Wellbeing and Learning Post-Pandemic: Amplifying the Voices of Early Secondary School Students

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Abstract

Education systems have had to rethink their approach in terms of wellbeing and learning particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the numerous crises being faced across the world. Learner voice has to be woven through all levels of policy in order to understand the experience of young people, during and since the pandemic. Post-Covid, there is a need for educational reform to articulate the direct link between wellbeing and learner progress and to debate the questions of how we assess learner progress. This journal article draws on a small empirical study of learners, conducted by a headteacher researcher in June 2023, to explore participants' experiences of learning in their first two years directly following school closures. The paper draws on literature from the original study, completed in 2023 and literature published since. It aims to highlight the voice of the learners as being crucial to research on wellbeing and learning and to amplify the influence of learner voice on further research and policy making.

The research findings demonstrate that, immediately following the pandemic, young people had a heightened awareness of their own wellbeing and the support that they require. This paper challenges educators to consider how the change in young people's engagement with this aspect of their learning might be used to influence educational reform. The study also highlights the importance of privileging the learner experience with practices that encourage safe articulation of complex feelings.

In terms of learning, the findings suggest that there needs to be a deeper consideration of how and what young people learn, what motivates them to learn and how attitudes both to how and what they learn has changed since the pandemic. While the general discourse of curriculum reform in Scotland is asserted to be in line with the views of the young people, there is a dearth of evidence of young people's voice influencing policy change at all levels.

Keywords: wellbeing and learning, learner voice, learner experience, COVID-19 pandemic, post-pandemic

Introduction: Context and Problem

As a new headteacher in 2021, it was clear that the immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were having a significant impact on the young people and how they were interacting with school. Following the pandemic, the changed societal value placed on wellbeing is evident in the attitudes and actions of young people in school. Society is placing much greater value on mental wellbeing,

prioritising wellbeing over the demands of school structures and expectations. Parents and carers focus more on wellbeing and do not view absence from school as a barrier to learning but rather a way to stay well. This is evident in the decreased attendance rates in school, which are still struggling to return to pre-Covid levels (Klein & Sosu, 2024). Issues such as pressure to catch up, anxiety and fear, which were a clear part of the picture in post-pandemic research (McDonald et al., 2022), continue to be a real concern for families and young people. Such remaining fears about young people's ability to cope in school are reflected in the way that young people are engaging in their learning.

The policy context has also changed in light of the pandemic and highlights the links between wellbeing and learning through research. Fullan (2021) made clear the inter-connectivity of wellbeing and learning and the impact that this has on success. Kiptiony (2024) places even more emphasis on the importance of wellbeing as a focus for success. Schools are responding to the collective trauma experienced by young people during the pandemic and continue to help communities to heal – not just from the symptoms of the pandemic but from the continuing trauma caused by poverty, racism and classism (Parameswaran et al., 2024).

The embedding of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots Law in July 2024, ensures that the views of the child are central to empowering young people in areas which concern their lives. What we might ask is whether the educational policy context is responding to the changing values and views of the young people. Research often has an adult interpretation of the learners' experiences which have become more complex as a result of the pandemic. As we progress with our learning from the pandemic, social and emotional education is becoming prioritised, a key part of this is the emphasis on the learner voice in the design of curriculum around wellbeing and learning (Cefai, 2024).

From analysing the articles utilised in the literature review, only two included empirical research with children or young people, three included voices of experiences of those in young people's lives (such as teachers or family members) and the majority were translated by the voices of school leaders or interpreted through quantitative data studies. In Scotland, educational policy emphasises the importance of learner voice in the design of curriculum and educational reform (Scottish Government, 2023a), however, in much of the existing research it is notably absent.

The tension between global, national and local policy in terms of the emphasis on the voice of the learner and the reality of those voices being absent in the research led to this study. The aim was to explore and amplify the voices of a groups of learners who had been significantly impacted by the pandemic as a result of transition process between primary and secondary education being affected by the school closures. This would help determine whether the views of the learners chimed with the direction being taken by policy reform and highlight the importance of the learner voice in the decisions being made about their educational experience.

Literature Review

As the focus of this paper is on a post-pandemic landscape, only texts which were written in the four years between 2020-2024 are explored. The empirical study asked learners about their views on the changes in their wellbeing and learning since the pandemic – this study was undertaken in 2023. As the participants were asked to look at wellbeing and learning separately, the literature review also looks at them separately.

