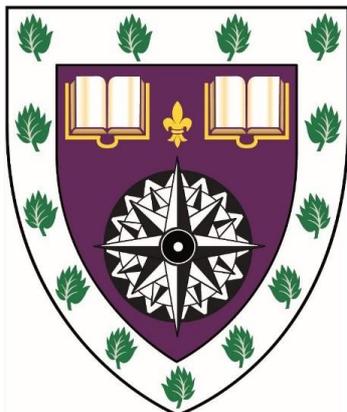


**The Effective Use of Evidence by Early Career Teachers in Rural Settings –
Final Report: Summary Findings**

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June 2021**

**Scottish Council of Deans of Education
Scottish Attainment Challenge Project**



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Project members

This report has been produced by Mark Lindley-Highfield and is the product of research carried out over a three-year period. The project has been supervised by Professor Morag Redford, the Chair of Scottish Attainment Challenge project panel.

PROFESSOR MORAG REDFORD

Professor Morag Redford was educated at the Universities of Edinburgh, Hull and Stirling, and at Jordanhill College of Education. Professor Redford's fields of expertise are teacher education and the interface between research, policy and practice; with a focus on professional learning, interprofessional practice and the political administration of Scottish Education. Professor Redford recently served as Chair of the Scottish Council of Deans of Education and has been leading the SAC Project since August 2020. She publishes regularly on education in the Scottish Parliament and contributed chapters on the political administration of education to the core text on Scottish education. Her early research in professional learning led to the design of an analytic structure to support teachers carrying out action research in their settings (Buchanan and Redford, 2008), work that led to commissions from the Scottish Arts Council, the Educational Institute for Scotland; and from the Scottish Government to lead the design of a Scottish Framework for Masters in Education. Professor Redford's research in interprofessional practice has been presented internationally, secured research funding and directly informed the development of Interprofessional Masters provision at the University of Stirling. Her current research interests include rural education, the political implementation of national policy in Scotland, and Education Partnership networks.

MARK LINDLEY-HIGHFIELD OF BALLUMBIE CASTLE

Mark Lindley-Highfield is an anthropologist by training, who studied at the Universities of Oxford, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, and the Open University. Mark is a Lecturer in Teacher Education at the University of the Highlands and Islands in Inverness and teaches on the PGDE programmes, Psychology and Philosophy degrees, as well as on the MEd in Critical Enquiry. He is the Programme Leader for the new BA (Hons) degree in Moral and Philosophical Studies with Religious Education, for those seeking to qualify as Secondary Teachers of Religious Education or RMPS. Mark's teaching and research interests centre on the use of observational techniques to inform teaching practices, and on synergies between this and the ethnographic method. He is particularly interested in rural education and the use of online media to facilitate professional collaboration and learning. For two recent academic years, Mark was seconded to the University of Dundee for part of his time to lead groups of student teachers on the Rural Learn To Teach PGDE programme. Mark represents UHI at the Scottish Educational Research Association, and is co-convenor of the Applied Anthropology Network of the Association of Social Anthropologist of the UK and the Commonwealth. Mark is also a member of the International Committee of Kappa Delta Pi, the international honour society for Education.

Executive summary

This report brings together the findings of three years of research by the University of the Highlands and Islands as part of the Scottish Council of Deans of Education's Scottish Attainment Challenge research project. Fuller discussions on information reported here can be found in our interim report (Redford et al, 2020), which provides more detail on individual elements of our findings. This report supplements the interim report with additional information about participants' use of evidence, and their experience of participating in the online community of practice developed as part of the research process, and summarises the overall findings of the research project.

Our investigations focused on early career teachers' use of evidence to close the poverty-related attainment gap and to raise attainment in Literacy, Numeracy, and Health and Wellbeing in rural areas for learners from the two most deprived deciles of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Even this initial research focus presented us with difficulties, as we found that the two most deprived deciles of the SIMD do not capture rural poverty in our region accurately, and thus our remit had to extend beyond this initial criterion.

Our key findings include that early career teachers are more comfortable with resources of support than pedagogical approaches for the closing of the attainment gap. They prefer to work with particular schemes, or resources that structure interventions for them. The practitioners reported that Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) was having an impact in closing the poverty-related attainment gap, by facilitating the acquisition of such resources and in enabling learners to benefit from one-to-one or small group support to raise their attainment in Literacy and Numeracy in particular.

We found that educators knowing their pupils and the communities they come from well helps to motivate learners and thus engages them in ways that assist in closing the attainment gap. This sits well with another finding that teacher agency is essential for the identification of pupils in need of additional support in rural areas, rather than any reliance on national indices, such as the SIMD.

We discovered that practitioner enquiry boosts early career teachers' confidence and encourages them to try out new things, including entrusting their learners more, which enables them to make changes to benefit the pupils in their classrooms. Practitioner enquiry gives them a framework for generating evidence, to which they can respond. In addition, we found that the rural learning environment is appreciated by practitioners as a place to live and to work, and that structures such as formats of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and new ways of working can promote the retention of practitioners in their communities or facilitate their return to the same, meaning that learners benefit from educators who know and understand their communities and contexts well.

