembly when it was not COVID we could all be together. Before COVID I did cricket but that finished too.

In relation to missing relationships with children outside of their classroom, Eira (age 7) explained that: *‘I really missed friends and the colours of the school and also my favourite teachers. I missed doing fun activities with different teachers, most of all, I missed Julia’*. She described how Julia was now in a different ‘bubble’ to her and that this meant that they were unable to play together during the school day. This was also visible in the voices of parents/carers who maintained that the use of ‘bubbles’ was *‘what is upsetting [her] most this year’* (Parent/carer of Eira, age 7) since it restricted the opportunity for children to interact beyond a very tightly predefined group of children, about whom they had no choice.

Whilst children expressed sadness that restrictions had impacted upon their ability to interact with the wider school community, teachers went beyond this and suggested that this had led to negative consequences. As Rachel’s (Teacher) comments indicate, the lack of opportunity for children to interact with children outside of the ‘bubbles’ (and therefore as part of the wider school community) was believed to have caused frequent low-level conflict between children:

Since September ... I’m not allowed to mix bubbles and I really think that because they don’t even have free time to go and play with other children ... those relationships have impacted learning because ... I, I would honestly not even exaggerate, you can probably see every time I come in and come in after lunchtime, I speak to them and the midday supervisor, there’s always been something that’s happened. Like some conflict’s happened between this, usually girls, and not like that they don’t get on but it’s because they just kept in the same space with the same people for so long. And you know, anyone who does that, even adults would get frustrated.

Other teachers felt that the restriction of social interactions had led to children lacking the ability to be independent, be patient and take turns. Teachers felt that these skills would ordinarily have been developed in the early years of school which children had missed:

Like their socialisation skills, their ability to be independent, their ability to turn take, it is almost like everything has shifted, everything that I was doing in reception would have been done in nursery, so that turn taking, the playing, the working things out together you do naturally through play and nursery because there isn’t so much formal learning, there was a lot more of that, I felt like I was going back a level and the children were so much more needy, they had had an extra year at home basically. (Eirlys, Teacher)

Summary of findings

This research set out to amplify the voices of young children regarding their experiences of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The creative data-generation methods employed explicitly sought to access young children’s experiences, perceptions and recollections of education during this time. The study and associated findings provide two messages. The first is that children experienced loss during the pandemic, specifically loss of belonging to a school community, loss of time with friends, loss of interaction with teachers, and loss of routines and systems that regulate the school day, week and year. Such powerful messaging indicates what these children valued in

their school-based early education experiences. The second message is that the children were capable and eloquent in being able to express their experiences of learning at home and learning in school while restricted by COVID-19 social distancing regulations. Each of these messages is considered in light of the realisation of process quality through curriculum enactment in early childhood, in the next section.

Discussion

While the finding that young children experienced loss of their school community during their education provision in the pandemic is not new (see e.g. Bowyer-Crane et al. 2021; Creswell et al. 2021; Timmons et al. 2021) this study provides powerful insight into children's perspectives by attending to the voices of children, which is lacking in others studies. It is this insight that allows us to consider, when enacting curriculum for early years children in the post-COVID-19 era: what can we learn from children's insights that can inform curriculum enactment and the realisation of process quality? There are three requirements for undertaking such considerations: (a) the need to ensure that not only do we access the perspectives of young children, but also, that we attend to them in order to fulfil obligations under article 12 of the UNCRC, to hear and *respond* to the perspectives of children (Lundy 2007); (b) to respond to the need to ensure children's perspectives are drawn upon to secure process quality in early childhood (Edwards 2021); and (c), to provide insight to support teachers who are responsible for curriculum enactment, such as those in Wales due to the emphasis on subsidiarity in the CfW. In attending to these requirements, we are able to respond to Wood's (2020) challenge to ensure that we 'understand curriculum as incorporating the dynamic, lived experiences of children, families and communities' (np).