Exploration of studies which have been developed by organisations with a focus on the learner experience often focus on "school voices" (UNICEF, 2022) rather than "learner voices" and these voices come from school leaders. The "voices" of learners in this case should not be tokenistic

(Pleasance, 2016). National reports such as *School Recovery Strategies: Year 2 Findings* (Department for Education, 2023) also rely on the voices of school leaders and parents. What needs to be redefined is the ability of all children to be able to communicate, we should never assume that the child's voice needs to be expressed through that of an adult or that children should be treated as one homogenous group (Williams, 2023).

Most recently, *All Learners in Scotland Matter: The National Discussion on Education* (Scottish Government, 2023) highlights the inclusion of the voice of a diverse range of learners and places a focus on learning and wellbeing incorporating direct quotation from young people. While the report responds to the voice of the learner and took place post-pandemic, there is a notable silence in terms of any reference to the changes that have taken place in learning and wellbeing as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important that the change in the learner experience since the pandemic and their reflection on the change in learning and wellbeing is included in the reform which is being undertaken as a result of our learning since the pandemic. Currently, there is a disconnect between the discourse and the action.

Eirdosh and Hanisch (2021) outline a compelling project which aims to "empower our students to elevate their voice as drivers in the cultural evolution of their school" (p. 470). The project incorporates as the key elements of focus, learner voice being used to develop understanding of wellbeing (through their topic of human behaviour) and driving learning forward. This project chimes with more current views like that of Kiptiony (2024) and Cefai (2024) which places the context of the learner voice as being central to the impact on the learner empowerment specifically in terms of empiricism.

> Social emotional education by its very nature is built on students' social and emotional experiences and it thus needs to incorporate and validate such experiences for it to be meaningful for them (Cefai, 2024)

What has become more evident in the literature post-pandemic, is greater recognition of the links between wellbeing and learning.

Wellbeing Literature

When exploring the literature on wellbeing post-pandemic, there was an increase in the number of studies which engaged with participants and gathered primary data on the experiences of young people. These texts were mostly transnational and offered insights into the experience of learners and their perception of their wellbeing on returning to school.

Mansfield et al. (2021) present a detailed empirical study on wellbeing in secondary age pupils. However, there are notable gaps here – the voices of pupils were gathered via surveys, much of which then became quantitative data. This reliance on surveys alone – while it can provide qualitative data – does not allow for the probe questions and support which is required in discussions around wellbeing (McGurk & O'Neill, 2016) an area which young people may find challenging to articulate (Skelton, 2008). Other empirical studies (Kim et al., 2021) outline the concerns of teachers on the wellbeing of learners. This is a similar study in structure and approach but focusing not on the voices of learners but rather that of the teachers. It is worth noting that many of the papers which have been written about pupil wellbeing were written *during* the pandemic. Gervais et al. (2022) undertook an empirical study of Canadian children and adolescents focusing on mental wellbeing and the harm that had been caused by the pandemic. Interestingly, while this study took place throughout the pandemic, many of the findings are in line with the views of young people interviewed. Gervais et al. (2022) also emphasise the importance of the learner voice and how they perceive the experience of the pandemic as being crucial to us understanding

wellbeing. This study proved to be of particular interest as there was qualitative data concerning "Anticipating and Appreciating the Return to School" (Gervais et al., 2022, p. 12) which provided an interesting comparison between the experience during the pandemic and the experience of returning to school.

Grey literature, reports and research carried out by non-academic organisations, also provide an insight into the changes in wellbeing before and after the pandemic. The Scottish Government report *Secondary School-Aged Pupils in Scotland: Mental Wellbeing, Relationships and Social Media* (2021), shows the findings by Ipsos MORI's Young People in Scotland Survey and offers a detailed picture of the mental wellbeing of pupils post-pandemic. However, this was once again done through surveys, the limits of which are stated in the report:

> Limitations include not knowing how accurately the pupils' responses reflect their actual experiences, and pupils who volunteer to complete the surveys potentially differing from those who choose not to complete it' (Scottish Government, 2021, p. 11).

These limits should not be underestimated in a world where wellbeing is at the fore of social and educational concerns (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022). What is missing in the literature is qualitative data, gathered directly from young people post-pandemic and obvious communication that such data should be used to shape policy. Even before the pandemic, there was a need to gather wellbeing data as measuring wellbeing has always presented challenges (Kempf, 2018). During the pandemic there are studies which aim to address this, often in detail and through quantitative study, but the voice of the learner is silent in the two years since returning to school, particularly in terms of wellbeing.