The new ways of working that have arisen during the Coronavirus outbreak have also provided valuable opportunities to restructure the industries and professions present in rural areas and thus to provide aspirational models for learners, which could contribute to a countering of the leaving or escape discourse, which may have an impact on attainment in

some rural areas. Finally, we have learned that the sort of facility we created in order to carry out the research, which brought together educators from across different stages, schools, and local authorities, has provided practitioners with a valuable space in which to engage in discourse about practice, which can otherwise be absent or of limited availability in rural areas.

This research process has made it clear that there is no one, single rural Scotland, and there is a need to understand the diversity of Scotland's rural areas to ensure that education in rural areas receives the support it needs to fulfil its role in the closing of the poverty-related attainment gap.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected this research by taking a place in the discourse that it would not otherwise have occupied, and by limiting opportunities to visit school settings to gain additional evidence. Deprivation is now viewed through the lens of the impact of the virus and the resultant displacement of learners during the lockdown periods, which altered the material conditions in which people were living and learning. This clearly is an issue of significance for any reflection on attainment.

The findings of the research have led to the modification of some of our existing provision in relation to equity and social justice, and leave us wishing to explore one of the findings further, relating to the facilitation of discussion between practitioners in smaller and more remote schools.

List of abbreviations

GTCS	General Teaching Council of Scotland
HWB	Health and Wellbeing
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development
PEF	Pupil Equity Funding
RMPS	Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies
SAC	Scottish Attainment Challenge
SIMD	Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
SNSA	Scottish National Standardised Assessments
TIS	Teacher Induction Scheme
UHI	University of the Highlands and Islands

Introduction

The poverty-related attainment gaps is well established in the literature (Sosu and Ellis, 2014) and in official statistics (Scottish Government, 2019a). February 2015 saw the launch of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC), which was instigated to address the poverty-related attainment gap and to promote improvement work in Literacy, Numeracy and Health and Wellbeing. The National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan support the Challenge and communicate an array of other measures and initiatives that create opportunities for young people to excel in and beyond their education in an equitable manner.

The Scottish Council of Deans of Education's SAC project's broader aim is to develop pedagogies that work for pre-service and early career teachers to reduce the attainment gap in Literacy, Numeracy and Health and Wellbeing. As part of this, the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) determined to examine the effective use of evidence by early career teachers in rural settings. There were two particular reasons for this: First of all, UHI is set in a uniquely vast rural region of Scotland, double the size of Wales and about the same size of Belgium. We are embedded in a rural context and prepare educators who work in this region and beyond. Secondly, as an institution, we have some expertise in practitioner enquiry, which features prominently in our PGDE programmes and is central to our postgraduate Master's degree in Education. We thus have interests in rurality and in the use of evidence.

The research on which this report is based falls within a larger study, funded by the Scottish Government, which is concerned with empowering early career teachers, i.e. those in ITE, the Teacher Induction Scheme year (or on the flexible route to qualification as a teacher), or in their first year of full registration as a teacher, to work effectively to enhance attainment and engagement for pupils from the 20% most deprived areas of the SIMD dataset, or equivalent in rural areas, as we will come to consider.

Säfström (2018) has discussed the role of supranational forces in determining the relative value and measures of evidence-based practice, noting the pattern of the adoption of evidence-based practice internationally within national education systems. This report considers an issue that such an approach raises.

Being situated in a rural context, the UHI aspect of this research focuses on rural education. Rural deprivation is not always captured by the SIMD deciles, as this report will come to show. Early career teachers working in rural areas may be teaching in composite classes with a small number of pupils from a wide range of SIMD deciles. The datasets and evidence which teachers use, in rural schools, to make effective decisions in relation to improving engagement and attainment, are potentially less stable than they are for their urban counterparts. This study focuses on developing early career teachers' capacity to make effective decisions when engaging with evidence in rural settings.

The key research question the UHI project was addressing was: What can we do we as a teacher education institution to support early career practitioners in rural settings to use evidence effectively?

For the purposes of this project, the effective use of evidence would involve the following three objectives, on a collaborative basis:

- To develop effective pedagogies for rural teachers to utilise when working with pupils who sit in the SIMD deciles 1 and 2;
- To develop effective approaches to engaging with evidence to inform practice in rural schools; and
- To develop understanding in the ways that rural teachers can be supported to develop new pedagogies and evidence-informed practice.

We will consider the implications for our provision in light of the response to this question and in relation to what we discover in terms of these objectives.

Methodological approach

This project is based on face-to-face and online semi-structured focus groups and discursive activities held in the Local Authority areas and in an online space, the Virtual Classroom (Bongo) on a platform called Brightspace. The researchers attended local probationer events across the UHI region during August and September 2018 and between August and December 2019 for each year's intake of NQTs (Newly Qualified Teachers), both Primary and Secondary. These face-to-face events provided the opportunity to recruit interested parties to engage in the ongoing online discussions that would take place monthly over the remainder of the academic year. In 2018-19, up to ten NQTs participated from three local authorities. In the 2019-20 school year, we attended a Probationer event at each of the Highland Council, Moray, Shetland, Orkney, Western Isles, and Argyll and Bute local authorities' staff development sessions for NQTs. This meant that almost all NQTs took part in the face-to-face first phase of the study.