Children reported feelings of belonging experienced in school in which day-to-day routines, learning experiences and social spaces create a compelling sense of community. The recognition of the 'social connectedness' (see Moore et al. 2022) offered by schools, in studies considering the mental wellbeing of older learners, was evident in the reports of the children in this study about what they had lost when unable to attend school. Early studies into the impact of the pandemic on school-aged pupils tended to focus upon 'learning loss' (e.g. Crenna-Jennings, Perera, and Sibieta 2021) and associated catch up programmes, especially for those considered most disadvantaged (e.g. Nugroho et al. 2021). However, despite the early approaches in England that focused on children's behaviour (Moore et al. 2022; Willow 2021), policy emphasis across the UK has shifted to supporting children's emotional recovery from the pandemic (e.g. Welsh Government 2021a). This direction is supported by our findings that children value the social, community and physical interactions that result from being in school and missed these when schools were closed or restricted due to COVID-19.

Furthermore, the data in this study speaks loudly to the need to ensure that curriculum enactment with young children focusses on enhancing the experience of educational belonging and social community that the school community, routines and physical environment can offer. We argue that attending to such experiences supports the realisation of process quality through curriculum enactment. Teachers and leaders might therefore attend to the school community as a basis for curriculum enactment, drawing not only on the improved relationships reported to have occurred between parents/carers and teachers during the pandemic (e.g. Waters-Davies et al. 2022) but also on the fact that the pandemic has been a near-universal experience for all the children for whom they are responsible. Curriculum enactment in the early years may take children's lived experiences as a start point and ensure that relationships are central to young children's school experiences (see also Murray 2020, who argues for the importance of ECE provision in the post-COVID-19 era). The children in this study reported strong connections to each other, to their teachers, to older and younger children and to school routines. Attending to such connections and relationships as a start point for enacting curriculum experiences, responds to the findings of the OECD (2021) regarding the curriculum driver for process quality in early education, considered

above. In the context of Wales, as an example, we argue that the insights provided by this study about ‘*what matters*’ (Welsh Government 2021b) to young children in their early years of school, offer an opportunity for local, relevant and contextual curriculum enactment in the foundation years of the CfW.

The second key message from this study is to emphasise children’s capability to express their experiences with nuance and detail through their choices, drawings, and explanations in the data generation process. Children’s capability to clearly articulate their experiences, to express preferences and rationalise them, as exemplified here (see also the body of work in Church and Bateman 2023), should inform the enactment of curriculum. In this study, children were supported, through the data generation methods enabling adults to ‘listen’ (Lundy 2007), to tell of their experiences. They did this with competence and capability, demonstrating nuance and depth in their telling. Such capability in young children is not new or unusual, however previous empirical work in Wales had indicated that some teachers do not routinely construct young children as capable and this is related to restricted opportunities for participation (see Chicken and Tyrie 2023; Waters-Davies et al. forthcoming). Given the capability demonstrated by children in the study, and the value placed by young children on aspects of provision that are associated with experiences of belonging and social community, we argue that this supports a curriculum-pedagogy relationship in which a responsive and relational pedagogy (see Papatheodorou and Moyles 2009) provides the framework for the enactment of the curriculum, at least in the foundation years. ‘Relational pedagogy offers the tools for attending to, unpacking, deconstructing and reconstructing cognitive and social relationships for learners to become reflective, critical, meaning-making and active citizens of today’s and tomorrow’s world’ (Papatheodorou 2009, 14). These findings cannot, of course, be generalisable beyond those young children involved, however, we argue that these messages are relatable and relevant far beyond the local context of the study. As, within the UK and internationally (OECD 2021), we seek to create curriculum experiences that support children’s long-term outcomes, attention to a critical driver for such outcomes, i.e. process quality, is essential.

Conclusion

Within the context of Wales, this research emphasises that, while there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused immeasurable disruption to the education of our youngest learners, it also provides an opportunity for us to understand what is important to our young children and to use this knowledge to shape curriculum enactment, both now and in the future. The research was conducted at a time point in Wales where local curriculum enactment and teacher agency are emphasised. The data tells us that children value school community, and we can respond to this insight in the enactment of curriculum. Children’s competence is recognised within the data and should, therefore, be acknowledged as a powerful tool in the process of curriculum enactment. In amplifying children’s voices here, we seek to ensure that what children communicate is both heard *and* acted upon, avoiding tokenistic engagement with young children’s feelings and experiences and, instead, harnessing the insight they are so eloquently able to share in support of curriculum enactment. Furthermore, while these insights are valuable in the Welsh context, they are applicable more broadly, as internationally the education sector seeks to create curricula that are contextually and culturally relevant for young children and reflect high process quality (OECD 2021) through responsive and relational pedagogies (see Castner, McMullen, and Buzzelli 2022).

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