Learning Literature

Learning post-pandemic has been at the centre of reform in Scotland. What we learned about ourselves and about our system had a significant impact on policy makers and on the teaching profession. In the *All Learners in Scotland Matter* report (Scottish Government, 2023a) it is clear that learners want to see a broader range of topics and many of these related to practical and social skills. Much of this is in line with the notion that since the pandemic, learners have felt more aware that learning needs to prepare them to actively participate in society: "More lessons in things that will affect us in the real world so that we will be ready" (Scottish Government, 2023a, p. 27). This could be in response to the disruption of a society that they previously understood. The educational reform report *It's Our Future* (Scottish Government, 2023c) outlines a Scottish Diploma which will respond to views of learners around how they will be assessed and what will be included in the assessment.

The literature proffered by the search terms links closely with this view that learning post-pandemic needs to have a greater focus on social learning: "We need to look beyond learning as an intellectual exercise, to learning that builds the emotional and social intelligence of our children." Kiptiony (2024, p. 3) We also require learning that will serve the needs of society, beyond quantitative data from high-staked assessments that perpetuate a neoliberal system. Ladson-Billings (2021) highlights the importance of "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 71) including the awareness of social issues, how they are influenced by policy, and how they might influence policy and pedagogy which reflects their own lives and experience. This view is echoed in the work of Curran et al. (2022) when considering the re-imagining of Community Youth Work. Hammerstein et al. (2021) undertake a systematic review of the impact of the pandemic on achievement but the study uses test scores as part of the criteria to determine the effect. It is this aspect of measuring achievement which we need to rethink and which can only be done successfully by talking to learners about their learning. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) now being in Scots law, identifies a key aspect of the importance of this in terms of a right to an

education which develops a personality as well as talents and abilities. To be able to express their views is central to this idea and is very much a core part of education.

Methodology

The study sought to answer the overarching question:

In a post pandemic Scotland, to what extent are the views of the learner, with regards to wellbeing and learning, reflected in the policy development and enactment?

Three sub-questions were also explored:

1. To what extent are learner's voices represented in post-pandemic research literature and policy?
2. What are the young people's perceptions of the impact on their wellbeing and learning in the first two years post pandemic?
3. How can the amplification of young people's voices better inform educational policy?

An empirical study was chosen as a result of the gaps in research which included a direct voice of young people. The *headteacher as researcher* role meant that careful consideration had to be given to the ethical approval process as well as the impact of the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Hence the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach (Braun & Clark, 2022) that explicitly acknowledges the positionality of the researcher.

The method of reflexive thematic analysis was used as it aims to *give voice* to participants and tell their stories in a straightforward way (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 56). It does not aim to test a hypothesis but rather to engage with the perspectives of the data and to interpret these perspectives. This led to the generation of themes which led to ideas with a view that they could be used to influence policy.

The objective of the study was to work with learners who had been significantly impacted by the pandemic and the school closures. The selection of early years secondary pupils, aged between 12 and 14 was due to the missed transition point of upper primary school and the impact that this may have had on wellbeing and learning. Observations of young people entering first year of secondary saw a significant change in their wellbeing, higher levels of anxiety around school, reduced attendance in S1 and an increase in non-attendance were evident. In terms of learning, the first year of secondary cohort showed reduced literacy and numeracy levels as well as challenges in learning in the classroom environment as part of a group.

The process of data collection was as follows:

- Surveys: 20 participants selected, 13 agreed to undertaking two surveys on wellbeing and learning, survey responses used to develop interview protocol
- Interviews: five participants interviewed on wellbeing and learning, 30-minute interviews.
- Analysis: six steps of reflexive thematic analysis, themes generated from interview transcriptions, themes analysed.