Over 20 probationers were recruited to participate in the online aspect of the study for 2019-20, although attendance was rotational, but all six partner authorities were participating in a mixed group, if not all at once. The findings from this initial phase of evidence-gathering have informed later stages of the research in which we have sought to build communities of practice across rural schools and the partner authorities (Wenger, 1999).

The face-to-face phase of the project focused on perceptions of the challenges of rurality and how deprivation is manifest in the unique settings of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Within the online space, this moved onto discussions about the attainment gap, evidence used to identify pupils for support, and interventions they were using that were proving successful. This second phase involved engagement in professional discussions around the visibility and understanding of the Attainment Challenge within school settings,

as well as identifying effective pedagogies in Literacy, Numeracy and Health and Wellbeing. To support the second phase of the project, one local authority requested an input on carrying out practitioner enquiry and every NQT working for that authority was asked to carry out their enquiry on an aspect of practice related to the SAC. Another local authority recommended that their NQTs focus on closing the attainment gap as the topic of their enquiry for the year.

The final phase of the study, in the 2020-21 academic year, involved four participants from the 2019-20 year coming back as mentors for the new cohort of NQTs who participated in the study and addressed the above issues afresh.

Ethical approval was received for the study by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Highlands and Islands, as well as a part of the wider project here.

School visits were carried out between October 2018 and January 2019 and in Spring 2020. The evidence from the school visits has been considered in the production of this report, however additional school visits in the 2020-21 school year were not possible owing to the virus outbreak, so this information has been limited. The school visits were one-to-one semi-structured interviews with class teachers and head teachers to build an understanding of how evidence is being used in rural schools in relation to the attainment gap in particular.

During the final analysis, evidence from the school visits has been analysed alongside evidence generated from the face-to-face and online focus groups. From an institutional perspective, UHI is carrying out an enquiry (Timperley et al, 2014) into whether these interventions help early career teachers in rural settings to use evidence effectively. The evidence gathered will be evaluated for effectiveness in advancing this aim. Similarly, we will reflect on the success of introducing mentors from the previous year's cohort of NQTs. The final online session consisted of a debrief and reflection on the whole process to gain feedback from the participants. The findings will be shared with the participating local authorities through a presentation in addition to this overarching project submission.

Analytical approach

As part of the interim report on this research (Redford et al, 2020), the participants' involvement within the project was assessed in terms of the teacher agency framework (Priestley et al, 2015) and in relation to the processes of the spiral of enquiry (Timperley et al, 2014). This was chiefly to understand the relative agentic capacity of the early career teachers to use evidence effectively, and also to contextualise their reflections within a practitioner enquiry framework. This final report considers the merit of that practitioner enquiry approach and how it was engaged with by the participants. The issue of agency will be reflected on in terms of its significance for decision-making.

This analysis is predicated on a socio-constructivist philosophical position (Hodkinson et al, 2007), in that it is seeking to identify meaning as it has developed through the discussions of, in particular, the online community created during this research process. The perspectives of the early career teachers will be communicated through a narrative analysis

(Bahktin, 1981; Wertsch, 1991), as this qualitative approach allows the voice of the rural participants to come to the fore, as is advocated by Corbett and White (2014).

Analysis

The evidence gathered during the three phases of the project is reproduced here in symbolic representations of the narrative discourse recorded in the face-to-face and online discussion sessions, organised under headings representing the key themes revealed in the research. This evidence is termed symbolic in relation to its representativeness, as we seek for it to represent the different viewpoints that were revealed within the research, which have been portrayed here in the form of indicative content. It is not the intention of this study that it repeats every piece of evidence gathered, but rather that it achieves authenticity through presenting accurate narratives that were typical of the general responses received and that are trustworthy reflections of the contributions of individual participants in the research.

All participants' names have been changed for the purposes of maintaining anonymity and preserving the confidentiality of those taking part in the research, to whom we are most grateful for their participation and generosity with their time.

There is not one rural Scotland in terms of education

In our interim report, we referred to the homogenisation of assessment standards through supranational structures (Redford et al, 2020). While there are clearly benefits to be had in terms of international comparability, scholars such as Naidoo (2018) have noted the delocalising force of the OECD and this leading onto a universalisation of contexts of education. A key example of this was the OECD's (2015) identification of Scotland as a place where rural education outperforms urban education, which was identified as an international anomaly. While we should be rightly proud of the performance of our rural schools that makes this claim the case, as we documented earlier, 'pupils in remote schools score more poorly than those from other areas in attainment data in almost all levels of the Curriculum for Excellence against expectations for their stage' (Redford et al, 2020, p.8). This term 'remote rural schools' reveals that rurality is broken down into different categories (Scottish Government, 2020a). There is thus an attainment gap between pupils in remote rural schools and in remote small towns, and those pupils in accessible small towns and accessible rural areas (Scottish Government, 2019b). Furthermore, those in remote small towns and remote rural schools also experience an attainment gap compared to those in large urban areas and other urban areas. So, while reading the OECD report might infer that rural education in Scotland is its peak performer, the reality is that pupils in schools in remote small towns and in remote rural schools suffer the largest attainment gap on average compared to their counterparts.

This evidence reveals that we cannot freely refer to rural education as if it encompasses any singular form of experience, but instead need to appreciate the diversity that there is to rural education, and that – clearly – rural schools require support to close the attainment gap as much as do those in urban areas. That the Attainment Challenge Authorities were largely in the urban central belt reveals the perception that the attainment gap is chiefly an urban phenomenon, and while this is where there is a density of population where there are attainment support needs, to ensure equity we need to be reaching out to these more sparsely populated rural communities also.

Crypto-poverty in rural Scotland

The Scottish Government's (2020b) notes accompanying the release of the SIMD data in 2020 highlighted three areas in which the SIMD data may not accurately represent deprivation in rural areas: Firstly, rural areas in the dataset tend to include larger geographical expanses. Secondly, any concentration of deprivation is likely to be smaller in a rural area. Thirdly, issues affecting people in rural areas, such as distance to employment and services, and transportation issues, carry less weighting than other aspects measured, such as income and employment levels. Collectively, these issues mean that material conditions which affect someone experiencing deprivation in a more rural location, such as the Highlands and Islands, may not register significantly as issues of deprivation (fuel poverty is such an example (Scottish Government, 2019c)). As the SIMD looks at larger geographical expanses in rural areas, these are much more likely to have a wide variety of housing and relative levels of deprivation, making it less likely that a high proportion of residents will be recorded as deprived, masking the exceptions to this, who can be in cases of extreme deprivation, but in an area not showing as particularly deprived. An example we could consider here is Orkney, where rural poverty is often not visible but is acknowledged to be present, with Orkney Health and Care (2019) recognising that Orkney is generally regarded as an affluent community and one of the best places to live and grow up in the UK, but with research from 2018 showing that 14% of children in Orkney grow up in poverty and that three-quarters of income- or employment-deprived people in Orkney do not live in Orkney's most deprived areas, hence why they would not register in the most deprived groupings of the SIMD.

I have labelled this situation, in which there are people who are in real situations of deprivation in areas that do not appear in the SIMD as particularly deprived, as *crypto-poverty*, as the poverty is hidden in the index. The reality, however, of the experience of these learners was noted by participants in this research, as we presented in the interim report. One such an example was that of Moira (all names have been changed to maintain confidentiality and to preserve anonymity), who recounted information about two learners her school was supporting through interventions:

There are two of them and neither falls under PEF. New to the school, one child has been identified because there's a specific plan required for the individual for his... he

has some learning difficulties. So we have a heightened awareness of the pupil's wellbeing, and where he lives, the difficulties he has with getting access to school, engagements with families, knowledge of the family's history. So being aware where the child lives and who he is, determines how we engage moving forward. [...] With the other child: it's similar: as being in Primary 3 there's two years previous history of engagement, or a lack of engagement through a lack of parental engagement, shall I say, that has elaborated on their family situation, so for that one there's no income and no employment.

Moira expanded on the situation of the first of these two learners, who was new to the school:

I am aware it is a low income family, low education, problems with housing. He has health issues but his sibling does not. There's evidence of crime. When I say it [has] not [got] geographical access it's... the family can't drive or have as much access to get him to school unless it is on the school bus, etc., because it is a very rural school. So their neighbours may be more affluent, like isolated, bigger houses, but this is a small... smaller cottage.

(Redford et al, 2020, p.15)

Moira's account reveals both the diversity to the types of homes and socio-economic backgrounds of those living in this particular area, and the extent to which this particular learner is affected by issues measured by the SIMD. If the family's low income is linked to employment issues, then this learner is affected by each issue that the SIMD seeks to take into account. The area in which they live, however, is not in the quintile of the most deprived locations. This issue reveals that, in rural areas, we need to be more reliant on teacher agency and the teachers' professional judgment as to whether a learner is in a situation of deprivation, instead of looking at the SIMD background of learners in a class. Of course, Getting It Right For Every Child means taking into account the specific individual circumstances of each learner anyway, yet the tracking of learners along the lines of SIMD band will be less meaningful in a rural context. This scenario was explained by Anna:

We are a rural school and our children come from a very, very long way away. They can come from about 25 miles away. So between all the distances the SIMD is very different and there is a very ...difference in community between the houses. So a neighbour to another neighbour could be a big house to a very deprived family using foodbanks. So we've got that, kind of, that same problem as well, and, erm, but we don't really have the SIMD.

(Redford et al, 2020, p.16)

By not really having the SIMD, Anna meant that the SIMD band of this area did not seem to acknowledge the deprivation present, despite some families' dependency on food banks. What she did show, however, like her other peers participating in the research, was that she had a firm grasp on which of her pupils were in situations of need, leaving her in a position of knowing that she needed to support them. Heather pointed to the procedure her school used to identify such learners:

Our headteacher is very proactive in identifying the pupils relevant to the attainment gap. We use the SNSA, teacher judgement, PEF info and tracking information to inform our groups. The attainment gap is first and foremost. PEF is not the first indicator in our case. We have very few PEF pupils and a large attainment gap.

(Redford et al, 2020, p.14)

Heather's example shows that schools have to be resourceful to support their learners who are most in need, as the existing funding model might not support them.

Resources of support

The overarching research question for the Scottish Attainment Challenge research project invited us to investigate pedagogies that work for closing the attainment gap, and such was the language we invoked when engaging with early career teachers. Interestingly, the language with which they replied was not so levelly grounded in pedagogy. It became apparent that NQTs were much more comfortable in describing interventions in terms of resources than in terms of pedagogy. Whether this is a shift from the pedagogical domination of their academic programmes of Initial Teacher Education to the now practice-dominated domain of school remains an unanswered question, however for whatever reason the language of resourcing was the norm.