Twenty learners were selected for questionnaires and 13 took part. Of the 13, five were taken forward to semi-structured interviews (Britten, 2006). The method of collecting and analysing the data collection, which was only completed by one coder due to the small sample size, was synthesized from the work of Braun & Clarke (2006) and is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Six Step Data Collection and Analysis (synthesised from Braun & Clarke, 2006)
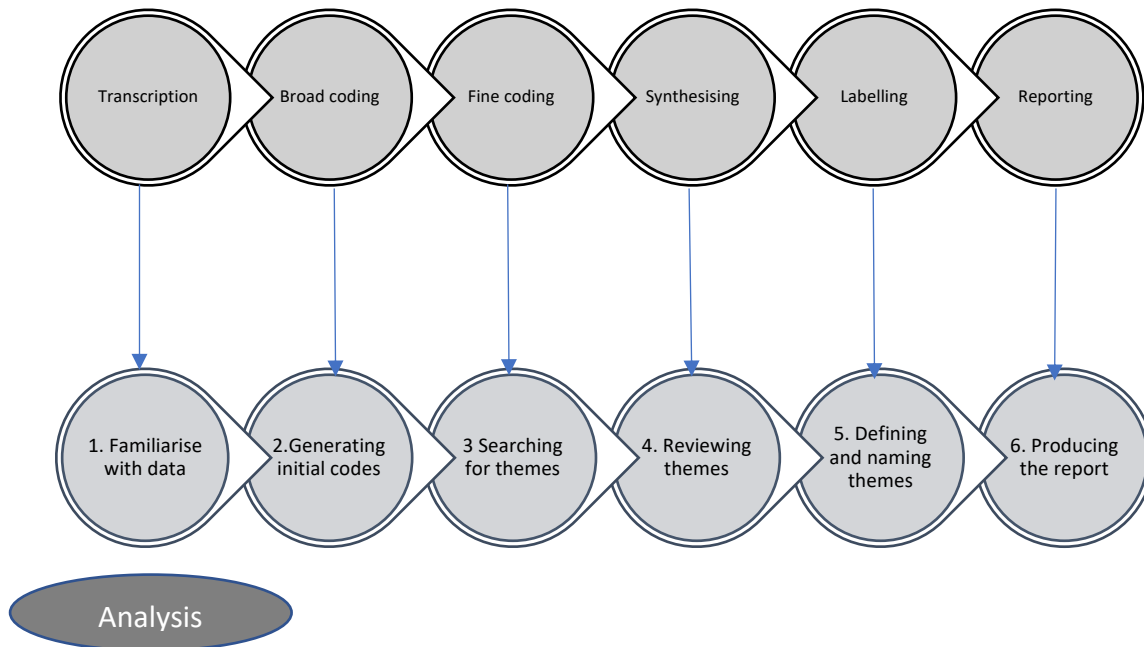
Data items and codes were created to organise the findings. A worked example is given in Figure 2:

Figure 2

Worked Example of Data Collection and Coding Approaches
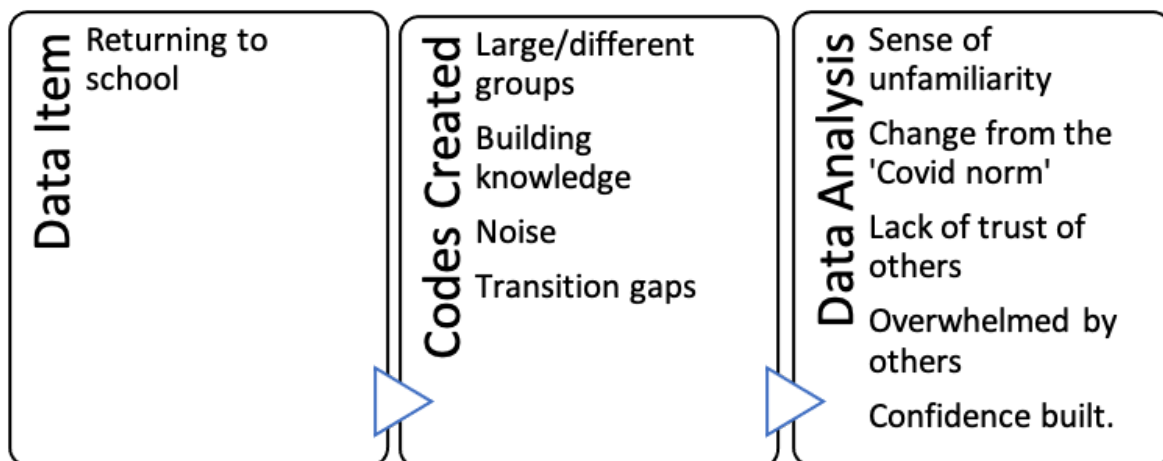
Themes were drawn from the qualitative data which contributed to the defining the headlines for the findings and how these would be useful or relevant to policymaking around wellbeing and learning in the post-pandemic reform of education.

Findings and Discussion

At a time when wellbeing is being recognised in society as vital to the individual's ability to undertake an active role in working or learning, the findings from the participants were very relevant. The themes which came through both in terms of wellbeing and learning illuminated aspects which learners felt strongly about. Wellbeing was certainly the area on which participants were able to speak about with the most confidence.