Emily, a NQT in a larger school, listed off the resources in which the school had invested (Redford et al, 2020, p.20):

[The] majority of the PEF money, it's not exclusive, but the majority of it was spent on those children in terms of Health and Wellbeing interventions in order to try to meet their social, emotional and economic needs. So things like sessions called Seasons for Growth, drama sessions, Dynamic Youth awards, ASN parents support groups, 1-2-1 pupil support, Chill & Spill, kitchen clubs, so cooking clubs, Lego, chanter lessons, equine therapy, earth time, so outdoor learning. So that was interesting and that was just from the Health and Wellbeing aspects.

She then explained some of the interventions used for Literacy and Numeracy:

In that case you have got things more like Talk Boost, Education City, Lego story starters, homework club, Literacy Box, Messy spelling and writing, First News newspapers, and then for Numeracy and Maths you've got Number Box, and Plus 1 Power of 2, daily Number Talks, introduced in class. Every day they do Number Talks. You've got new Maths for Scotland textbooks, and Sum Dog. And what was to come next was the creation station, music therapy, yoga, Talk Boost at Second Level, and more data analysis as well.

While Number Talks appear here, which are clearly a pedagogical approach, they are listed alongside a number of other resources or schemes which the school has adopted. Generally, where pedagogies are taken on, they form part of an adopted scheme, as Emma revealed in relation to writing:

We have started doing Talk for Writing, using story mapping. It seems to be working well, although the output of writing is less as it takes so long to do the story mapping. It certainly gives the [pupils who can struggle] a larger bank of vocabulary to use and their punctuation is so much better. Then again, a lot of the writing you get is quite samey. [...] They get the chance to change the story again afterwards. They can write it down from the story map or they can embellish it and make it their own and there's a few in the class who will do that. We've only been doing it for a short time but for those who are more capable it's not so much of a problem, but for those who aren't then the type of work that you get, it might appear better [.]

(Redford et al, 2020, p.22)

Some of the participants stated that PEF was enabling them to close the attainment gap. Many of the resources and schemes that they found effective were purchased with PEF funds. They particularly noted improvement in learners who had had one-to-one support in Literacy or Numeracy, or who had had additional support in small groups, which had been underpinned by this funding, showing the benefit of the learners' needs and areas for development being known well by staff working closely with them.

Knowing their learners and the communities they come from

Amanda told the story of how she managed to engage one of her learners who had been refusing to work in the classroom. The pupil concerned had been benefiting from support in terms of a nurture group, but was not engaging well in class. Amanda chose to spend some of her non-contact time to visit her pupil in the nurture room on a couple of occasions to see what he did and to learn further about how nurture worked, as she had not experienced a nurture setting before then. She explained:

Another time where we basically just had, like, a free play session [in the nurture room] and the thing that I enjoyed most about that, was that this child who was finding it difficult to be with me [in the class] just sat and talked to me for the whole hour and that was actually, I was quite emotional. When I left I thought, gosh, why can't he, what am I doing wrong in the class that he can't speak to me like that there and and I kind of said that to my mentor [...] He [said] ... "He just doesn't like the classroom setting and", you know, "environment." [...] And he said, "It's not you, you know? If you ask any other teachers, it's like that." Um, so... And then my cover teacher, who happened to be his teacher of the year before said "Oh, yeah, he was like that with me before."

Amanda found that investing the time to get to know her learner in a setting in which he felt comfortable and could demonstrate his abilities enabled her to transform her relationship with the learner. She felt as though she was meeting a new person, or the real him for the first time:

I think it actually changed my attitude towards how I was approaching him in the classroom because, you know, he just would sit there and refuse to do things and go under the table and and I thought, what is this all about? But I realized then, you know, that, he and that was his response to not being able to do it or even feeling slightly challenged by the work I was giving him. So, I had to give him something to do, and then start him off with pretty much everything or he would just go under the table. [...] The nurture part of it and me seeing him in nurture helped me develop my relationship with him, so that he felt safe with me, 'cause I think that was the issue at the start. He didn't feel safe because he didn't know me, and I was saying to him, "Why're you not getting on with this work?", because I didn't know him.

Amanda invested some of her time out of the classroom to get to know her learner in another setting that he occupied, and they both clearly benefited from this. Her learner went from hiding under the table and refusing to do work to being comfortable to read out loud in front of the whole class. This building of relationships might remind us of the comments of Fiona, who spoke about family involvement in numeracy learning. She found that her learners were more motivated to engage in Numeracy work when their parents had shown an interest in numeracy too:

One of the teachers [who] has been quite successful has been running numeracy family sessions after... in the afternoons and after school. She's been running these sessions which is all about how to develop numeracy within the family and parents supporting the children, and it's really, really, really good because it is all about... it's activity based. They're a great way of getting the families in so that you can talk to them about other things as well.

(Redford et al, 2020, p.18)

The Head Teacher of another school explained how they had employed a Support Worker to help their most disadvantaged families with anything from assisting with escorting the pupils to school to working on the learners' social skills. One of the things that they ran also was a budgeting course for families. Like Fiona's example above, this involvement of the family in numeracy work added to the extent that they talked about numbers and, according to the teachers' professional judgment, boosted the pupils' self-application in Numeracy lessons. This post was entirely dependent on PEF funds.

These brief examples stress the importance of knowing your learners well and also having positive relationships with their families, ideally building the connections between school and home. We also saw the significance of this knowing of learners in our earlier observations about identifying learners in circumstances of need or deprivation, when official statistics or indices might not highlight their position. There is also the issue of knowing the community in which the learners are situated.

Escaping the Escape Narrative and the Leaving Discourse

Iain pointed to the efforts to promote the idea of employment among learners in his school:

We had a World of Work Day organised where as many parents and people we knew in different aspects of work were coming in to speak with the children and show them what they did. Sort of making it relevant jobs that the parents were doing and in the local economy. The idea is just to get them interested into the idea of working, as quite a few of the children I have and throughout the school are second, third, fourth generation without employment, so it's about getting them to see opportunities out there that they could be taking.

(Redford et al, 2020, p.20)

Another participant, Caitlin, also spoke of parents coming in to talk about their work. She saw this as good way of bridging the links between the school and the community, adding:

It lets us learn more about the community and about jobs in the area. A lot of people work in fishing or farming. A number of children talk about going to work with their dad or another family member after school. If people are looking for other careers, they might have to move away.

This issue of the leaving discourse, or what is sometimes called the escape narrative, where achievement may be measured in terms of moving from the rural area onto somewhere else is well represented in the literature across different rural settings (Corbett and Baeck, 2016; Corbett and Forsey, 2017; Hargreaves, 2017; Roberts, 2018). It is interesting that we talk of 'going to university', when the option remains now to 'stay at university' in a number of cases. Lorna told her story:

When I got my place at university, my family saw it as a real achievement. At that stage, I was ready to move away. I want to use the next few years as a chance to work in different parts of Scotland. I ticked the box, as I was willing to go anywhere.

Clearly, some subjects may only be available at a university some distance away, and it is perhaps no surprise, taking into account the leaving discourse, that the Scottish Government (2015) confirms, 'A slightly lower proportion of residents of remote rural areas have a degree level qualification or equivalent compared to accessible rural areas and the rest of Scotland.' Some of those who went away, stayed away, however some do wish to return.

Debbie, a NQT in the Highlands, commented:

After school, I was ready to move away from the Highlands. I was looking forward to the experience of city life. After meeting my partner and wanting to settle down, I decided to move back to an area like the one I grew up in. I knew it would be the right place for having a family of my own.

Indeed, Kirsty, a student who studied on the University of Dundee's Rural Learn To Teach programme, run in association with the University of the Highlands and Islands, advised:

I would not have been able to become a teacher without this course. My family is settled in the area and we are buying our own home. We couldn't afford for me to leave work and go away to do a PGDE for a year.

This particular programme involved local authority employees retaining their current posts but being released from the same for school placements while studying for a PGDE on a part-time basis. As Kirsty notes, this allowed her to stay in her community where she has a mortgage on a property and let her contribute to the place she is invested in as her home community as a teacher. Sarah similarly was able to qualify as a teacher close to her hometown by studying full-time at UHI, noting that this was 'without leaving [her] community.'

While students on programmes such as the PGDE at UHI develop skills that give them a place-responsiveness, meaning that they are equipped to adapt to teach in whatever setting in which they may find themselves (Redford and Nicol, 2021), there is also a benefit to retaining some home-grown talent that knows the community well and understands the issues that pupils experience there, as well as being role models of opportunity themselves, showing that success or achievement does not have to mean moving away (or can mean moving back again).

Overcoming spatial limitations, and learning

The Coronavirus pandemic, through its lockdowns, transformed the ways in which many people learned, worked, and lived their lives. One of the implications of this that challenges the leaving discourse is the eventuality that a number of people demonstrated the ability to carry out their roles from home. If the leaving discourse, or escape narrative, centres on the notion that achievement or success is attained by moving away, the diversification of jobs, careers and professions available in rural areas through remote working challenges this narrative. If society can retain and embrace some of these ways of working, even if on a part-time basis, there is the possibility that we can expand on the opportunities for people living and working in rural communities, and thereby also expand on the roles to which people wishing to remain in rural communities can aspire, adding to the sustainability of those very same communities. This responds to Bartholomaeus et al's (2014, p.59) call, that 'Closing the Attainment Gap' in rural areas requires acknowledgment of the 'complex nature of rural living and making sense of the role education could play in rural development.'

Limited opportunity may limit ambition, which in turn may limit attainment. Macleod et al (2015, pp.89-90) note that schools that tend to perform less well in England also tend to view the learners who attain less well as being subject to limited opportunities and less support at home, making this diagnosis a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereas higher attaining schools take on board the responsibility to change that reality for their learners. Should the

same pattern apply in Scotland, raising the sense of opportunity locally and also preparing learners for those opportunities actively are more likely to raise attainment. For instance, perhaps we should be teaching pupils that remote working provides the opportunity to carry out a number of different possible roles from home, opening up the possibility of their creating ways to achieve this, by igniting that idea.