It was interesting to witness the change in young people's capacity to talk about their wellbeing which could be related to their experience of the pandemic and the environmental conditions of the wellbeing of everyone being highlighted on the media and on their return to school. It could also be related to the changes in policy and the participants' consciousness of this focus through consultations such as the *National Discussion* (Scottish Government, 2023a), the *Health and Wellbeing Survey 2020/2021* (Scottish Government, 2023b) and *Getting it Right for Every Child* (Scottish Government, 2022).

The findings were divided into two sections, wellbeing and learning. Each section contained 3 themes, shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

Wellbeing

Figure 3
Wellbeing Themes and Findings from Data Collection
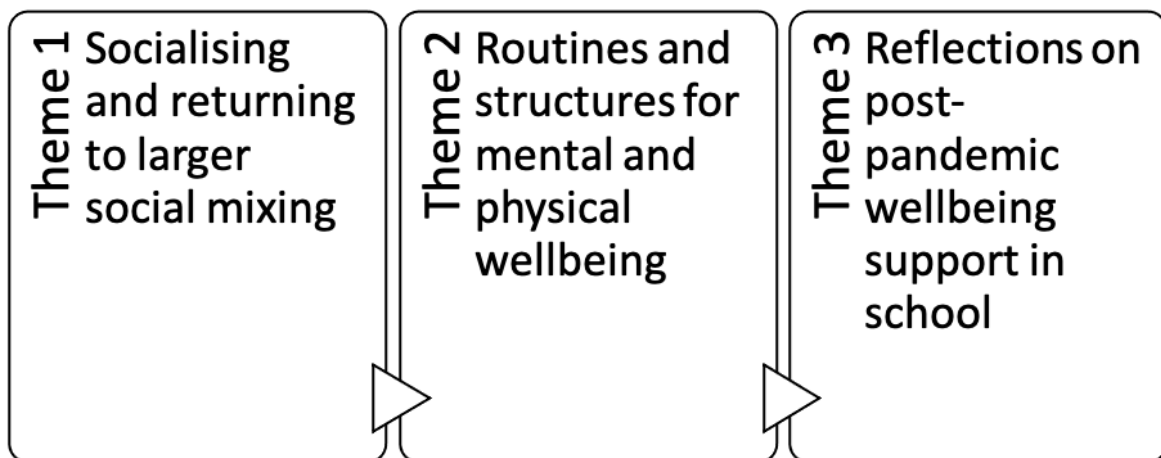
Some of the young people were able to identify that they felt overwhelmed at returning to school. They were unused to large groups of people and that they struggled with noise and with the requirement to be social in groups. However, there were those who indicated that they could see an improvement in their wellbeing as a result of returning to groups. Where young people felt comfortable coming back into larger groups there was a sense of excitement and a feeling that this socialisation was very important to them.

Theme 2 highlighted that young people recognised that routine and structure were an important part of their lives, perhaps in a way that they had not previously realised. The extreme *unknown* nature of lockdown and the lack of any real direction in how to navigate life was stressful and highlighted to young people that routines and structures were important in order for them to feel

calm. This finding suggested that there was a maturity of thinking in the young people interviewed which may not have been there had Covid not impacted their lives.
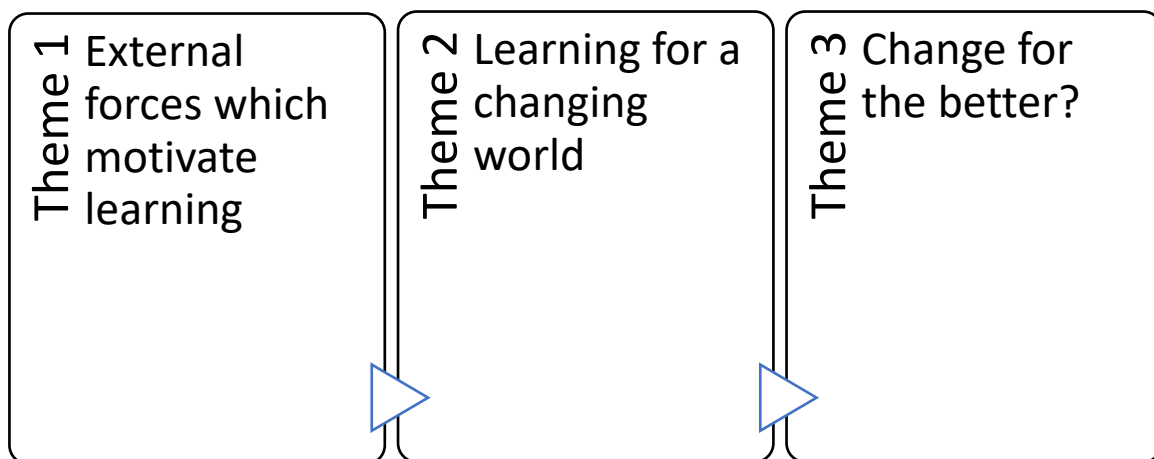
In contrast to this, other young people found the return to the routines a challenge; since the pandemic this would seem to have been the more common supposition about teenagers returning to the demands and structures of school life. These young people believed that routines were not important and that they had little or no impact on their mental wellbeing.