As the interim report recorded, remote working under Coronavirus was not without its challenges (Redford et al, 2020). The Education Endowment Foundation (2020) predicted the impact that remote learning would be likely to have, which was largely detrimental, although there have been reports of children, such as those with high-functioning autism, benefiting from these times, having 'an opportunity to flourish at home and improve not only their grades but also their mental health' (Reicher, 2020, p.263).

Despite the challenges, some interactions were facilitated by online collaboration. For instance, Charlotte commented on her experience of being in a small rural school with just four teaching staff, stating that there would only be two people in the staffroom at a time when in school, so opportunities for sharing ideas were limited, but when working remotely they had staff meetings at the end of the day, when they all could attend, adding to the level of discourse. Charlotte went on to explain the benefits of taking part in the present research, which has also been carried out in the online space:

I find it quite useful to be able to talk to other people here in the same situation because I'm in quite a small school and there's only four classes and [...] the things that I've got from it is just to talk to other people, get some ideas and as my confidence is growing, actually, have the confidence to use their ideas..[...] When I was a student when we would, just because I did, um, distance learning apart from my placements obviously, and when we used to meet up for our network days, it was great. [...] I think having this forum has helped me and it has replaced that if you like, because I've always come to it, knowing that I've got nothing left to do for tomorrow. I've got no work to do for tomorrow and everything's ready.. I'm not preoccupied and I can just think about what we're talking about here.

This situation was echoed by Ciara, who said that there were limited opportunities for staff to discuss things in her small school also, as people had different responsibilities during different breaks, and some worked in their classrooms. She similarly valued the opportunity to engage in discussions with peers, or people who had been in a similar situation recently, online. Charlotte also explained that some of the probationer training she had attended had involved listening to guest speakers, but without much opportunity to engage in discussion, which she valued in the space we created. She had also come to appreciate the fact that she was celebrating some of her successes in this shared online space, which was adding to her confidence, which she contrasted with her ITE year, where she felt she was regularly feeling guilty about what she had not managed to do yet.

As we invited the prior year's NQTs to come back as mentors in the third and final phase of this research, the NQTs valued in particular the opportunity to speak to people who had very recently been through similar experiences. This also reassured them in respect of issues such as finding employment at the end of the Teacher Induction Scheme year, which was an issue playing on their minds. They had the chance to learn of teaching and learning

strategies that these mentors had found effective, who also in turn benefited from hearing of the ideas and suggestions of the latest cohort to enter the profession.

The intention of our online meeting space was for it to be a safe space where people from different stages, schools, and local authorities from the Highlands and Islands region could come to discuss their practice in relation to the focus of this research. The research itself has revealed that practitioners in more remote rural schools and small schools sometimes have fewer opportunities to engage in dialogue and that a facility like this, a space in which to form a community of practice (c.f. Wenger, 1999), is useful to them. This is something that we would be interested in exploring further in future research. Muijs (2015), for instance, notes the potential for networks between rural schools to raise attainment. Some of the practitioners participating in the current research developed skills of collaborating online as a part of their ITE, so are well placed to make use of the same as part of their ongoing professional development and identity.

Evidence and Enquiry

When asked about the impact practitioner enquiry has had on their practice, Amy replied that it has made her 'less scared to try stuff.' It has made Amy much more willing to innovate in the classroom, and also to hand decision-making opportunities to the learners. She has integrated outdoor learning into her approach for her primary pupils and lets them choose a focus for the exploration of the outdoor space once a week, and then as the teacher Amy facilitates a discussion on their return to the classroom about the skills they were using and developing from the perspective of skills for life, learning, and work. She says it has made her less controlling and more willing to let the learners come up with ideas.

Anna commented on what she has taken from enquiry:

Whether you are looking to develop something in the class, whether it's come from the improvement plan, or whether it's something you really want to look at [...] you're just sort of making enquiries into that area to see if you can make it better, and if you can make improvements, you know, close that gap, whatever it is. So, it is, it's just an informal [enquiry] that's based on your class. It's not like you're coming into the year and you sort of know what you're going to work on or you might have a general idea, and then make it more specific. Whereas, you know, it's based on your class and what you think they need.

Anna has accepted enquiry as a general and ongoing approach that she can make use of in the classroom without it needing to be a formal, written-up process. She realises that it is specific to her context and that it is focused on improving things for her learners. She then explained what this has meant for her understanding of evidence, and what she said summarised the general comments on evidence made by other NQTs participating in the research:

This year I've tried sort of gathering different types of evidence like, going for, like, a formal, little sort of maths assessment when we came back from lockdown to see what they knew, and, yeah, and then being terrified by the results, and then you do work in class, you know, or a Maths talk and you see it, that they can do it. You know, it's just that type of evidence that you were looking at, it just didn't suit them. So, sort of using a range of different evidence, but not just, you wouldn't just go okay, this is the evidence I'm going to base everything on. You're supposed to, you know, you've got to look at absolutely everything, and it is maybe thinking about the different kinds of evidence you can use.

Anna continued to give the example of a pupil who she thought could not carry out a particular task, identifying syllables, because of how he had presented his work in his jotter, but she decided to gain additional evidence, so assessed him verbally in a couple of different ways and in each of these he could identify the syllables fine. She, like the others, understands that it is important to be resourceful in seeking evidence, and that the evidence-gathering process may itself identify additional learning needs ancillary to those being assessed. She links her development in this area to a growth in her confidence in her own teacher judgment. This line of thinking about evidence also mirrors well the cycle of enquiry (Timperley et al, 2014), as she scans, focuses, develops a hunch, and then investigates. This research indicates that an openness to an enquiry-based approach helps the early career teachers to identify evidence and to respond to the same, then seeking further evidence for how their intervention has gone. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) observe that practice is developed through a process of selecting from prior thoughts, actions and experiences to inform decision-making in the present, and note that how future scenarios or outcomes are imagined can affect agency. Rather than a particular pedagogy being a solution to closing the attainment gap, a practitioner enquiry approach demonstrates a mindset of continually seeking to improve things for the learners and thus leading to behaviours creating the potential for the closing of the attainment gap.

Limitations affecting the final cycle of the research

We experienced some drop out in the third and final year of the research as a consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak. Two island authorities' NQTs did not participate in the process owing to the challenges they were facing in supporting their pupils via remote learning. The numbers of NQT participants taking part in the online sessions varied from two to eight on any one occasion, with some rotation of different participants from different authorities, leaving the total number of participants in the research over the years at forty-three participants. Up to four mentors attended the sessions. To some extent discussions took place through a filter of the Coronavirus, as it was affecting the work of the early career teachers and their pupils' learning to such a significant extent. Closing the attainment gap came to mean recovering from the pandemic. Yet, as this research has shown, there have been some positives from these new ways of working. Another limitation was that it was

not possible to make the planned visits to schools to speak to additional teachers and head teachers.

The scope of this research did not allow for any meaningful and prolonged assessment of the benefits of the use of the online space to facilitate interaction between practitioners. This is something worthy of exploration, but goes beyond the capacity of the present research.

Of course, this research is not intended to offer results of any statistical significance, but rather to report on the lived experience of early career teachers and to foreground their voices in terms of what they have been learning and how. In this sense, it is not appropriate to test its findings for generalisability or to speculate about the same, but rather to offer the findings as an authentic account of those participating in the project.

Implications for our provision

The key question this research sought to address was: What can we do we as a teacher education institution to support early career practitioners in rural settings to use evidence effectively? There appear to be three key aspects to the response to this question. Firstly, we can continue to support the development of an enquiry-mindset (c.f. Timperley et al, 2014), to equip NQTs with a methodological framework that helps them to come up with strategies that will assist in the closing of the poverty-related attainment gap. Secondly, we can promote teacher agency and emphasise the importance of teacher judgment by highlighting the difficulties of identifying socio-economic deprivation in rural areas based on national indices, such as the SIMD. Finally, we can seek out support to carry out research into the provision of a supportive, safe online space in which practitioners can come together to discuss their practice, particularly for those in more remote or especially small schools, although not being exclusive to these groupings.

In terms of the three objectives we set out to achieve, we have determined that we first have to critique the concept of pupils falling into deciles 1 and 2 of the SIMD data, as this will not necessarily represent all pupils experiencing significant deprivation in rural areas. Then we note that early career teachers are more focused on useful resources and schemes that assist them to close the attainment gap, rather than pedagogies, although they do engage with the same. As a result, we have determined that rather than identifying particularly effective pedagogies, although some of these are noted in this report, it is most important that early career teachers develop an effective enquiry mindset, which is promoted in ITE and in the Teacher Induction Scheme year by some authorities.

In turn, this addresses our second objective, to develop effective approaches to engaging with evidence to inform practice in rural schools, as practitioner enquiry has also been revealed to be an effective approach to engaging with evidence to inform practice in these rural settings. In relation to the third objective, namely to develop understanding of the ways that rural teachers can be supported to develop new pedagogies and evidence-

informed practice, this is also achieved through practitioner-enquiry and through the development of communities of practice as we engendered during this research, where ideas and strategies are shared.

Practitioner enquiry already occupies a significant place in our ITE provision at UHI, with one morning a week dedicated to the development of related skills and the enquiry process being formally supported by tutors who track the planning process of the then student teachers as they come up with their enquiry ideas. The enquiry itself is assessed over two formal pieces of work and one formative assignment. We also reinforce these skills in existing practitioners by offering a MEd in Critical Enquiry, which involves a dissertation based on an enquiry project.

We have revised the Equity and Social Justice part of the PGDE programme to build understanding of the complexities related to the attainment gap in rural areas, such as the differences between accessible and remote rural schools in terms of attainment, and also the difficulty of families experiencing deprivation in rural areas being represented at any significant level in indices or data such as the SIMD.

The research has also provided us with the opportunity to share these findings through participation in events such as the SERA Connects talks run by the Scottish Educational Research Association, Poverty Week with the Northern Alliance, and at academic conferences.

It is hoped that we are able to play a part in facilitating professional dialogue and discourse between practitioners in more remote rural schools and small schools, where access to dialogue may be limited or less frequent. We have technologies that can support such interaction and can provide a safe space through a degree of detachment from hierarchies in which practitioners are embedded. This is an area that we would like to research into further.

The project overall has also provided a truly valuable opportunity to benefit from learning from our peer institutions and also sharing our own research findings with them in return, which will add to the sharing of good practice within the sector.

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