The third theme was drawn from the participants' reflections on the post-Covid offer in schools. For one participant who had engaged with mental health support, there was a sense that the support had changed significantly since the pandemic. They observed that there was a lot more on offer for learners. There was a positive view of the improved communication between staff and pupils which had improved the way that they viewed staff and the support being offered by staff.

Learning

Figure 4
Learning Themes and Findings from Data Collection

Theme 1 External forces which motivate learning	Theme 2 Learning for a changing world	Theme 3 Change for the better?

Theme 1 was drawn from the participants' comments on motivation for learning. The young people interviewed reflected that they had noticed a change, not in motivation itself but rather in how they were motivated and what they had learned about this during the time that they had to self-motivate when schools were closed.

Interestingly, this aspect really offered two perspectives. There was a clear sense that throughout the pandemic when lives were being lost and there was turbulence in all areas of life, young people felt a sense of pointlessness to learning – that learning was not going to change anything and that they were not in control of anything. Young people recognised their phones and social media as a non-motivating aspect of learning. They were reliant on devices and this was also where they were getting a lot of their information.

However, there was a clear thread that learning is a social activity and that young people view learning as being better when done together. Learning together motivates them and this was something that they really missed during the pandemic. Feedback from peers was certainly something that they had missed and this recognition underlines the importance of the pedagogy that the participants missed.

Learning theme 2 was drawn more from the surveys and required some probing questions. Participants were able to illuminate on some of the ideas around real-life contexts for learning. They recognised some of this in the curriculum but felt that they had become more connected to learning about the present world throughout the pandemic and that this wasn't always explicit in the curriculum they experienced at school. The participants suggested that the learning which was self-motivated by interest and current affairs is more successful in developing learning than that which is determined by teachers. In addition to current affairs they spoke about learning from adults in the home about their work and their finances which they saw as relevant and motivating learning experiences. Participants felt strongly that what we need to learn has changed since the pandemic. The world has changed and they have changed with it as a result, so have their learning needs.

What theme 3 highlighted were the positives in how the learning has changed since the pandemic. The use of digital technologies was highlighted as a positive. The learners were better able to communicate with their teachers (also highlighted in wellbeing theme 3). Learning was more controlled by the learner when digital was being used to support learning. Participants felt that the social aspect of learning needed to be recognised by teachers as an important part of the learning as it was one of the things which had been most missed – being able to work in groups and to solve problems together. This was both in terms of collaboration and in terms of competition which was an interesting contrast and seemed very relevant in terms of skills development.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is essential that we amplify the voices of learners in order to develop a culturally/socially relevant, learner led and skills driven curriculum. Empirical research with learners needs to continue as we traverse a new educational experience. Learners' views will help to shape the new approaches required to support effective pedagogies and practices and empower learners to determine what they learn and how they learn it. It could be that this supports improving attendance and engagement which have been problematic since 2020.

Current social norms which existed pre-pandemic but which are intensified in a post-pandemic society are having a negative effect on the wellbeing of learners. Developing social and emotional beings through a renewed focus in this aspect of their holistic education will offer learners the ability to better articulate their experiences both socially and educationally. But in order to do this with greatest effect, we need to empower learners to have a key role in the way we design curriculum.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, Scotland's education community recognised key issues such as our assessment system and took steps to address what we had learned through the Scottish Government (2023c) *It's our Future* report and *All Learners in Scotland Matter*: *The National Discussion on Education* (2023a), but while the research is there, we are yet to act on this in any meaningful way. Scottish education needs to be braver and more decisive in the actions it takes next. It should be acted upon by Qualifications Scotland the new organisation outlined in the Education (Scotland) Bill (2024). Wellbeing and learning must coexist in the curriculum alongside authentic engagement with learners in our next steps as an education system.

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